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The purpose of this work is to engage in an analysis of political rhetorical strategies that invoke phrases such as the "silent majority" and "identity politics" in order to understand how these strategies operate logically, how they figure and define the "political" in the context of contemporary American politics, and what effects they have on minoritized subjects and their political labor. In this work, I place these strategies in an historical context of ongoing sociopolitical dominance by white, hetero-normative, and cis-normative ideologies with special attention given to the turn-of-the-century eugenics movement and its rhetorical operations. I engage in an extended analysis of these strategies and their historical and contemporary contexts through a series of close readings of political texts that theorize with, through, and against, including an historical white supremacist text that theorizes a political sphere based on the will of the "majority," a contemporary monograph that claims "identity politics" poses a threat to the "properly political," and the Combahee River Collective, a Black feminist manifesto that coined the term "identity politics" and uses it to both engage with and interrogate the "political." By engaging with these texts, I hope to demonstrate that the visions of the "political" these texts map out are not inconsequential or dismissible as mere "strategy." To the contrary, they constitute serious theorizations of what the "political" is and thus need to be critically engaged with in order to understand how the "political" is imagined and re-imagined through the deployment and re-deployment of these strategies.

FROM THE "SILENT MAJORITY" TO "IDENTITY POLITICS":

THE MAJORITARIAN IMAGINARY AND ITS

RHETORIC OF MINORITY EXCESS



by

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CHAPTER I

POLITICS AND THE MAJORITARIAN IMAGINATION

In online discussions based in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Reddit, among others, adages citing various "laws" of mainstream discourse or parlance are coined by users to highlight both their specific sheer frequency of use and the general lamentable predictability of particular tropes rearing their head in a political discussion. Examples of these phrases include "Godwin's Law," which states that the longer a discussion continues, the more likely a comparison to Hitler or the Nazis will be invoked, and "Lovejoy's Law," which refers to the seemingly inevitable appeal along the lines of "please think of the children" ("Urban Dictionary," 2018). What these satirical phrases do is mark a particularly tired invocation of a rhetorical trope and draw attention to the ways in which political discourse is overdetermined by a handful of images or concepts that one almost always invokes in any given exchange of ideas within that discourse. These are terms that express a certain frustration on the part of the user, a frustration with constantly having to labor with trite abstractions used to justify sloppy or lazy thinking. It is, ultimately, a frustration with the displacement of thought that these invocations provoke, a displacement that always leads back to an order of concepts that seems to constantly haunt political thinking.

I, too, am frustrated in a similar way, but there is no clever, disaffected proverb that encapsulates or even approximates this frustration. This is the frustration I feel when

someone tells me they are supporting or celebrating a public figure's lack of "political correctness" in what they believe to be a bold defense of the values of "free speech." This is the frustration I feel when I am told that concepts like "proper pronouns" and "intersectionality" are simply too divisive, too jargony, too elitist, and too theoretical to warrant critical engagement. This is the frustration I feel when white liberals lament that their party has been overrun by "identity politics," costing them elections and causing them embarrassment. This is the frustration I feel in response to the heavy-handed reminders to not forget the "majority" when preparing public appearances and the wide-eyed bewilderment that flows forth when I articulate that my project is specifically *not* one that is concerned with the "majority." This archive of frustration, containing tense discussions behind office doors, rolled eyes in the classroom, condescending sighs from faculty members, and hushed words whispered down the hallway or typed behind a bright screen, is what brings me to this project.

These frustrations and the tropes that incite them seem to haunt me perpetually. They are one of the reasons I left political science and pursued research in the field of gender studies. They are the reason I wrote my undergraduate capstone paper on the concept of "political correctness" and how it operates as a rhetorical strategy. They are the reason I remain ever-skeptical about appeals to the majority, to "common sense," and to not use jargon. They are the reason I react so strongly to suggestions to not saddle the political with the petty, excessive concerns of mere identity when there are more pressing issues that *actually* affect people within the nation, like the concerns of the majority or "bread-and-butter" issues, and outside the nation, where other Others suffer more

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authentically, implying that no one with geopolitical proximity to the majority (in other words, anyone who is seen to reap the spoils of majority-led civil society) can legitimately claim harm and a shared sense of consciousness around that harm. Furthermore, these frustrations have led me to question why the articulations so often read as "identity politics" and "political correctness" are seen as actual, material threats to the political and/or the political life of the majority rather than as simply one more viewpoint to be managed in an idealized pluralistic democratic system.

It seems to be, given these tropes and their continued currency in political discourse, that we are always either just prior to or just following a moment in which we will have gone "too far" in accommodating or promoting identity as a mode of politics, meaning that the political is or will be irreversibly harmed. Generally, those invoking those concepts, explicitly or implicitly, position themselves as a lone voice of reason in a chorus of irrationality that is driving us towards this ever-approaching political horizon and that they mean no harm but are simply concerned with what is about to happen when we finally "go too far."

For example, on December 8th, 2017, Congressman Steve King, a representative from Iowa, tweeted a link to a website called "The Voice of Europe" with the caption "diversity is not our strength" and a quote from a Hungarian politician that suggested that "mixing cultures" was a detriment to the quality of life within a nation. King followed up the controversy around his tweet by declaring that "American Assimilation has been the envy of the world. Bring back American Assimilation," positioning his statements as commentary on the "too far" pluralism of contemporary society (CNN, 2017;

Friedersdorf, 2017). King previously made statements such as "We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies," and remarked that such statements were not racist, but simply concerned with "our stock, our country, our culture, our civilization" (CNN, 2017).

It is remarkable how such a simple set of statements perform such a significant binarization, juxtaposing "diversity" against "strength" and "assimilation" alongside the latter. The implication, of course, is that homogeneity of "stock" as King calls it is strong and that there is a legitimate interest in regulating the level of "diversity" in a population. Furthermore, such a statement relies on a crucial underlying claim about politics: that the political "us" that is spoken for in the statement is in need of protection from a possibly lethal contagion that threatens the well-being of the proper body politic. The "us" in question, and its assumed political hegemony, is fragile and in need of active preservation. "Diversity" and the *potential of being outnumbered* is constantly in question; this is what I believe people like King mean when they continuously position the political on a precipice of about-to-be too far away from some value like assimilation. The implications of such statements are interesting because they seem to reject the notion that a "diverse" population can be a strong and legitimate foundation for a political system. In other words, if a "diverse" population were to grow and outnumber the "stock" that King refers to, the resulting political scene would be illegitimate, despite the fact that the "diverse" outnumbering the "we" should, in theory, result in a legitimate shift in political power according to the logic of majority rule. The dominant "we" and its permanent ascendancy is then necessary for preserving the political in this understanding;

in a system where political power is assumed to come from numbers of people, the implication is "*we* have the right to outnumber *you*."

The idea of the loss of true, mathematical majority status for the "we" in question is not merely limited to the concept of immigration, which King was referring to in his statement. Majoritarian paranoia seeps into all kinds of political and ethical discussions. For example, some supporters of President Donald Trump have complained that a majority of individuals in Robert Mueller's federal grand jury are Black and that such a jury could not possibly act in an objective way due to this makeup (Delk, 2018). A prominent conspiracy theory claiming that gay men were recruiting young boys to become homosexuals and support the "gay agenda" lives on in a new form, in the painting of transgender individuals as dangerous people with a mental illness who want to infect otherwise "normal" children (YouGov, 2017). The "fourteen words," a popular statement of support for white supremacy, invokes the need to "secure" a white future for white children (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). White hegemony is, by the logic of this statement, fragile and in need of saving, and is apparently numeric, based on the impetus to reproduce. The fear of being outnumbered, becoming a minority, losing hegemony status, and perhaps being subject to the violence that comes with minority-status (even as that violence is downplayed or ignored completely) lurks in these frightful imaginings. The necessity of a white, citizen, cisgender, and heterosexual constituency for the proper reproduction of the political is key; what binds all of these statements and logics is that a political arising from any other type of constituency would be illogical, immoral, and illegitimate. The political is synonymous with some form of hegemony guided by the

only truly *proper* political subjects; anything else is a dire and dangerous discrepancy. To put it another way, the minority threatens the legitimate order of the majority through biological, political and/or cultural reproduction.

The assumption that the majority should be the driving impetus that forms and legitimizes the political seems relatively innocuous. However, there is a logical slippage apparent in the use of the word "majority" here. Majority, in purely mathematical terms, is fifty per cent plus one unit, which means, theoretically, that whatever group meets this criterion should have the power to influence and guide the political realm. However, the "majority" imagined by the preceding sources documented in the previous paragraphs is not simply quantitative, it is also qualitative. The claim is not only that a minority is unduly influencing what should be the governance of the majority, but also that the possibility of the majority becoming the minority is, in itself, illegitimate. The majority, then, as it is rhetorically imagined, has certain identifiable qualities and assumable political positions. Whether or not this majority is actually a mathematical majority is irrelevant; the majority here is believed to have a permanent claim to determining and indeed producing the political. This subtle routing of qualitative judgements through the parlance of the quantitative demonstrates a desire to make this logic less visible to critique. How can you argue against the majority in a majority-rule system, after all? However, such routing also reveals the very precarious nature of this particular strain of reasoning in that this slippage is so central to its functioning.

The anxieties I have described recall similar fears that motivated the development and implementation of eugenics programs at the turn of the twentieth century.

Eugenicists feared that the a more pure and superior group (Western European descendants) was threatened biologically and existentially by an inferior group (racial minorities) through breeding and resource depletion. Part of the reason I find marking this rhetoric of the "majority" so important is that this act of marking will make it possible to trace historical lines from current to past rhetorical patterns. Identifying these broader patterns will add historical depth to my research and also allow me to connect what I am calling the "rhetoric of the majority" to other ideologies of domination, such as systemic racism. In fact, many traits and arguments made by self-identified white supremacists in the United States can be traced back to a book called *The Dispossessed Majority*, a burgeoning six-hundred-page tome published in 1972 that explicitly links eugenics-era concerns with biological devastation of the white race to the rhetoric of the "majority" and the potential for the rightly ascendant white majority in the United States to be usurped by aggressive minority groups.

While invocation of the "majority," alongside "political correctness" and "identity politics" may seem to be more common on the political right, it would be very inaccurate to categorize these rhetorical patterns as occurring exclusively within right-wing or "conservative" discourses. To the contrary, many on the left have invoked similar to near-identical critiques of those on the right. These critiques follow similar rhetorical patterns and link the "failure" of the political left in the United States to an excessive focus on the politics of "identity." Mark Lilla, whose essay "The End of Identity Liberalism" enjoyed wide circulation on both the left and right, states that "American liberalism has slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity

that has distorted liberalism's message" (Lilla, 2016). Bill Maher, long-time political comedian who generally identifies with the American left echoed this sentiment, telling Democrats to "ease up on the identity politics" and that they should "make sure you look like you represent everybody, including the majority" (Mazza, 2017) In a similar although more subtle statement, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders stated that "a strategy that's just micro-targeting particular, discrete groups in a Democratic coalition sometimes will win you elections, but it's not going to win you the broad mandate that you need" (Griffiths, 2016). These critiques, which explicitly and implicitly invoke "identity politics" and the "majority" in similar ways, parallel with similar claims on the right. My purpose in marking these statements and patterns on both the right and the left is to draw attention to the way what I am calling the "rhetoric of the majority" works across the ideological spectrum and in fact frames most liberal ideological conceptions and claims of what constitutes "politics."

To clarify, my intention in highlighting these patterns is not to suggest that political approaches that center "identity" or "diversity" are unproblematic or represent a "better" political ideal. As scholars such as Sara Ahmed have argued, the language of "diversity" can be and has been adopted uncritically in institutions within the United States as a way to obfuscate systemic racism and white supremacy (2012). Rather, what I want to draw attention to is how the marking of certain issues, ideas, and people as participating in "identity politics" operates as a mode of minoritization. The broader interventions I want to make by observing, marking, and engaging with these rhetorical patterns is to provoke a recognition of the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie our

thinking of the "political," a rethinking of what constitutes proper "politics," and how such a rethinking can be and is already being practiced by politically constituted communities. These interventions reflect the academic passions that drew me from political science to women's and gender studies. Furthermore, I believe that, given the current political landscape, the imperative to rethink and recognize already existing rethinkings of "politics" grows exponentially with each passing day.

This thesis will be part of a continuing, long-form, academic project that focuses on what exactly the political is, how it is imagined, and how political subjects, particularly those who are not perceived to be part of the "majority," relate to the political, or more explicitly, experience the political as a relationship to the state and what/who the state claims to represent and stand in for. This specific work will concentrate on the rhetorical logics, assumptions, and tropes that guide the political, what ideologies they can be traced to, and how they function both historically and in the contemporary political moment. Specific questions that guide my work include: Who gets to claim "majority" status and how do these claims operate rhetorically? What motivates these claims and why are such claims seen as politically important and/or strategic? How do they configure and map political relationships? Are these claims connected in any way to dominant patterns of thought regarding race and identity? What movements use these claims to organize, and why do they choose to use them? Why are some social issues perceived as "identity politics" rather than politics proper? How do understandings of "identity politics" intersect with the concept of the "majority"? Who do these understandings serve and who do they harm? What do these understandings tell us about

dominant conceptions of the "political"? Why is the politics of identity considered to be excessive, jargon, or overly theoretical? How have "minorities" grappled with and responded to these rhetorical strategies and logics? Can we think of politics as something other than a relationship to the majority? What can "identity politics" make possible? What can it foreclose on?

I find these questions important and compelling because of the ways in which identity affects one's participation in the political and how one's political labor comes to be read in certain ways if that labor is performed in or perceived to be performed in the name of identity. Furthermore, I find it necessary to closely examine and deconstruct the political logics that structure how minorities come to be understood as such and that limit or proscribe certain modes of being and participation in the political, even those that claim to do so on behalf of "progressive" or leftist causes. In doing so, I hope to unsettle these logics, show how they operate so convincingly, and hopefully provide a starting point for thinking about politics and the political in different ways.

The questions I want to pursue in this research project concern the intersections of political science, history, philosophy, and rhetoric. In asking these questions, I want to engage in a conversation with these fields and also facilitate conversation between these fields, as they have not always articulated explicit connections between themselves. As I weave in and out of these fields as a researcher, I hope to both perform the important work of intersectional and holistic analysis while also expanding the potential for connections between disciplines that are often walled off from one another in the university. Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate that the work these fields do is, in fact, not

mutually exclusive to their respective "disciplines" and that the conceptions of these fields as such is part of a larger pattern of thinking that pervades contemporary discourse on the issues of "identity."

My primary method of analysis in this text will be the close reading of primary sources related to my questions and secondary sources that can offer clarification, context, or further understanding of those sources. I have intentionally chosen to focus primarily on the source texts, giving them the bulk of my attention rather than conducting extensive reviews of secondary literature. Focusing specifically and closely on these texts is important because they are the kinds of texts that rarely receive scholarly attention, despite the work they do in theorizing a vision of the political, even if that is not their expressed goal. My readings are informed by post-structuralist philosophy, critical race theory, critical ethnic studies, political science, and feminist theory.

Each of the three chapters addresses a theme that emerges from the larger questions I am provoking in my research. The second chapter of this thesis will provide a historical basis for the questions I am asking. This will consist of reviewing the rhetoric of the "majority" in modern politics, with special attention to the rhetoric of Richard Nixon and a text called *The Dispossessed Majority* by Wilmot Robertson, a white supremacist. In addition to identifying the rhetorical patterns and strategies used in these texts, I investigate the connection the rhetoric of the majority may have with the rhetoric of eugenics and how the rhetorical moves made by these discrete bodies of work perform similar kinds of political mapping.

The third chapter of this thesis will focus primarily on contemporary events and invocations of the "majority" and how these invocations are connected to the discourse of "identity politics." In this chapter, my primary site of analysis will be Mark Lilla's book *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, in which he argues for an end to "identity politics" in favor of an emphasis on commonality. In analyzing this text, I argue that the logic that Lilla uses to understand the nature of politics is quite similar to the logics of eugenics and the majority as established in the previous chapter.

The fourth chapter offers a brief critique of some iterations of "identity politics" that actually wind up doing work similar to Lilla's and not, as he claims, actually challenging or putting forth an alternative understanding of the political. I will also turn to the Combahee River Collective Statement and Harney and Moten's *The Undercommons* as sites of political reimagining that gesture towards the radical potential of an "identity politics" that actually remakes and re-theorizes both identity and politics rather than deploying them together in a non-specific and indiscriminate way. To conclude, I will briefly re-visit the "archive of frustration" that I invoked at the beginning of the thesis and reflect on what my work on this thesis means for ongoing academic conversations and for my own personal lived experience as someone who will likely be understood as doing "identity politics" for the rest of their life.

CHAPTER II

THE EUGENIC LIFE OF THE SILENT MAJORITY

The first full definition of "politics" in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "the art of science of government," along with two supplementary extensions, one that adds "concerned with guiding or influencing governmental policy" and another that adds "concerned with winning and holding control over a government" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Although I suspect that this definition is primary because it is the one most readably legible and acceptable to many individuals, I find it quite narrow and troubling in that it seems to collapse what may be more accurately called "governance" with "politics," which I approach as a much broader term. The fifth and final definition that Merriam-Webster provides is "the total complex of relations between people living in society," which is closer to how I envision and deploy the term (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). I see the work of politics as the delineation and mapping of that "total complex of relations."

As elaborated in the introduction of this thesis, the majority/minority binary is one example of this type of work. By understanding ourselves in relationship to the signifiers "majority" and "minority," we are mapped by them, making ourselves legible to one another based on these terms and the subsequent vocabularies and signifying chains that these terms give rise to. To put it another way, politics is the process by which signifiers cut into that complex assemblage of social relations to make it meaningful for both the

actors involved in those relations and the entities that claim to manage those relations (the state). By becoming described by "majority" or "minority," for example, we communicate who we are in relation to one another and we acquire political value in relationship to the state. What I am interested in exploring in this chapter is what kinds of knowledge and knowing come to inform these political signifiers and how they come to be understood as the most natural or logical way of mapping the political.

Furthermore, I am interested in understanding how these framings of the political come to account for what/who is and what/who isn't permitted to participate in or exist the political. In other words, how some presences ("diversity," for example, in Steve King's comments mentioned in the introduction) come to be seen as a threat to the political order. I am interested in this not only because it seems to be such a common rhetorical move, but also because it implies that politics is essentially a negative operation concerned with the subtraction of certain concepts or bodies affixed with political signifiers from that larger "complex of relations" in order to better those relations. To put it another way, I am interested in how some people become affixed with political labels in such a way that they become perceived as political issues to be solved, managed, and/or eliminated.

To address these questions, I will be moving between research on political history, contemporary political science, analyses of political rhetoric, and concepts from critical race theory that elaborate on how certain patterns of life and living come to be seen as natural, why others come to be seen as degraded and unnatural, and what abilities and privileges are afforded based on proximity to an "optimal" way of living. In doing so,

I hope to address critical lacuna in the field of political science that comes from disciplinary segregation and the refusal to consider how theoretical concepts from critical race theory can illuminate larger political struggles and processes.

To begin this chapter I will first review the turn-of-the-century eugenics movement by sketching a brief history of the movement and giving special attention to how eugenics operated rhetorically. In this analysis, I argue that the political was mapped in eugenics rhetorics by tying social ills to the reproduction of the "unfit," defining three key features of eugenics rhetoric that guide how it marks bodies and moves between differing discourses. In addition to reviewing this history and rhetorical functions of eugenics, I also move to situate eugenics as a node in the larger pattern of race-based control based on what Sylvia Wynter terms as the dominance of "Man" as a genre of human.

To follow, I will trace the concept of the endangered political majority to the presidential campaign of Richard Nixon, who developed and strategically deployed the "silent majority" as a rhetorical tactic to activate a segment of the population that was hostile to minority forces. The phrase "silent majority" has remained a force in politics and has informed further developments in political rhetoric. After briefly sketching and analyzing Nixon's use of the "silent majority" trope and considering the place assigned to it in contemporary political science, I will consider how its rhetoric and logic maps the political in a similar and analogous way to the eugenics movement, mirroring its three key features.

Finally, I will pursue a textual analysis of Wilmot Robson's *The Dispossessed Majority*, a white supremacist tome which articulates racialist theories that draw on the legacy of eugenics rhetoric while also speculating about the potential mobilization of a racially pure "American Majority" political unit. In this section, I argue that Robertson's text not only theorizes the rhetoric of eugenics and the majority together, but shows that they indeed must be theorized together. To conclude I reflect on what these analyses mean for the broader political questions I am pursuing in this thesis.

**Eugenics, Rhetoric, and Political Mapping**

The first recorded use of "eugenics" was in the year 1883, when it was coined by English scientist Francis Galton (Painter, 2011). The word came from the Greek *eugenes*, which combined eu- (good) and genos (birth) and was defined by Galton as the "doctrine of progress in evolution of the human race." Although the word "eugenics" was not formally created until 1883, the legacy of eugenic ideas stretches back much farther, with some of the earliest claims to inherited criminal social traits going back as far as 1783 (Painter, 2011). Ironically, the earliest manifestations of proto-eugenic thought aimed to explain and biologize intra-racial differences as opposed to inter-racial differences.

Richard Dugdale, an English scientist, published a scientific report in 1877 claiming to link criminal traits to defective heredity (Painter, 2011). Dugdale's research, carried out on prison inmates, claimed that the reproduction of a class he called the "jukes" caused a phenomenon known as "degenerate families" which would be taken up by racial thinkers to explain the lifestyles of poor whites that did not fit in with theories

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of white superiority and ascendancy (Painter, 2011, pp. 4095–4127). The success of

Dugdale's publication would go on to inspire more radical applications of hereditarian

thinking. A New York social reformer, Josephine Lowell, began to advocate for a

coercive state system to prevent the "diseased and vicious" from reproducing based on

Dugdale's research, even though Dugdale was not completely convinced that

environmental strategies could counteract bad hereditary inheritance (Painter, 2011, p.

4148). The idea that the control of reproduction was direly needed to preserve the white

race by pruning it of so-called "degenerate" inheritances would spread from the

Progressive movement to religious leaders such as Oscar McCulloch, to figures in the

pacifist movement, such as David Jordan, to mainstream political leaders, such as

President Teddy Roosevelt (Painter, 2011). All of these thinkers and leaders were

profoundly concerned with the supposed growing degeneracy of the white race,

specifically in regards to the traits and lifestyles of poor whites. These intertwining lines

of thought between different individuals and movements would begin to mobilize

eugenics from thought into action, with state-sponsored sterilization beginning in 1907 in

Indiana, with more widespread acceptance as social policy in the 1920s (Lombardo,

2011; Painter, 2011).

During the 1920s, the trend in eugenic thinking began to move farther away from

treating the supposed degeneracies within the white race and started to move towards

addressing other "degenerate" races and the threats they posed through breeding with

whites. In 1923, psychology professor Carl Brigham declared that "racial admixture"

with Blacks was a leading cause of racial degeneration (Roberts, 1998, pp. 63–64). This

sentiment was echoed that same year in the publication of *The Passing of the Great Race* by Madison Grant, a New York anthropologist, which argued that the decline of the Nordic race could be linked to interbreeding with Blacks and inferior immigrant groups (Roberts, 1998). Although the Great Depression dampened the circulation of eugenic thought temporarily in the United States, it was kept afloat by the Nazis in Germany and by the emerging birth control movement in the United States (Kendi, 2016). During this time, Margret Sanger, leader of the birth control movement, reframed birth control from a radical feminist stance of self-determination to a eugenic necessity that would stave off the impending "race suicide" caused by differences in reproduction (Roberts, 1998, p. 72). While still focused on the degeneracy of poor whites to some degree, the turn in eugenics towards those outside of the white race (and thus the displacement of racial anxiety onto a biologically distinct other) had important social consequences. Birth control clinics in the South began aggressively pushing birth control and sterilization onto Black populations, and by 1940, thirty states banned interracial marriage (Roberts, 1998).

   After World War II, the eugenics movement in the West began to suffer due to the role eugenics thought played in the Holocaust. However, even as eugenics was formally "dethroned" by scientists, politicians, and organizations such as the United Nations, the perpetuation of eugenic-like ideas continued to spread and be deployed by various individuals and institutions (Kendi, 2016). Indeed, as I hope to draw attention to in this project, the "formal" life of eugenic rhetoric in the first half of the twentieth century was but one node in the long history of white supremacist thought, one that is preceded and

succeeded by other strains of rhetoric that borrow much from this particular theorizing of racism.

Sylvia Wynter's work concerning different genres of human and the overdetermination of "Man" as the sole genre of the human is helpful to contextualize and situate eugenics and the logic it is based on within the longer history of racial domination. Wynter writes that the primary contemporary socio-political struggle will be over "securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass… conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" (2003, p. 260). In her analysis, Wynter traces the development of Man as a particular *genre* of human throughout history and its ascent to hegemonic status, where it is presently considered the only viable genre or way of being human (2003). In other words, the current Eurocentric and ethnocentric ideal of what it means to be a human is not *the* way of being, but merely one of many *genres* of being that has attained hegemonic status due to the global expansion of the West and the dominant ethnoclass. Wynter writes that the concept of race and, subsequently, the subhuman, was necessary to legitimate and maintain the supremacy of Man. She writes that

> …it was this construct [race] that would enable the now globally expanding West to replace the earlier mortal/immortal, natural/supernatural, human/the ancestors, the gods/God distinction as the one on whose basis all human groups had millennially "grounded" their descriptive statement/prescriptive statements of what it is to be human, and to reground its secularizing own on a newly projected human/subhuman distinction instead…"Race" was therefore to be, in effect, the nonsupernatural but no less extrahuman ground (in the reoccupied place of the traditional ancestors/gods, God, ground) of the answer that the secularizing West

would now give to the Heideggerian question as to the who, and the what we are. (2003, p. 264)

Race as a concept was necessary to maintain previously supernaturally delimited boundaries of being and humanity and its adoption represents but one event in the larger history of the human.

Wynter's attention to race as a phenomenon situated within a larger process of subjugation is exactly why her analysis is helpful for understanding eugenics and its rhetorical functioning. In a similar way, eugenics is a phenomenon occurring within a larger process of racial subjugation. Eugenics, then, is a technology of race and thus also a technology of genres; it is the biological overdetermination of a narrow genre of human (namely, a white, Nordic, and Eurocentric human) that strives for the elimination of other genres of being. Wynter's work aids in contextualizing eugenics as a singular expression of a long history of the drive to control human genres while also allowing for the consideration of eugenics as an evolving expression that necessarily shifts and changes in response to its socio-political environment.

Given the broad historical trajectory of the eugenics movement and the even broader context of race-based domination that Wynter's work highlights, settling on a singular definition of what eugenics is can potentially be quite problematic As the preceding paragraphs demonstrate, eugenics changed and fluctuated fairly frequently, evolving from a concern with white degeneracy to the infiltration of the white race by other inferior races and social groups while also occurring within a bigger context and

history of racial domination. To craft a more holistic understanding of eugenics for this project, a different approach to defining the term is necessary.

Marouf Hasian writes that eugenics is an "evocative term that could be employed in a myriad of ways" (1996, p. 29). In his review of scientific literature, Hasian found no less than eight different definitions for eugenics, covering a wide range from improving the health of a race and nation to a more lasseiz-faire framing of "scientific philanthropy" (1996, pp. 28–29). All of the definitions, however, relate explicitly to the field of science concerned with genetic betterment and a population that is assumed to be in need of said genetic betterment. That being said, it is clear that the use of eugenics exceeded even this wide swath of definitions by traveling outside of the realms of explicit science. Hasian also writes that eugenics contains "rhetorical fragments, representing the ideologies of multitudes of social actors who at different historical junctures have reconfigured these ideographs to legitimate a plethora of political, social, and economic agendas" (1996, pp. 22–23). Given this observation along with Wynter's analysis, it seems necessary to construct a definition of eugenics that can account for the myriad ways in which eugenic rhetorics travel and morph into different social, political, and epistemological contests.

To briefly recap, eugenics had a varied life during the time of its widespread adoption in the first half of the twentieth century, is part of a larger structures and process of racial domination in connection to a project of human genres, and travels outside of science rhetorically and adapts to cultural, political, and economic agendas. Due to all of these factors, I find that to try and determine a singular definition for what eugenics and its rhetoric *is* would be to reduce its inherent complexities and penchant for adoption.

Hasian's work notes that while the exact meanings of eugenics are "diverse and often contradictory" and frequently context-dependent, pursuing an analysis that highlights functional patterns is worthwhile and important (1996, p. 23). Thus, I would like to propose then that a more useful approach for this project would be to highlight what eugenic rhetoric *does*. By creating a framework for understanding eugenics as the relationship between discrete but intertwined and mutually constitutive processes, I hope to maintain and represent the animacy and operations of the concept rather than settling for a static definition that may only reflect a narrow expression of eugenic processes.

The first key function of eugenic rhetoric is the binarizing of individuals into two distinct groups: proper and improper humans. Eugenics maps the abstract notions of "pure" and "impure" onto differing groups of bodies. In her study of eugenics and nationalism, Nancy Ordover observes that

> in constructing entire racialized categories of demonized others, eugenicists put forth an ideologically purified America – purged of past sins and guarded against future menace. The eugenics project revolved around imagining the nation: what it was (now threatened) and what it might be (with and without government and medical intervention). It was the sort of creative visualization that demanded both historical revisionism and ominous prophecy. (2003, p. 7)

Through the mapping and constructing of "demonized others", eugenics produces the notion of a "proper" group of people or genre of human upon which society or civilization rests. In other words, "pure" groups are more advanced and thus fit to lead or establish society than "impure" groups. This is what Ordover calls the "imagining" of the nation and what the nation could be if impurities are removed from the body politic. In this understanding of biology, identity, and the nation, the reproduction of society as we

know it is contingent upon the biological reproduction of those who have inherited the proper biological genre, as Wynter would call it; all others represent a continuous threat to the purity of the dominant genre and thus the continuation of proper society. The rhetorical mapping that this logic relies on is a deceptively simple binary of pure and impure legitimates the regulation, surveillance, and eventual destruction of groups deemed as threats to the "proper" through sterilization and forceful assimilation.

The second key function of eugenic rhetorics is to move outside of its original home in pure science and assemble with other bodies of knowledge. As elaborated in the previous paragraphs, eugenics and its rhetoric are fluid and not constrained to any one body of knowledge or political issue or vocabulary. Eugenic rhetoric can assemble with many bodies of knowledge and even seemingly contradictory political issues or parties. Ordover credits the long and continuing legacy of eugenics and eugenic rhetoric to its status as a "scavenger ideology" that plays on anxieties over assumed immutable differences and its "capacity to both absorb and be absorbed by other ideologies and political agendas" (2003, pp. 3, 207). Hasian's rhetorical study confirms this, as he notes that eugenics is not only the "creation of a coterie of pseudoscientists" but also a collection of "rhetorical fragments" that have been effectively popularized and refitted for various political purposes and popular media (1996, pp. 22–23). For example, Dorothy Roberts' work analyzes the deployment of eugenics rhetoric and metaphors by Margaret Sanger in order to promote the use of contraceptives (1998). Roberts writes that while Sanger's intentions were initially allied with the idea of female self-determination, her use of eugenics as a frame for her campaign allowed her to tie contraception to the

well-being of the nation (1998, p. 58). Eugenics was as much a political strategy here as it was a scientific claim; Roberts writes that "The language of eugenics, moreover, gave scientific credence to the movement's claim that birth control was an aspect of public health and improved the national welfare" (1998, p. 72). Ordover also notes in her study that eugenics was also deployed as a solution to sexual and gendered deviancy and that eugenics and its logic were able to absorb these categories into its purview and that the terms it set are still relevant in the contemporary era where sexual orientation is assumed to be a product of genetics (2003). These examples show that eugenics is not limited to any one time period or body of knowledge; it is a pattern of thought that emphasizes the inherent nature of the qualities it maps onto bodies, and that propels the assumption that human progress can be measured through biological means and that ensuring the steady progress of humanity means regulating impure populations.

The third and final key function of eugenic rhetoric is to draw attention away from systemic analysis and towards reductive essentialist analysis. Eugenic rhetoric turns attention away from social or structural analysis; it insists that social problems can be alleviated by managing reproduction and that, ultimately, the political conflicts at any given time in a society are mere expressions of a more true and concrete biological reality, one that is governed by notions of evolutionary purity and impurity. Ordover writes that the desire inherent in eugenic thought to "substantiate and sustain existing social hierarchies" motivates the move "to evade analyses of socioeconomically generated inequalities" (2003, p. 9). By creating a logical framework for understanding social problems as signifiers of bad biology or genes, eugenic rhetoric forecloses upon

any analysis of socially generated inequalities and thus alternate solutions or courses of actions that focus on altering social structures and/or extending support to those disadvantaged by currently existing structures. In fact, proponents of eugenics often arrive at the opposite conclusion and consider any means of social support to be a pointless waste of resources at best and a harm to the purity of the nation at worst (Roberts, 1998). The reduction of complex social issues and political realities to matters of reproduction and genetics robs one of rigorous analysis and saddles the already disadvantaged and marginalized with the weight of the nation's problems. Thinking back to Wynter's work, we can say that eugenic thought posits the existence and reproduction of other genres of being as the source of social inequality and inequity and that science can solve these complex issues by providing the means to manage the proliferation and extermination or favored and disfavored genres, respectively. The regulation (and eventual extermination) of improper genres is then thought to secure a future free of social problems for the rightfully dominant genre of Man.

Although eugenics and its rhetoric were more or less "formally" admonished by the West after World War II amidst the revelations about the connections between eugenics and the holocaust, eugenics and its structuring of the world through the three functions I have outlined continued into the latter half of the 20th century through sterilization abuse and the reemergence of overtly biologist approaches to social inequality and questions of identity (Ordover, 2003; Roberts, 1998). Furthermore, the logics that eugenics relies on provided fertile ground for other imaginings of eugenic-like

projects that deploy different vocabularies to make similar claims and achieve similar goals.

**Activating the Majority: Modern Eugenic Analogies**

"The choice we make in 1968 will determine not only the future of America but the future of peace and freedom in the world for the last third of the Twentieth Century" Richard Nixon direly predicts during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 1968 (1968). In the same speech, Nixon goes on to list many of the anxieties of the nation; deaths on "distant battlefields," mutual hate and "killing each other" within the nation, and the "anguish" coming from Americans who are forced to "see and hear these things" (1968). The answer to these many problems is to be found in "the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans – the non-shouters; the non-demonstrators" Nixon informs us (1968). He reassures us that these Americans "are not racist or sick," "guilty of the crime that plagues the land," and that they are ultimately "decent people" who work, save, and pay taxes (1968). The rhetorical strategy that Nixon deploys here – singling out a supposed "majority" of Americans who found themselves forgotten amongst the protests and anguish of the turbulent 1960s – would go on to be developed and refined in Nixon's tenure as president, culminating in the "silent majority" strategy that aimed to mobilize voters in favor of Nixon and his policies.

However, the "silent majority" was not just a novel way of imagining a coalition for the presidency of Richard Nixon; it was an activation and recoding of an already

existing political logic of eugenics. Nixon's insistence that he must represent a wrongfully silent (and thus unrepresented) majority in order to defend it from the excesses of a vocal minority effectively capitalized on the notion that minorities harmed the majority and the nation. Furthermore, the rhetorical strategy recoded the overly biological terms that originally framed the argument in the eugenics movement into political terms that appealed to liberal values such as majority-rule. In this section, I will briefly review the history of the "silent majority" rhetorical strategy, how it fulfills similar functions to the rhetoric of eugenics, and how it reorganizes eugenic arguments with new political terminology.

Nixon's election to the presidency in 1968 was marked by a lack of enthusiastic support for Nixon as a candidate, which was particularly distressing to him as someone who was very concerned with image and matters of public relations (King & Anderson, 1971; Mason, 2004). Nixon's gradual development of the themes from his acceptance speech ("forgotten Americans") into the concept of a "silent majority" was directed specifically at turning a "rhetorical assertion" into a "political formation" (Lowndes, 2016, pp. 25–26). To accomplish this, Nixon and his team set out to provide the untapped "forgotten Americans" with a kind of political image that appeared "legitimate, coherent, and significant" (King & Anderson, 1971, p. 245). The development of this image through the rhetoric of the "silent majority" was, for Nixon, about maximizing support for his policies, both domestically and abroad in Vietnam, which continued to be a particularly divisive political issue (King & Anderson, 1971; Mason, 2004). The emerging rhetorical strategy that accompanied invocations of the "silent majority" trope

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was one that emphasized political polarization above all else. On one side was Nixon's "silent majority" and on the other was a coalition of drug users, unproductive protestors, and liberals only concerned with issues affecting Black Americans (King & Anderson, 1971; Lowndes, 2016; Mason, 2004). Nixon's rhetorical strategy framed social ills as emanating from these "external enemies" who were actively and intentionally attempting to subvert the American way of life. King and Anderson's study notes that this strategy was particularly effective at directing the attention and displacing the guilt of a troubled nation onto these now discernable enemies constructed in opposition to the "silent majority" (1971). Nixon and his team specifically mobilized voters against anti-war protests on the basis of racial anxieties, such as the perception that African-Americans were advancing economically at a faster pace than white Americans, presumably due to government intervention (Lowndes, 2016; Mason, 2004). The notions that social problems were caused by certain groups of people and that those groups of people are advancing at a faster rate due to overrepresentation formed the basis of Nixon's "silent majority" strategy. The "non-shouters" had to now be marked, campaigned for, and represented to combat the onslaught of minority groups bringing crimes and drugs to middle America and suburbia.

Many scholars consider Nixon's crafting and use of the "silent majority" trope as a pivotal moment in his presidency and in the general trajectory of the American Right overall; Lowndes goes to far as to assert "the modern Republican Party in the US was made possible through the concrete realization of the Silent Majority" (2016, p. 26). The success of this concept and the rhetoric it relies on and perpetuates should not simply be

attributed to Nixon and his team being especially politically savvy. This is not to discount the Nixon administration's role in cementing and perfecting the "silent majority" trope, but it would be naïve to speculate that such a trope emerged spontaneously and in a theoretical vacuum. Instead, I would like to suggest that the initial and ongoing success of such a concept is due to the ways in which it formed a rhetorical analog with the already-existing rhetorical foundations of eugenics. To put it another way, the "silent majority" was so successful as an enduring political strategy because it relied on similar notions and acted in similar ways to the rhetoric of eugenics, thus endowing it with a "commonsense" familiarity that made it legible to people already immersed in a culture strongly influenced by eugenics and the frames of understanding that it relied on. Contextualizing the "silent majority" trope in this way also allows us to consider this political rhetoric in the larger context of ethnocentric domination that Wynter outlines; the "silent majority" merely re-stated the case of Man against non-Man, substituting "Man" with "majority" and "non-Man" with "minority."

Using the "silent majority" as a political and rhetorical strategy completes the three key functions of eugenic rhetoric that I highlighted earlier. First, the silent majority maps pure and proper politics onto a particular group (silent majority) that is assumed to be in danger of being usurped by an impure minority (protestors, minorities on welfare, etc). Furthermore, it is assumed in this rhetorical mapping that the fate of the current political society hinges upon the continued leadership and hegemony of the pure class; anything else will lead to political, moral, and ethical degradation. What the silent majority does is tap into an already existing logic and re-codes it into political terms. It

re-wires racial anxiety onto the language of politics. Dominant races and good genes become dominant majorities and good politics that is shared by a majority group. The implication is that aggrieved minorities are wrongfully siphoning government support and attention that outweighs their "rightful" claims to such resources based on their minority status. Furthermore, such support undermines the interests of the majority and the political field in which they are situated. Thus, the imperative becomes to render the minority politically impotent; the focus shifts from overt biological regulation to political regulation. However, this does not mean "true" eugenics stopped; it, in fact, continued alongside the use of the silent majority trope through the practice of forced sterilization and surveillance of mothers on welfare, and both drew on the notion of proper genres of the human (Lombardo, 2011).

Secondly, the use of the silent or disenfranchised majority shows a similar elasticity and fungibility to the concept of eugenics. It travels to different political issues, philosophies, and parties just like eugenics did at the turn of the century. The concept of speaking for a supposedly silenced majority would go on to inspire other movements such as Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority," as well as concepts such as "political correctness" and "identity politics" that rely on the notion of vengeful minorities silencing rightful majorities (Soileau, 1985). The rhetoric of re-focusing on the majority would even become part of Democratic Party politics in the 1990s, as the party steered away from its image as a "civil rights" party and towards issues explicitly attractive to "white working and middle class votes" (Lowndes, 2016, p. 31). Even in contemporary politics, a fetishized fascination with the white working-class that emerged from Donald

Trump's election solicit the notion that the election represented a push back from a group supposedly forgotten due to an excessive focus on minority issues. Like eugenics, the political currency possessed by the "silent majority" is, in part, due to its conceptual elasticity and ability to adapt to varying political issues, movements, and moments.

Thirdly, the silent majority rhetorical strategy draws attention away from the systemic nature of social problems and towards issues of "proper" political representation. The issue tends to become that minorities have too much political power and influence over the political sphere and that this improper allocation of political power is to blame for social ills. The problem becomes, for example "too many Black people are on welfare" instead of "the labor system is fundamentally flawed." Attention is turned toward curtailing or silencing minority groups instead of addressing the systemic issues that minorities often critique or fight back against. Critical race scholar Abby Ferber places such rhetorical strategies as a part of a larger culture of "oppression blindness," which "operates to defend the culture of privilege against perceived attacks" (2012, p. 69). Ferber is critical of approaches to anti-racism that do not consider the "intersectional" ways in which multiple axes of oppression are systemically minimized and ignored. Majoritarian rhetoric is one way in which "oppression blind" rhetoric has become perfected; it allows for the minimization of oppression using language that sounds democratic and appeals to ingrained political patterns of liberalism. Eugenics draws our attention to the biological representation of the dominant genre of human; the silent majority draws our attention to the political representation of the dominant genre.

The connections between the rhetoric of the majority and the rhetoric of eugenics shows that both bodies of rhetoric fulfill similar functions and seem to rely on comparable political logics, particularly in regards to the relationships between majority groups and minority groups. However, I want to go further than merely suggesting that these rhetorical patterns are simply similar. In order to better understand how these discourses and logics resemble and rely on one another in order to be legible, I will now turn to a text that explicitly theorizes the two strands as one and thus reveal how they intersect with one another.

**Robertson's American Majority**

Wilmot Robertson is a self-described "native Pennsylvanian" whose credentials include "long periods of study" at universities, service as "an army office in World War II," and a "varied career in journalism, advertising, and small business," with "an overwhelming concern for the darkening tragedy of his people" (1973, p. 619). Robertson runs a small publishing house in Florida that publishes "white racialist books" and a magazine called *Instauration* (Berbrier, 1998, p. 435). In 1976, Robertson published his own book titled *The Dispossessed Majority*, a burgeoning 600-page treatise written in an intellectual style with dense footnoting and appendices that outlined Robertson's ideas about the decline of the so-called "American Majority" (Berbrier, 1998). In *The Dispossessed Majority*, Robertson elaborates at length on the nature of race, the human, and the Western political system, concluding that the "decline" of the United States that he writes in response to is largely attributable to the decline of the "American Majority,"

which, according to Robertson, are white Americans of Northern European descent

(1973). In this section, I will pursue an extended textual analysis of *The Dispossessed*

*Majority* in order to understand how Robertson is theorizing the relationship between

race, politics, and the majority, and how this theorizing is informed and implicated in the

rhetorics of eugenics and Nixon's "silent majority" strategy.

Robertson's text begins with a short preface that outline his goals for the book and

who his book is for:

> The *most truly disadvantaged* are those who are hated for their virtues not their
> vices, who insist on playing the game of life with opponents who have long ago
> abandoned the rules, who stubbornly go on believing that a set of highly
> sophisticated institutions *developed by and for a particular people at a particular
> point in time and space is operational for all peoples under all circumstances*.
> (1973, p. xi, *emphasis mine*)

In this short opening statement, Robertson alludes to two very central claims in his text:

that there is a group (later named the "American Majority") who are "most truly

disadvantaged" (implying that there are others falsely claiming disadvantage), and that

the political institutions and values that define the United States have a material

connection to a specific group of people with shared genetic traits, making it dangerous

to assume that such institutions are compatible with people who do not share those

genetic traits. Robertson then goes on to a list a number of American ailments such as

"the drug and homosexual plagues, AIDS, the taste-killing shock waves of pornography,

ghetto savagery, the feminist madness, reverse discrimination, the degeneration of the

military, the torrents of illegal immigrants, the apostasy of the professors and journalists,

[and] the mindlessness of the students" that may seem eerily similar to anyone familiar

with contemporary American political discourse (1973, p. xii). Nonetheless, Robertson

assures his readers that these are mere stumbling blocks on the way to a "higher and more

luminous life form" (1973, p. xii). This indicates that the text is not only concerned with

making an argument about the current state of things but also with speculating about the

future and the possibilities of "higher" life forms, invoking a crude evolutionist

understanding of human development that will be important for many of Robertson's

claims throughout the text.

  The bulk of the book is split up into ten "parts" similar to chapters, all with dense

footnoting and a few sub-headings, followed by an appendix, bibliography, and index,

mirroring the layout of an academic text. Parts one through four give a detailed

explanation of Robertson's assessment of race, majorities, and minorities, parts five

though nine detail various "clashes" between the American Majority and what Robertson

calls "minority racists," and part ten is dedicate solely to speculating about the future of

the "American Majority." Robertson's writing style is deliberate, sophisticated, and

methodical, moving between various resources, government documents, and statistical

tables with the ease of a well-seasoned academic writer. Although it may be tempting to

dismiss Robertson's text as the deluded cries of a white supremacist, the organization of

the text and the style it is written in reflect a certain amount of intellectual labor on the

part of the author. To put it another way, Robertson's work reflects a concern for being

taken seriously as an intellectual text that adheres to the standards of academic decorum.

Thus, I believe it should be approached as a serious effort to theorize race and politics

from a white supremacist point of view. We too often dismiss overtly racist viewpoints as

the byproducts of unruly anger, ignorance, or general irrationality. Racism can be (and often is) rigorously theorized, meticulously structured, and cloaked in rational or logical parlance. Furthermore, many of the tropes Robertson invokes, from radical college professors to professional minority agitators, are still more than common in contemporary political discussions, demonstrating just how familiar and accessible Robertson's arguments are, rather than removed and outlandish.

Robertson's text begins with a short meditation on the nature of race and what it means for human society. Robertson writes that while a man may be able give up his religion or culture, he "cannot give up the physical side of his race, which… is inexorably determined by the laws of genetics" (1973, p. 6). Just how bound up humans are with race in Robertson's rendering is revealed towards the end of the text, where he states that "[a]s race has been the controlling factor of the human past, so it will be in the future" (1973, p. 556). For Robertson, race seems to be aligned not only with traits and attributes but also with *trajectories*; the biogenetic inheritance called "race" not only determines one's physical features but indeed the fate of humanity itself. Because this rendering of race is so dire and places such high stakes upon the concept of race, Robertson is very logically led to theorize racism as an equally important force. Robertson defines racism as "the overt or covert expression of the concept of race at one or more levels of human activity in   politics, art, religion, business, community life, and in the privacy of the home" and assigns it great political importance, claiming that it is the "force majeure in human achievement and human failure" and that it explains the "rise and fall of civilizations" better than factors such as economics, religion, or "even fate" (1973, pp. 7–

9) . Robertson is also quick to naturalize racism as "a basic element of human nature" and that "practically every nation or society" has passed through "racist cycles" (1973, pp. 8–10). It is important to note here that Robertson's understanding of racism is that it does not mark an inherently discriminatory or negative act of prejudice; it is simply the *expression* of race as a concept. Where there is race, there is racism; any awareness of race is inherently racist in Robertson's schema. Since race is already everywhere genetically, it follows that racism is also already everywhere and is, in fact, an undisputable fact of human existence. To deny or decry racism, then, is to deny a fundamental scientific reality about humans, as Robertson later claims sociologists and anthropologists do at their own peril. This insistence on race as an immutable, genetic fact about humans clearly bears affinity with the rhetoric of eugenics, which also maps race as an immutable fact that greatly determines productivity and ability. If anything, Robertson's theorizing of race raises the stakes of eugenics in an even more explicit way. If racism is merely race consciousness, and racism is a natural part of human society, it is only natural that eugenics, a clear and explicit expression of the concept of race, would eventually emerge in science.

Robertson's hard and fast understanding of race cements his ever-important concept of the American Majority, which Robertson always capitalizes, indicating its prominence. For Robertson, the American Majority is not a designation for a group within the United States that happens to be a majority of the population but a "discrete genetic and cultural continuum" (1973, pp. 70–71). Robertson claims that this group is made up of "Nordic, Alpine, Nordic-Alpine and Nordic-Mediterranean elements of the

population," and, at the time the text was written, made up almost seventy percent of all Americans (1973, pp. 29–30, 65). It is extremely important to note here that Robertson's use of the word "majority" in his American Majority concept is specifically not mathematical in the conventional sense. Other groups cannot become the "American Majority" (though some can be partially assimilated) and even if the American Majority were overtaken in the population, it would still continue to be the American Majority. "Majority" here refers to a claim that is not just about numbers but is also about essence. For Robertson, the American Majority is the enabling essence of America; it is a genetic group that quite literally carries American democracy with it. Even if minorities become a majority they can never be the Majority, because the Majority is the genetic material from which America (politics, culture, and all) is expressed. Robertson argues that "it should be emphasized that the power and durability of a race do not depend on numbers. A healthy morale, a healthy biology, and a consciousness of kind are  more important factors than size" (1973, pp. 65–66). The actual, mathematical majority-ness of the Majority is irrelevant, in other words. It is the fact that the Majority is genetically superior and thus indisputably more likely to produce successful civilizations that makes the Majority so important and this is why "consciousness of kind" or racism as Robertson defines it is so important. If you believe that race is a natural genetic substance that confers the potential or lack thereof for advanced civil society, then to be aware of race is to be aware of the means by which society is literally genetically reproduced. Any threat to this precious genetic substance is thus a biological and cultural threat to society as we know it.

It is fairly easy to ascertain Robertson's views about those who fall outside of the American Majority by proceeding logically from how he has sketched his argument thus far. If the American Majority comprises the raw genetic material from which political and cultural good flows forth, the minorities in opposition must only bring trouble and strife. Robertson splits minorities up into five primary groups: "assimilated minorities," containing people of Irish, Finnish, and Slavic descent, among others, "unassimilable white minorities," containing Southern Italians, Spanish-speaking white minorities, and some Mediterranean individuals, "the Jews," "nonwhite minorities," containing people of Mexican, Cuban, Chinese, Japanese, and Native descent, and "the negroes," which deserve their own chapter for being the "largest and most violent minority" (1973, pp. 125–236). "Negro racism," as Robertson calls it, "has now reached the point where it has literally grounded the once soaring American Zeitgeist and threatens to mutilate it beyond recognition" (1973, p. 217). Robertson goes on to describe a number of tropes common to anti-Black rhetoric including armed Black men, a "large criminal caste," drug abusers, welfare recipients, and fatherless families (1973, p. 217). Robertson's treatment of African-Americans as the most debased and most "backwards" of the racial types he mentions confirms Sylvia Wynter's claim about the status of Man, which is cemented by its opposition to the negro at the human nadir (2003). In Robertson's argument, Blackness essentially forms the antithesis to the American Majority. It is the least assimilable and clearly the most dangerous to the biocultural well-being of the nation, threatening to snuff it out completely. It is the natural opposite to the genetic superiority of the American Majority and thus opposite in culture, achievement, and overall success

at being since, in Robertson's view, genetics and race explain everything else. The connection between race, genetics, and success at life is what makes Robertson's argument so clearly connected to the logic and rhetoric of eugenics, which are pathologized forms of life that fell out of the narrow ethnoclass of Man.

The next facets of Robertson's argument are perhaps the most important in his text, as it articulates and theorizes what is left subtle and implied in the rhetoric of eugenics. Robertson's utter faith in genetics and race as explanatory factors for social phenomena leads him to believe that philosophical or "classic" liberalism and the institutions that spring forth from it are cultural and political expressions of a genetic reality, one that is not and cannot be shared by other genetic groups. Robertson differentiates between a fraudulent "modern liberalism," which he calls "illiberal" and the "party platform of minority racism," and "classic liberalism," which he defines as an individualist, propertied ideology that was in no way sympathetic to the cause of racial equality (1973, pp. 333–338). Robertson specifically allies this "classic liberalism" as the more authentic of the two and credits it with "eighteenth-century Whig governments in England, [and] the founding of the United States" (1973, p. 334). Robertson claims that the political qualities typical of classic liberalism, such as "[a] fondness for personal freedom, an independence of spirit, the unusually high status accorded to women, and a deep affection for the land," are genetically inherited by the American Majority from ancient Germans (1973, p. 78). This leads Robertson to conclude that "if a special biological inheritance had accounted for the progress and prosperity of the Northern European states in the Old World, it would have been reasonable to expect that a New

World country with an overabundance of the same genetic resources would become an even greater nation, perhaps the greatest nation of all" (1973, p. 79). Thus, for Robertson, classic liberalism and democracy are the political expression of racial aptitude that, quite naturally, cannot occur from groups of individuals who have not "inherited" classic liberalism and democratic tendencies. Robertson decries egalitarian Majority members who "are trying to transplant a faded, withered ideology, which functioned adequately under a special set of historical and genetic conditions, to a different age and to an often hostile and alien environment," noting that doing so has transformed "an intraracial struggle for individual rights and liberty into an interracial struggle for power" (in other words, what he calls "modern liberalism") (1973, pp. 111, 139). This explicit suturing of race and classic liberalism here makes it clear exactly why racial purity is necessary for the reproduction of society; classic liberalism, the philosophical and cultural foundation of the West, is a racial trait that must be cultivated through the management of race and genetics. To desire a liberal future is to desire a future dominated by the American Majority because one cannot occur without the other. True liberalism is a racial quality manifesting on the political strata. The willingness of the Majority to share their genetic spoils of true liberalism and democracy with those genetically unfamiliar with concepts such as self-governance, self-reliance, and individual rights led to liberalism being used by minorities "for purposes entirely different from those for which they had been intended" (1973, p. 552).

The concern for Robertson is not just that minorities are growing in number (recall that Robertson doesn't believe the strength or durability of a race is dependent on

numbers) but that they are growing in consciousness of their race, or "racism" as Robertson defines it, and that their racism is naturally antithetical to liberalism and democracy. Furthermore, Robertson's claim is that minorities have (wrongly) used liberalism to nurture their own race consciousness while preventing the Majority from doing the same. "Minority participation in politics and all other aspects of American life has now increased to where it can be said that the Majority is no longer the racial establishment of the United States," Robertson claims (1973, p. 82). The Majority may still be the majority and lead relatively prosperous lives but is politically "circumspect to the point of pusillanimity" (Robertson, 1973, p. 83). Unlike minorities, the Majority has no scholarship on common racial identity, no watchdog organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, and no literary or cultural representations of racial pride (Robertson, 1973). Most conclusive of the Majority's enforced silence at the mercy of minority racism is the media coverage of the Moon landing, which "was often treated with veiled hostility and even described as a deliberate trick to divert attention from the plight and needs of the poor and underprivileged" (Robertson, 1973, p. 96). It is key to understand here that Robertson does not believe that minority racial groups are unentitled to their race consciousness which, for Robertson, is a natural facet of human nature, but that minorities have twisted true "classic" liberalism in such a way that they are allowed to be race conscious while the American Majority is not (1973). Since race, consciousness of race, and the political are all inextricably intertwined for Robertson, a lack of race consciousness is a fundamental political lack. Through bloc voting, appeals to the courts, and control of culture and the media, minority racism and antiracism (in Robertson's

view, they are one) have effectively dulled the political reflexes of the Majority, even when they hold power through elected office (Robertson, 1973).

For Robertson, liberalism and democracy cannot deal with these racial clashes because they are race-specific and connected to the notion of universal human progress in Robertson's theorizing. Robertson writes that "In its dynamic stages racism can only be controlled or suppressed by superior force, a force most effectively provided by an opposing or countervailing racism" (1973, p. 226). In other words, the race consciousness of the Majority is what reproduces the political, of which liberalism is a part, not the other way around. The debilitation of white racism corresponds to the debilitation of society which further corresponds to the "profitability" of minority militancy. With no "effective preachers or teachers to defend the Majority cause, no contemporary literature or theater, no press to speak of, and… no nationwide forum of expression" the rightful ascendancy of the Majority was "efficiently blotted out" (Robertson, 1973, p. 554).

This process of minority growth, the corruption of liberalism into a platform for minority racism, and the "blotting out" of the Majority through separating it from its rightful ascendancy is what Robertson refers to in his use of "dispossession" in the title of the text. Oxford defines dispossession as the act of "[depriving] (someone) of land, property, or other possessions," a sentiment captured quite nicely as Robertson laments that "there is hardly a greater form of dispossession than becoming a servant in one's own house" (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.; 1973, p. 99). This treatment of the American Majority as "possessing" something that can be lost and that such a loss would render them "servants in their own house" is fascinating in that it renders the genetic/racial/political

ascendancy of the Majority as a kind of property, similar to how whiteness is understood

to be property by Cheryl Harris. Harris argues that the concept of whiteness cannot be

disentangled from the concept of property and that, in fact, whiteness is a "highly volatile

and unstable form of property," that was "the characteristic, the attribute, the property of

free beings" (1993, pp. 1720–1721). Harris reveals in her work how the ability to possess

was understood to be unique to whiteness, not a universal attribute, and that exclusion (of

people from whiteness) made whiteness into a kind of valuable property (1993).

Robertson's invocation of the Majority-member being made into a "servant in their own

house" by dispossession is an acknowledgment that Majority status is a kind of property

and that the lack of this property means to be outside of whiteness. The lingering fear in

this statement is that property will not only be seized but then weaponized against its

original owner through forced servitude. To put it another way, Robertson fears that the

classic liberal apparatus built by the Majority (the "house" as it were) that relied on the

exclusion of non-whites will one day be used by the minority to exclude the Majority and

that the precarious value of whiteness will be lost and deployed to oppress those who

depended on oppression. This apprehension elucidates the injury that must be done to

maintain whiteness in that it is a fear that whiteness or the Majority will one day become

located in the place of injury rather than non-whiteness or the minority.

The tracing and suturing of the concept of immutable racial qualities to the

rhetoric of the Majority and political value is what connects Robertson's claims to those

of Nixon's. Robertson makes explicit what Nixon's majority rhetoric leaves silent; that

the "majority" is to political society as the white race is to the genetic health of the nation

in eugenics. It is a distinct and rightfully ascendant and propertied bloc that has a legitimate interest in managing the political life of the minority. In eugenics, this ascendancy is articulated as biological (minorities threaten our evolution as a species). In Nixon's rhetoric of the Silent Majority, this ascendancy is articulated as sociopolitical (minorities threaten our political and cultural representation). What Robertson's text demonstrates is that these two stratum are not discrete and coincidentally analogous rhetorical strategies. In order to achieve logical and rhetorical consistency, the biological and political *must* be theorized together, even if that theorization remains largely unspoken or implied. Without the concept of immutable group qualities that have a material linkage to liberal society, the logic of Nixon's "Silent Majority" breaks down completely. Under the foundational principal of majority-rule in liberalism, any group achieving fifty percent plus one unit (a mathematical majority) should theoretically have a claim to a majority of political power. What Nixon signifies with the Silent Majority is the unmarked assumption that the political and cultural well-being of the nation is dependent on a propertied group with identifiable qualities that make them fit to determine the political arena, which is constantly threatened by aggressive minorities who censor and shame the majority while seizing political power and consciousness for illiberal ends. What Robertson's American Majority and Nixon's Silent Majority do is articulate a political space for otherwise unmarked assumptions of natural sociocultural ascendancy and superiority to be marked using language that sounds democratic. What sounds like a plea for the forgotten majority is a way of signifying a supposedly forgotten superior propertied nature of a discrete group of people. The key difference is that

Robertson's Majority makes explicit the biological nature of the political ascendancy of the superior ethnoclass, while Nixon's majority leaves it unspoken but implied as he and others praise the assumed immutable morality of the majority while decrying the lack therof in the minorities. To put it another way, the articulation of the "silent majority" works to reproduce the assumption of a rightfully ascendant biopolitical bloc with a legitimate claim to leadership *prior to* liberalism and majority-rule while occluding that very assumption through the language of liberalism and representation. It is, to put it in Robertson's terms, a method of fostering "race consciousness" without explicitly articulating racial claims.

This is what other scholars of political science have missed by refusing to seriously engage with fields of thought such as critical race theory and critical ethnic studies; these developments are not new or novel and do not represent an original way of thinking about political subjectivity and mobilization, but in fact tap into a much deeply ingrained understanding of what the political is and who it should serve. While explicit white supremacy and the idea of an organic white people may not be explicitly popular when articulated as such, what Robertson's book shows is that the underlying biological eugenic logic can very easily translate and fit into language that sounds democratic and philosophically liberal. Furthermore, Robertson, Nixon, and proponents of eugenics all rhetorically link the reproduction of proper society with a narrowly defined population, implying that proper politics is the expression of a particular reality associated with the immutable qualities of this population.

In this chapter, my analysis has demonstrated that political rhetoric exceeds mere persuasion or strategy; the rhetoric of the political actually maps what the political is, who can participate in it, and who must be forbidden from participating. Eugenics was a way of mapping the political through the language of science. Both Robertson and Nixon draw on the mapping put forth by eugenics while also establishing an analog rhetoric of the majority that recodes the hard science of eugenics into political terms. This mapping of the political as a pure and proper social force against an impure and improper social contagion is not confined to the eras I have covered in this chapter. They continue to be reproduced in political contexts today and are part of a longer history of domination and subjugation by a social system that overdetermines a narrow way of being as the only proper way of being. Eugenic metaphors and analogs continue to be produced in modern political rhetoric and continue to do the work of foreclosing upon other possibilities for thinking about what politics is or could be.

CHAPTER III

IDENTITY AND THE POLITICS OF EXCESS

As time moves on and political environments change, so does political rhetoric. The rhetoric of the "silent majority" and all of the connotations carried by that signifier slipped away after Nixon's presidency and other signifiers came to hold the conceptual space it occupied. The 1980s gave rise to concepts such as "welfare queen" and "tough on crime" that reproduced the core logics of eugenics and the "silent majority" by imagining the Majority as victims of violent and parasitic minorities. Similar reproductions continued into the 1990s, with the rise of texts such as *The Closing of the American Mind*, *Illiberal Education*, and *Tenured Radicals* that imagined common-sense American concepts like free speech and freedom of thought to be under attack by waves of "political correctness" emanating from college campuses around the United States (Bloom, 1988; D'Souza, 1991; Kimball, 2008). The demands of minorities, according to critics of "PC culture," were quickly swelling far beyond reason and threatened American education and the future of American politics. As a rhetorical strategy, invoking "political correctness" was largely successful, leading the term to stick to political discourse well into the 2000s.

Although the specific terms had shifted, rhetorical tropes like "political correctness" and "welfare queen" still reflected an imagining of the political that pitted a pure, proper expression of politics and civil society (attached to white and normatively gendered bodies) against an impurity (attached to non-white and non-normatively gendered bodies) whose very presence signified the collapse of the civil and the political. In other words, these concepts told a similar story to the ones told by eugenics and majoritarianism; that minorities must be politically managed (genetically and/or politically) in order to successfully reproduce civil society in the future for the majority. As Sylvia Wynter highlights in her work, these stories are the continued re-stagings and progression of a political struggle between the overdetermined colonial genre of Man and other genres of the human that follows from the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the Enlightenment (2003).

Following the previous chapter's documenting and analysis of this ongoing political struggle that profoundly affects the way in which certain political subjects are produced and how they interact and function with the political, this chapter will take up texts responding to the results of the 2016 presidential election to argue that this political story is continuing to be told and, specifically, has undergone a significant revival in modern political discourse through a new signifier of "identity politics." My selection of the aftermath of the 2016 election as my site of inquiry in this chapter is supported by the resurgence of interest in terms like "political correctness," "silent majority," and "identity politics" in the weeks following from the date of the election, documented via the Google Search Trends online tool which archives interest in specific search terms (See Appendix,

Figure 1). The "spike" in interest for these terms occurring within a few weeks of the election gives us insight into a crucial political moment that was widely understood to be an "upset" that upended long-held political assumptions about notions of "progress" and the exceptional nature of the United States as a nation and population. In the weeks following the election, these assumptions were hastily re-written and re-coded in order to make sense of the election results. The surge in interest of these discrete terms reflects not only their similarity and utility for meaning-making in the wake of complex political phenomena, but also their work in connecting the political moment of Donald Trump's election to the supposed rise in political work that explicitly grapples with questions of racial and gendered identity. This supposed connection supports a narrative according to which Trump's election was the result of the left's defiance of the "silent majority" through an excessive focus on "political correctness" and "identity politics" which is a narrative that conveniently allows the left to displace and map its political anxiety onto minoritized groups, similar to the displacement of political anxiety onto minorities through genetics and race science in the eugenic era.

The specific texts I will engage with in this chapter to document these repeating rhetorical patterns are authored by Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University who specializes in "intellectual history, with a particular focus on Western political and religious thought" (Columbia University, 2017). Lilla became associated with left-leaning critiques of the concept of "identity politics" (which Lilla alternates with "identity liberalism") after publishing an op-ed in the New York Times titled "The End of Identity Liberalism" where he posited that the Democratic Party lost the 2016 election

because it focused on issues related to "identity" that alienated white working-class voters and drove them to vote for Trump and others in the Republican Party (2016). Lilla's op-ed was widely circulated after its publication to much celebration from some and much critique from others, eventually receiving a follow-up extension in the form of a short book called *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. Lilla became something of a minor political celebrity during this time, giving interviews to publications like Vox, The Guardian, and the New Yorker. Lilla's seeming authority and wide circulation in contemporary political discourse is why I have selected three of his texts – his original op-ed, his book, and an interview on the book given to Vox – as my primary sources for this chapter. While Lilla's remarks and opinions on "identity politics" cannot be regarded as comprehensive, I believe their wide circulation and overall popularity attest to their resonance with current understandings of the interactions between identity, minority groups, and American politics.

As with Robertson's text as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, there has a been a relative lack of scholarly engagement with Lilla's arguments[1]. Although there have been several critiques of Lilla from mainstream publications, they have largely focused on trying to refute Lilla on his own terms, often arguing that "identity politics" is simply a "good thing" in contrast to Lilla's assessment. My intention in this chapter is not to prove Lilla wrong about "identity politics" or argue that what he names as "identity politics" is desirable, which would accept the terms and framings that Lilla has put forth.

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[1] As of the date of this writing, Google Scholar only reports two English-language peer-reviewed articles that cite Lilla's book, neither of which engage in a sustained analysis of Lilla's arguments (see (Davidson, 2017; Francescato, 2018).

Instead, it will be to understand how "identity politics" rhetorically functions as a concept and trope in Lilla's text and how he uses it to theorize about what constitutes true politics. My reading of Lilla is intended to be attentive to the rhetorical moves he makes, what evidence he cites to construct his argument, and what his argument necessarily excludes in order to achieve coherency and a logical flow. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that the rhetorical and logical moves Lilla makes are analogous to the moves made in eugenic and majoritarian thought that define a pure and proper politics against an aberrant difference that is perceived as a threat to the possibility of politics.

Before moving on into a textual analysis, it is important to note a couple of details about the context of Lilla's texts and how those contexts bear on my analysis. First, it is important to understand that Lilla is writing not only as a political and intellectual historian in these texts, but also as a political strategist. In his interview with Vox, Lilla explicitly articulates that he is talking about "trying to seize power in this country" through winning elections and enacting progressive policies (2017). Lilla's normative critique is, essentially, that focusing on issues related to "identity" costs the Democratic Party election victories. While some may object to treating a work of political strategy as an object for close theoretical analysis, scholars like Chandan Reddy have highlighted the perils of citing strategy or pragmatics as the rationale for not pursuing an extended analysis of political texts (2011, pp. 5–6). Choosing not to read Lilla's works as acts of political theorizing carries the high stakes of occluding how hierarchical political thought comes to be reproduced in the name of political strategy.

Secondly, I find it important to note that Lilla is addressing a predominantly liberal and left-leaning or at least left-sympathetic audience in these texts, as evidenced by his continuously stated support of the Democratic Party, citations to well-known figures of progressive politics like Franklin Roosevelt, and allusions to the labor movement in the United States (2017) . Thus, it is important that we consider his rhetoric as uniquely framed and constructed in a way to maximize persuasive appeal to those on the left. As such, my analysis in this chapter will explicitly consider the similarities of Lilla's rhetoric to the rhetoric of eugenics while also highlighting the dissimilar ways in which the rhetoric is framed and coded. That is to say, my intention in this chapter is not to prove that Lilla is explicitly or directly advocating for eugenics and/or genocide, but that Lilla' rhetorical and argumentative patterns produce similar rhetorical effects in the ways in which they render non-white, non-straight, and non-cisgender bodies and their utterances as antithetical to politics itself and thus signify political absence. As discussed in the previous chapter, a key feature of eugenic-like thought is its elasticity and ability to conform to different political contexts. Lilla, in being strategic and writing for a left-leaning audience, inscribes his argument in a frame and with terms that appear on the surface to be radically different than Robertson's or Nixon's arguments, but that produce a similar mapping of the political, albeit framed in a different light.

**Mark Lilla and Identity Politics**

In his assessment of the current state of the American left, Lilla paints a fairly grim picture of the current and forthcoming generation of political actors and thinkers.

Lilla opens his op-ed for the New York Times by lamenting that liberalism in the United States has "slipped into a kind of moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity" that has effectively left liberals incapable of governing. According to Lilla, the past few decades have featured an American left that has consistently built up an "omnipresent rhetoric of identity" that middle- to lower-class white Americans resent (2016). For Lilla, the current state of the left is simply not possible of producing long-term social or institutional change.

There are two key features to Lilla's understanding of identity and its bearing on politics that I find important to highlight. The first is that the intersection of identity and politics is a recent development in American politics that can be traced to the rise of the individualistic politics associated with Ronald Reagan. In his book, Lilla claims that, prior to the 1980s, the United States was dominated by the "Roosevelt Dispensation," which Lilla links to a "collective enterprise" of citizens who were devoted to "solidarity, opportunity, and public duty" (2017, p. 8). This political dispensation would later come to be usurped in the 1980s by the "Reagan Dispensation" which was attached to an individualist imaginary devoted to "self-reliance" and "minimal government" (2017, p. 8). In carving the last century of American politics up into two broad conceptual sections, Lilla is able to assert that the focus on identity on the political left is a novel development that is directly connected to the rise of the "Reagan Dispensation," boldly declaring that "identity is Reaganism for lefties" (2017, p. 95).

Although a politics based around identity and group-consciousness may seem odd to trace to Reaganism and individualism, Lilla is not deterred from doing so. For Lilla,

the rampant individualism associated with the American right in the 1980s is directly related to the rise of "identity politics," which Lilla considers to be a mode of self-production and a kind of narcissistic longing to make the world identical to the self (2017). According to Lilla, "identity politics" encourages people (especially young people) to "[engage] with the world and particularly politics for the limited aim of understanding and affirming what one already is" (2017, p. 84). In short, identity is, in Lilla's rendering, a pre-existing set of qualities that one possesses that is only tangentially related to the political. Although Lilla admits several times throughout the text that race and gender have certainly been political issues in the past, they are only *objects* of political interest and are not necessarily bound up or intrinsically connected with politics (2017). Lilla thus considers a preponderance of fixation on such arbitrary traits or qualities to be pointedly non-political, rhetorically reducing identity to a set of signifiers that are used exclusively in the description and development of a fundamentally apolitical self (2017). This move on Lilla's part to cleave identity from the larger political world is extremely important for his overall project of reducing and downplaying the importance of identity in American (and especially American leftist) politics by allowing Lilla to collapse identity from a complex sociopolitical phenomenon to a mere individualistic set of traits.

In addition to his assertion that "identity politics" is primarily an individualistic and narcissistic exercise, the other key facet of Lilla's reading of "identity politics" is that issues directly related to identity that take the form of concerns over language or culture are figured as excessive, exotic, and deliberately petty in the face of "real" political issues

such as those related to class or economics. Lilla asserts that the rise of "identity consciousness" encourages an "obsessive fascination with the margins of society" that are remote to the concerns of real politics (2017, p. 83). Lilla provides "the supposed moral urgency of giving college students the right to choose the designated gender pronouns to be used when addressing them" and "the fate of transgender people in Egypt" as examples of the absurd and excessive focuses of identity politics (2016). Lilla also cites specialized terms such as "intersectionality, performativity, [and] transgressivity" as evidence of the exotic nature of identity (2017, pp. 86–87). Likewise, Lilla aligns the supposed excesses of identity with the excesses of evangelical religious thought:

> [Identity politics] is mesmerized by *symbols*: achieving *superficial diversity* in organizations, retelling history to focus on *marginal* and often *minuscule* groups, concocting inoffensive *euphemisms* to describe social reality, protecting young ears and eyes already accustomed to slasher films from any disturbing encounter with alternative viewpoints. Identity liberalism has ceased being a political project and has morphed into an evangelical one. (2017, p. 14, emphasis mine)

"Symbols," "superficial," "marginal," and "miniscule" are all terms that evoke a sense of excessiveness and sense of remoteness from a rational reality. Lilla develops this analogy further in his text when he suggests that identity politics swaps real political arguments with "taboo" that is deployed to "[parse] every conversation for immodest locutions and [rap] the knuckles of those who inadvertently use them," invoking a "buttoned-up Protestant schoolmarm" (2017, p. 91). Lilla's mocking comparison of the politics of identity with the excessive discipline of evangelical religion's marks identity politics as simultaneously excessive, petty, without reason, and even violent. Lilla's comparison

here recalls the kind of othering that has occurred overall several centuries in western travel literature, which portrays non-European others encountered during travel as "[amenable] to domination," as scholars like Mary Louis Pratt have noted in their work (1985, p. 120). In staking his claim in a kind of psychological deficiency of those who do "identity politics," Lilla reproduces racial metaphors that see racialized Others as without reason and sympathetic to irrational discourses of domination, which Lilla invokes here with the image of the "Protestant schoolman." In asserting that "identity politics" is both individualistic and excessive, Lilla maps "identity politics" outside of the realm of the political, dubbing it "pseudo-political" or even "subpolitical" (2017, p. 57).

Lilla's theorizing and carving out of "identity politics" as outside the limits of proper politics relies on several key omissions and outright errors that obscure the long history of "identity" as it relates to politics (even if it was not named explicitly as such). For example, Lilla discusses (and dismisses) the Combahee River Collective Statement in a brief and flippant manner, citing only one quote from the Statement before entering into a conversation of the decline of Marxism and the rise of other critical theories in the university (2017, p. 83). This scant engagement with the Statement is one of the ways in which Lilla ignores the long history of women of color organizing that highlights the ways in which "identity" has consistently been a formative condition of politics and the distribution of life chances in the United States. Patricia Hill-Collins writes that Black feminist critical theory "reflect[s] women's efforts to come to terms with lived experiences within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and religion… the need for such thought arises because African-American women

as a group remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice" (2009, p. 9). Collins specifically remarks that these social theories "do not arise from the rarefied atmosphere of their imaginations" (2009, p. 9). In other words, Black feminist theory exists as a mode of understanding and mobilizing collective experiences of injustice in a particular political context. Lilla does briefly mention the formative conditions of identity politics, but refuses to elaborate on them, consigning them to the past and sketching identity politics as something akin to a horoscope or personality analysis, something that exists for the sake of a self somewhere that wants to know more about itself.

Furthermore, the Combahee River Collective Statement actually speaks to the interaction between personal experiences, the political, and the potential for change. The Statement reads that "as Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). In other words, the Statement conceives of the Collective's project as one that is a response to the many oppressions faced by women of color, not one that only fulfills a personal desire to know more about oneself. The Collective does declare that Black feminism does indeed emerge from personal experiences and feelings, but they immediately connect that to the gaining of a political conscience which is directed at the outside world and outside forces (1977). Furthermore, the Statement explains that "racism …does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). This clear connection between the cultivating and analysis of

personal experience in the context of politics building establishes that personal

exploration is not, as Lilla writes, merely an exercise in vanity that is meant to disconnect

one from the larger world. In fact, it is the exact opposite; to understand personal

experiences and build a politics from them to engage the outside world. The Statement's

own theorizing and sketching of the political considers personal experiences to be

paramount to developing a politics; however, it does not, as Lilla argues, create a vision

of politics that is solely for a rarefied individual that is any way comparable to the image

of the "rugged individual" that forms the basis of a Reaganist political imaginary.

Lilla's treatment of the Statement and the larger increase in visibility to political

movements that explicitly invoke "identity" as their formative basis as a new trend that

can be traced to the latter half of the twentieth century also omits a significant amount of

sociohistorical context and intellectual history. For example, Lilla, in contrasting

contemporary social movements to historical ones, highlights the developments of a

"scholastic vocabulary" in fields like gender studies, containing words like "fluidity,

hybridity, intersectionality, performativity, transgressivity, and more" (2017, pp. 86–87).

The highlighting of "intersectionality" and the focus on specificity as opposed to

generalization in contemporary feminist discourse and the presentation of these qualities

as novel and as a corruption of a more authentic social movement is interesting,

particularly given recent scholarship on the intellectual history of "intersectionality" by

scholars like Ange-Marie Hancock. Hancock demonstrates through a rigorous

engagement with numerous primary sources that the formal conceptualization of

"intersectionality" was preceded by decades of women-of-color anti-violence activism

that effectively practiced core tenets of intersectionality, such as specificity and attention to intersecting categories of oppression, even before the word "intersectionality" was coined (2016).

Lilla's analysis of identity politics as isolating and naturally aversive to the concept of a political "we" is also misguided. Despite Lilla's claims that a politics rooted in identity is fundamentally incompatible with coalition politics, Black feminists have engaged with and deployed the concept of coalitions at length in their work. Barbara Smith, one of the members of the Combahee River Collective that helped author the Statement, remarked that "we didn't mean that if you're not the same as us, you're nothing. We were not saying that we didn't care about anybody who wasn't exactly like us…we worked in coalitions with other people too. We certainly showed up for causes that might not be the expected ones for people who had the identities that we had" (Taylor et al., 2017, pp. 847–856). The notion that Lilla pushes that those working explicitly with identity cannot or will not work with others of different identities is clearly not what Smith had when working within the Collective. Smith further remarked that refusing to work across lines of difference would be "really, really bad politics" and that such a politics could not be conducive to the survival of Black women (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 857). Given Smith's comments on the nature of identity politics as it was conceived by the Collective, it is clear that the politics theorized by the Statement is not one that is isolationist or separatist; in fact, the Statement specifically rejects separatist visions of politics, stating that they do not support fractionalization (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Coalition, as it turns out, is a key facet of the politics that the

Statement proposes, contrary to Lilla's claims. Other researchers such as Brian Norman have also noted the Statement's wide circulation outside of Black feminist groups, which also pushes back on the notion that identity-based scholarship or politics is only relevant or able to travel amongst those who share particular identities (2007). In fact, Norman claims that the "we" present in the Statement is both "specific to the space and place of initial articulation" and "provisional and temporary" in such a way that the manifesto anticipates the destruction of subject identities (2007, p. 122). Put another way, the Statement acknowledges both the importance of recognizing and respecting the identity of the authors while also anticipating and desiring the destruction of oppressive systems that construct those identities.

Another key area of historical inaccuracy comes from Lilla's association with "past" social movements as proper and in-line with the values of citizenship while considering modern social movements to have strayed from this ideal to an improper focus on identity. This history is shockingly backwards on several accounts, ignoring the very radical roots of the second-wave feminist movements and the groups like the Black Panthers that existed alongside the Civil Rights movements and within a larger history of Black radical thought. Lilla's analysis here is especially inaccurate in the case of LGBT organizing, which, as scholars like Dean Spade have pointed out, actually began as radical movements that were then later appropriated and subsumed into nonprofit structures in the 1980s, thus becoming less "radical" and more attached to normative solutions to identity problems, exactly the opposite of what Lilla seems to suggest (2011). Lilla's disregard of these historical facts and his general lack of engagement with the

Statement, concepts like intersectionality, and the history of identity-based social movements could be characterized simply as poor, sloppy, or incomplete research, perhaps partially justified by the form of the text and its orientation towards a general, rather than academic audience. Doing so, however, ignores the very political implications of Lilla's omissions, which participate in exactly what Hancock highlights in her work, which is the erasure of Black women and other women-of-color from intellectual history and, furthermore, from the "political" itself.

**Citizenship as the Limit of Proper Politics**

The characterization of "identity politics" as based in falseness due to its excessiveness, petty nature, and reification of the Reagan individual in Lilla's work provides the constitutive contrast for the "proper" vision of politics that he advocates for in his project. The more proper and "true" politics that Lilla proposes in his text is defined by an intertwining set of priorities, which he defines as "the priority of institutional over movement politics; the priority of democratic persuasion over aimless self-expression; and the priority of citizenship over group or personal identity" (2017, p. 104). Similar to the previous section, I will take up these three "priorities" as rhetorical sites that are, in fact, producing a vision of proper politics, even as they are steeped in strategic language that figures them as "priorities" rather than theory. As previously mentioned, while Lilla is naming his texts and arguments as strategic, it is important to consider these arguments as performing a particular type of theorizing about politics,

given Lilla's background in intellectual and political history as well as the text's wide circulation.

The "priority of citizenship over group or personal identity" is where I will begin, given that "citizenship" is the base image upon which Lilla builds his argument and which logically leads to the other two "priorities" Lilla mentions (2017, p. 104). Lilla's critique of "identity politics" and "identity liberalism" continually rely on appealing to notions such as "commonality," "shared destiny," "common good," and a "universally democratic we" that have supposedly been undermined by an aggressive and narcissistic focus on identity, which have shifted the focus of politics from "we" to "me" (2016, 2017, pp. 99, 137). The excessive and unruly rhetoric of identity is, according to Lilla, a "*depoliticizing* force" that effectively prevents a "political vision" of the future of the nation from emerging (2017, pp. 103, 137, emphasis mine). Lilla's figuring of identity here as a force that literally possesses the power to "depoliticize" (in other words, unmake the political) and prevent the political from emerging is very indicative of how Lilla is imagining identity and its relationship to the political. The emphasis here on what identity prevents, interrupts, or unmakes figures identity as a sort of artificial and secondary wedge that disrupts a primary and natural emergence of the political through an identification with the state and the commons of the nation (two concepts which, as I will later discuss, Lilla continually conflates).

Lilla mobilizes an even more violent metaphor when discussing the effects of identity on politics in his interview with Vox: "It works for them [Republicans]. It doesn't work for us. It's that simple. *It's killing us*… It's the first thing we think of. It's our

mentality now, to immediately think about how different groups are affected, about our social differences… We don't have a sense of a national destiny and a national project because we can't stop talking about our differences [emphasis mine]" (2017). The figuring here of identity as something so excessive that it poses a mortal threat to the left and to the left's vision of the political resonates uneasily with the rhetoric of eugenics, as discussed in the last chapter. Of course, Lilla is speaking metaphorically here, but the slip from literal death to political death is not without significance. The coincidence that Lilla's metaphor targets the same figures (non-white, non-straight, and non-cisgender) that were often the object of eugenic thought and practice, and that Lilla's framework of thinking about the political performs a very similar rhetorical mapping of non-normative bodies onto the specter of political ruin as does eugenics (which maps bodies onto genetic ruin), cannot be ignored. Lilla's argument is not new nor does it respond to a novel set of circumstances that emerged only recently.

If, in Lilla's text, we can read "identity" as the subjugated, excessive, and irrational mode of being, then the figure of the "citizen" is Lilla's marker for the proper political genre of Man. The concepts of "citizenship" is, for Lilla, the only proper foundation of the political because it is the sole identification that can allow a political commons to emerge. Lilla writes that "we must re-learn how to speak to citizens as *citizens* and to frame our appeals – including ones to benefit particular groups – in terms of principals that everyone can affirm" (2017, p. 15, emphasis in original). The focus on re-learning "how to speak" and the necessity for shooting any claim about *particular* groups through a language of citizenship-as-commonality reflects Lilla's commitment to

a vision of the political that figures "citizenship" as the original political identification in the sense that it is literally required to engage and produce politics. When citizenship isn't present, Lilla claims that "there is a natural tendency for subpolitical attachments to become paramount in people's mind" (2017, p. 131). The "subpolitical" as a marker of lack in contrast to the "citizen" as a marker of sensibility and reason analogs well with Wynter's terms, with *citizen* assuming the hierarchical supremacy of *Man*, while other political identifications become subsumed as *subpolitical*, literally beneath (in terms of worth) the proper political genre.

The contrasting of citizen as proper and reasonable to identity and difference as improper and irrational (by virtue of its excessive and petty nature) is further demonstrated in Lilla's text by the supposed ability of citizenship to effectively manage and adapt to difference. Lilla asserts that the concept of citizenship is not necessarily exclusionary, but can "[absorb] ethnic attachment rather than exclude it" (2017, p. 64). Lilla goes on to highlight the African-American civil rights movement as an example of citizenship's egalitarian force, writing that "the leaders of the civil rights movement chose to take the concept of universal, equal citizenship more seriously than white America ever had. Not to idealize or deny difference – which was evident to the naked eye – but to render it politically impotent" (2017, pp. 65–66). Once again, Lilla paints the civil rights movement with a broad brush, but his understanding of citizenship is as that which can render difference "politically impotent" as opposed to an idealization or denial of difference. Lilla's statement, when read together with his previous positions of identity and difference as "subpolitical" reinforces citizenship as a rational, common

sense, and proper foundation for the political. If difference is, as Lilla states, "evident to the naked eye" and thus always already present as a simple optical phenomenon, then politically identifying with it most likely does seem irrational and excessive in the "eyes" of citizenship, which transcend mere optic difference and achieve a universal equality that is otherwise made impossible by political identification with differences. Lilla posits citizenship, that which "we all shared but which was nothing to do with our identities" as the "only way out" of the political conundrum of identity (2017, p. 120). This logic renders citizenship as the most rational, most egalitarian, and most advanced mode of thinking about the political at the expense of rendering political identifications with difference as merely becoming obsessed with that which is "evident to the naked eye."

Lilla's use of "citizenship" as the basis for all political identification creates other rhetorical issues in addition to the ones already mentioned, although Lilla's investment in the concept apparently supersedes any need to engage with them substantively. For one, the image of the citizen relies on the image of the noncitizen in order to gain meaning or coherency; if some people are citizens (in Lilla's terms, identified with the state), then there must be others who aren't citizens and who aren't identified with the state (2017). Given the recent swell of explicit nativist rhetoric in the United States, one may come to the conclusion that the image of the citizen may not be appropriate or resonate for individuals who are legally excluded from formal citizenship. Lilla, despite deploying the example of immigration to demonstrate the supposed elasticity of citizenship as a concept, completely sidesteps any substantive engagement with the potential for citizenship to produce a political fracturing effect rather than a unifying one. To the

contrary, Lilla points to the idea that citizenship may be an alien concept as a sign of

political debasement:

> It is a sign of how polluted our political discourse has become that any mention of
> the term citizen leads people to think of the hypocritical and racist demagoguery
> that passes for our "debate" on immigration and refugees today. I will not be
> discussing such matters here, and what I have to say about citizenship implies
> nothing about who should be granted citizenship or how noncitizens should be
> treated. (2017, p. 15)

For Lilla, the taking up of citizenship as a racist trope is simply *de facto* improper and, in

fact, a sign of the "pollution" of political discourse that does not warrant serious

engagement. Lilla's bold declaration that his text cannot imply anything about citizenship

in legal terms and thus simply cannot be a fracturing force demonstrates his investment in

the concept as the basis for the political.

The importance of citizenship, the marker of a proper political "we" upon which

the political rests, leads to the next priority that Lilla describes, which is the "democratic

persuasion over aimless self-expression" (2017, p. 104). For Lilla, because "citizenship"

and commonality are the privileged mode of political interaction, the importance of

persuasion (which produces sameness) as opposed to expression (which produces

difference) seems logical. According to Lilla, public sentiment is the "basic law of

democratic politics" and that means that true political work must prioritize the viewpoints

of the "vast majority" of Americans (2016, 2017, pp. 5–6). Although Lilla explicitly

states that he is not invoking a "homogenous silent majority," his repeated emphasis on

the "public" as the proper object of politics alongside other statements complicates his

desire to distance himself from the Nixonian rhetoric of the "silent majority" (2017, p.

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111). Lilla points to the supposed abandonment of the legislative branch (a representative branch) for the Supreme Court (a non-representative entity) perpetuated by left-leaning social movements as evidence of liberals disdain for "finding out where people stand, trying to persuade them, and building a social consensus" with "fellow citizens with different views" (2017, pp. 113–114). Lilla also admonishes different social movements for interfering with the political process of persuasion and representation, arguing that movements deploy rhetoric that alienates citizens from one another and leads to the "subpolitical" attachments of identity. For example, he states that "I'm here, I'm queer will never provoke more than a pat on the head or a roll of the eyes" and that Black Lives Matter is a "textbook example" of an improper non-persuasion politics, writing that the movement's indictment of society, law enforcement, and its "Mau-Mau" tactics effectively played into the hands of the Republican party and can thus be held partly accountable for its ascent to power (2017, pp. 117–118, 129). The prospect of alienating that "vast majority" of citizens is dire enough for Lilla to state in his interview with Vox that "we have to emphasize certain things and not emphasize other things… we try to remain silent on things that will be too contentious" and that we must "stop thinking and talking about ourselves, and sacrifice some of our sacred cows" (2017). In these statements, Lilla once again invokes the excessivity of identity while also advocating for the management of political difference in such a way that it does not interfere with the successful reproduction of the political commons that the "citizen" underlies. Lilla sets up his argument in such a way that the sacrifice of some "sacred cows" for the sake of the political seems perfectly legitimate and logical. Persuasion and the production of some

level of sameness and consensus among political participants is, for Lilla, the marker of a proper politics as opposed to the improperness of identity, which recklessly creates artificial and arbitrary difference that threatens the political commons and, ultimately, the representative function of the state.

The centrality and priority of government reform over social movements is Lilla's final priority and it forms the last node in Lilla's understanding of proper politics. The citizen is the basis that ensures a political commons, persuasion is the only mode of political engagement that successfully reproduces the commons, and government reform is (and always has been) the "main focal point of American democratic politics" (2017, p. 106). Lilla admits that minorities need more attention, but that the only way to "meaningfully defend them" is to win elections at every level of government (2017). The emphasis on winning elections leads back to the importance of persuading that "vast majority" which establishes the need for a political commons rooted in a common citizenship and the management of sectarian differences. The three priorities that Lilla sets up as a normative prescription for what the political ought to be establish a system of individuals in consensus on their mutual identification with the state (citizenship) whose aim is always persuasion (the production of sameness and the closure of difference) for the purpose of being properly represented at the level of government as to produce policy reforms. This figure of the government as the fulcrum and logical endpoint of the political justifies the imperative to produce a political commons that is premised on citizenship and persuasion as opposed to other identities and expression. Although Lilla's arguments leave quite a bit out, as previously discussed, the framework that he proposes

does in fact produce a coherent image of an ideal political sphere that is based in consensus and commonality and thus in which legitimate disagreements and differences of opinion can be properly worked out.

What is significant and compelling about Lilla's text is not only that it crafts a specific model of politics that Lilla advocates for, which is fairly common in mainstream political discourse, but that it claims to map an ideal universal vision of the political through the image of the citizen while simultaneously and implicitly advocating for the management and, in fact, elimination of certain political modes of engagement. What Lilla names as "identity politics" cannot just be a mere difference of opinion that can be subsumed within a pluralistic political field. It is, as I have already highlighted, an inherently depoliticizing, subpolitical force that is "killing" the left. Individuals who participate in "identity politics," who Lilla generally imagines to be young women, college students, Black women, and transgender individuals who actively articulate a politics based around their identity, literally come to signify the *absence* of the political. There is no possibility of politically engaging with (for example, by persuasion) identity politics because it is inherently marked as a lack of the political. The political model of the "citizen" which claims to be universal cannot read identity politics as political because it is defined in advance as always already against the politics of identity. Non-citizen identities can only ever be excessive, petty, and irrational in comparison to the rationality of the image of the citizen, which ensures the most productive political sphere by excluding those who complicate the function of the state to properly represent and mediate between differences in interest between citizens. Modes of politics that do not

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center a common citizenship, persuasion, and government reform cannot be truly political for Lilla because the presence of such modes is read as an absence of politics (pseudo-politics, as Lilla names it) and is thus a threat to the future of the political. That is to say, for Lilla, the future of the political (for the left and for the nation) is contingent upon the exclusion of what he names as "identity politics" from politics, hence the subtitle of his book "After Identity Politics."

If one considers Lilla's text to only be a work of political strategy, then it is easy to dismiss the dire images and narratives Lilla creates as a strategic way to address and shore up a perceived political weakness for the Democratic Party in the United States. However, even at this lowered bar of scrutiny, there are issues with Lilla's argument. As Samuel Moyn points out in his review of Lilla's book for the Boston Review, Lilla rightfully points to the "structural realities" in his historical analysis as important for understanding political situations, but then ignores a great bulk of those realities by choosing to target the "existential neediness" of identity politics and college campuses rather than the adoption of libertarian economic philosophy and the rise of neoliberalism and neoconservatism that have largely served as the catalysts for more radical contemporary social movements (2018). Moyn also smartly asks "Did Lilla come to bury identity politics – or simply raise it to the level of the country?" noting that Lilla indicts the symbolic politics of identity only to immediately offer the symbolic, non-specific image of the citizen as the primary mode of political identity (2018). In short, Lilla does not actually advocate for the end of "identity politics" but instead advocates for an identity politics that is particularly invested in the identity of the citizen.

Again, to read Lilla's project as purely a strategic one could easily lead one to assume that Lilla's strategy is simply a poor one that misses a lot of historical context and locates a rather inappropriate object of critique given his stated political goals. This type of reading, however, misses the point of why Lilla would choose to frame his argument in such a way and what exactly this argument offers and authorizes that a critique of neoliberal economics, as suggested by Moyn, would not. By framing the political struggle as one between a rational and proper politics that adheres to the liberal traditions of citizenship, persuasion, and government reform to an irrational pseudo-politics that prioritizes arbitrary group differences over commonality, Lilla is able to argue for the management of certain types of political activity. Although he frames it as strategy and as specifically for the political left, his critique and overall project suggests that in order to successfully produce a liberal and civilized future, political modes that emphasize certain expressions of identity must be curtailed and eventually expelled from the political imaginary altogether.

What is so remarkable about Lilla's project is not just that he makes an argument for the exclusion of certain kinds of politics in the name of politics, but that he frames his appeal to the left as one that is essentially targeting the right. I do not find it puzzling that Lilla traces what he names as "identity politics" to the rise of Ronald Reagan and makes comparisons of social movements like Black Lives Matter to evangelical conservatives; doing so allows him to conflate what he wishes to manage ("identity politics") with targets that are generally seen as acceptable by the left (Reaganism and evangelical conservatism). By framing his argument as if it were about a confronting a specific

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version of Reagan individualism, Lilla makes his appeal more persuasive to those on the left. By marking social movements like Black Lives Matter as hateful, petty, and individualistic in ways that are comparable to Reaganism and the Religious Right, Lilla crafts an argument for excluding and managing certain approaches to politics that is easily digested by left-of-center individuals and incorporated into their preexisting understandings of how contemporary American politics is structured. Lilla's critique is able to displace real engagement with the social movements or issues of "identity" so persuasively because he frames his critique as one that is essentially about the right masquerading as the left. To put it another way, Lilla's argument marks contemporary social movements and issues as essentially the same as the political right in the United States, thus making his desire to manage and eliminate certain political modes seem appealing to his audience, which is left-of-center and not sympathetic to the American right.

The desire to preserve a pristine and pure political commons against an impure and invading contagion that is not a participant in the political but instead an existential threat to the possibility of the political is what makes Lilla's argument a eugenic analogy that is rhetorically framed for a left-of-center audience. Lilla's critiques, although devoid of any mention of eugenics or genetics, rhetorically maps the political in an analogous way to the rhetorical mappings of eugenics and the silent majority; a pure and rationally superior group of individuals with a legitimate claim to leading the political (the genetically superior, the silent majority, and, for Lilla, the "citizen") is (genetically or politically) endangered by an excessive minority that is read as *absence* that threatens the

future of civil society. This rhetoric, whether shot through the language of genetics, of majorities and minorities, or through political citizenship, produces a mandate to manage and eliminate the encroaching and excessive minority who threatens the "vast majority" with biological or political contamination. It is no coincidence that this reoccurring narrative, regardless of what particular parlance is used to articulate it, targets the same group of non-white, non-straight, and non-cisgender individuals every time.

This is why I keep coming back to Wynter over and over again; this is fundamentally about genres of being in a political world that continuously reproduces an overdetermined genre of Man and his political mode that relies on rendering other potential genres of being and interacting with one another as irrational and dangerous to the majority of people and thus needing to be managed and eliminated. Chandan Reddy speaks to this kind of logic in his book *Freedom with Violence*, arguing that the state enacts of legitimate violence by claiming that it has the responsibility to eliminate irrational hate. Reddy writes that the state imagines itself as having an "ethical role of enforcing truly legitimate violence, of becoming the representative and material expression of that violence" and that "any violence not sanctioned by the state is characterized either as nonpolitical or antipolitical 'hate,' both conditions best addressed by medicine, psychology, or the military (all institutions that…have the capacity and authority for the eradication or annihilation of the offending hate)" (2011, pp. 11–12). This has quite a bit of resonance with Lilla's claims about "identity politics" being a symptom of narcissism and that people who practice "identity politics" are hateful and petty in the same way an evangelical Christian would be. "Citizenship," an identification

with the state, thus becomes the marker of rationality that must be defended against a hateful irrationality. Lilla's framework for understanding politics, then, is a framework which marks certain modes of political being and labor (what Lilla names as "identity politics") as in excess of political rationality (and actually subpolitical or antipolitical) and thus needing to be managed or eliminated. Furthermore, Lilla's rendering of politics and specifically of "identity politics" as in excess of the political due to its irrationality corresponds to the "practices of hate" that Reddy identifies, noting that "the state has an obligation to eradicate, so that political society can remain free—in this way, the state delivers not a political violence against a political enemy, but a nonpolitical violence against the enemies of modern political society" (Reddy 2011, p. 12). Lilla sees identity politics as the "very limit of political society" and this figures it as an irrational and non- or sub- political threat to the very possibility of political society (Reddy, 2011, p. 12). Reddy helps us see here how Lilla is reproducing a dominant political trope in modern-day liberal nations that functions to rationalize state violence by claiming to "properly" distribute it in the name of preserving political society.

Reddy also discusses the positioning of the liberal state as the natural and rational basis for political change in his book. He writes that "the US nation-state continues to assert its form as the best possible totality for worldwide social relations" and that the liberal state is often positioned as "the final outcome of struggles for equality," which Lilla does when he makes assertions that all political action must be focused upon government reform (2011, pp. 8, 37). Reddy uses the phrase "freedom with violence" to denote the ways in which state violence occurs through a "monopoly on rationality" that

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is figured as a desire to define "rational freedom" as the "freedom from the threat of arbitrariness" (2011, p. 38). He also uses this phrase to gesture towards how visions of emancipation that remain tied to nation-state form and to identifications with it, such as citizenship, do not disturb notions that "legitimate violence" ought to be use by the state to eradicate "irrational practices and cultural expressions" (2011, pp. 38–39). This is precisely why Lilla's critique (and other critiques like it) are both so resonant with liberal political understandings and so potentially dangerous; they are attached to a political imaginary that figures the state as the ideal representative of rational social forces that are authorized by their rationality to eliminate irrationality, which is almost always figured as individuals and political subjects who do not properly reproduce what is thought of as "proper society." Reddy's attention to the ways in which geopolitical competitors become rhetorically figured as moral and existential threats can be thought of in terms of Wynter's genres, where other genres of human aren't simply seen as competitors to Man but as an existential threat to Man and all who do properly comply with it. The rendering of those doing "identity politics" in Lilla's eyes as threats to the very possibility of politics performs the exact kind of strategy that Reddy is highlighting, one that can't consider "identity politics" to simply be another viewpoint or interest in a pluralist democratic system, but as a threat to democracy itself.

Lilla's understanding and figuring of the political as primarily a way of managing interests is also something that deserves to be examined. Political philosopher Jacques Rancière troubles the notion of politics as a kind of commons where people come to dispute their interests, which is exactly how Lilla imagines liberal society, i.e. as

"citizens" who come together in politics to dispute their rational interests about issues such as economics. Rancière, to the contrary, argues that:

> Politics does not exist because men, through the privilege of speech, place their interests in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something "between" them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing. (1999, pp. 26–27)

In other words, for Rancière, the political is not a conceptual commons where interests are debated, but the confrontation between the logic that claims to establish the political commons by properly accounting for all political subjects and those who exceed this account and are in fact, not counted. Rancière acknowledges that this is a very different account of politics than offered by most and proposes that the "organization of powers" that is usually referred to as politics be called the "police" instead (1999, p. 28). Rancière writes that when he uses "police" he is not so much referring to discipline necessarily, but more the "rules governing their [bodies] appearing, [and] a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed (1999, p. 29). Lilla's image of the "citizen," in addition to performing what Reddy terms a "freedom with violence," also functions like what Rancière would call a police order, claiming to properly name all political subjects with nothing left over; subjects can have their identities, which are synonymous with interests, but they are all citizens first and most importantly. What "identity politics" actually does, in Lilla's understanding and with

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Rancières terminology, is disturb this order and call attention to the fact that the figure of the "citizen" cannot in fact account for all political subjects.

If the figure of the "citizen" cannot account for all political subjects and Lilla sees any attempt at disputing the count of the "citizen" by refusing it as a primary marker of political subjectivity as foreclosing on the possibility of politics, then his project may be termed one of "consensus democracy" as Rancière would term it. "Consensus democracy" or, more accurately, "postdemocracy" is the "conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combinations of social energies and interests," according to Rancière (1999, p. 102). If, as Lilla argues for, the image of the citizen is wholesale embraced as the basis for the political, this is exactly what would be achieved; no more miscounts or disputes about identity and belonging to the nation, just interests that are managed in their interplay by the state. Rancière notes that this is understood as a "reasonable agreement" that rests on the assumption that there is no gap between parties appearing at a dispute and parts of society, which Rancière rightfully calls "the disappearance of politics" (1999, p. 102). This is to say that what Mark Lilla is actually calling for by arguing for the abandonment of "identity politics" is the end of politics itself since identity is, in his imagination, articulated as a kind of non-identification with the state and with common political interest. Furthermore, Rancière notes that consensus democracy represents itself "as the world of law as opposed to the world of non-law, the world of *barbaric identity*, religion, or ethnicity," thus fulfilling the opposition of rational and irrational that Reddy

highlights in his work(1999, p. 124, emphasis mine). Politics is, for Lilla, the end of politics and the wholesale embrace of the rational figure of the citizen that is to be defended through legitimate violence against the surplus irrationality of other identifications.

In this chapter, I have engaged in a close reading of Lilla's texts to show that his project is one that relies on a rhetorical mapping of the political that is analogous to the one produced by the logic of eugenics and the silent majority. In doing so, I highlight that these political moments are not isolated or unique, but in fact connected to a longer history of domination and subjugation that is invested in managing and eliminating certain modes of being. While eugenics is framed by the language of science, the "silent majority" by the language of politics and mathematics, and Lilla's critique of "identity politics" by the language of citizenship and commonality, these understanding of the political all single out a kind of "villain" figure that is not just another political participant but an existential threat to the possibility of politics itself. These narratives justify and authorize the management and elimination of non-white and gender non-normative individuals and modes of being. For eugenics, this is in the name of evolution and genetic progress; for the "silent majority," this is in the name of the rights of the political majority; and for Lilla, this is in the name of a liberal, left-of-center future.

Advocating for the management of these populations and their political expressions is clearly not isolated to one side or the other of the political spectrum and, in fact, seems to be becoming more and more prevalent on the left after the election of Donald Trump. For example, Amy Chua, a law professor at Yale, recently published a

book titled *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations* that forwards a similar thesis to Lilla's, but shot through the language of international relations and citing a fear that "political tribalism" may pose a threat to the politics of the United States (2018). In her book, Chua explicitly compares the "tribalism" of the left ("identity politics") with the "tribalism" of the right (racist nativism) and prescribes commonality and political moderation from minorities (such as not calling people racist for doing or saying racist things) as the solution to American social problems (2018). The growing trend of imagining the regulation of the political expressions of minorities as the solution to structural social problems and imagining political futures contingent upon this management reflects both an unwillingness to address the political structures (capitalism, white supremacy, systemic homophobia and transphobia) that produce the need for the social movements singled out by Lilla as well as a continuing trend of blaming minorities for holding back political and human progress.

CHAPTER IV

THE UNDERCOMMONS OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Thus far in this thesis I have explored three technically distinct political and

rhetorical strategies – eugenics, majoritarianism, and identity politics – to argue that, far

from being discrete, these modes of understanding the political rely on a notion of a

proper political genre of being. That is, all of these rhetorics imply there is a proper mode

of interacting with the political and that maintaining this interaction and managing other

interactions is necessary for the successful reproduction of the political. Furthermore, all

of these logics rely to some degree on a notion of contamination – that a pure political

past was recently compromised by impure and improper modes of being and that the fate

of the society/nation/world is contingent upon the production of a once-again politically

pure future. Temporality and more specifically futurity are at work in these political

imaginaries that attempt to mobilize a vision of the future that is free from the excessivity

of non-white, non-straight, and non-cisgender subjects so that the "real" work of politics

(managing conflicts of rational interest between subjects capable of having them) can

occur.

Futurity as a mode of theorizing and approaching social problems, particularly

from marginalized perspectives, has recently been taking up with great fanfare within

interdisciplines such as women's studies and American studies. However, as scholars like Lee Edleman have highlighted, futurity is not inherently liberatory and is not an all-powerful conceptual tool that is the "answer" to contemporary issues in social thought, even when visions of the future are being produced by subjects understood as "minorities" (2004). Politically futurist imaginaries, even those produced by and put to work by minoritized subjects struggling against dominant genres of being, can still collapse into imperatives to regulate and manage certain kinds of life and establish pure conceptual spaces for the most deserving iterations of life that can travel under the sign of a minoritized identity signifier. Respectability politics and analyses that fix upon one axis of identity, for example, often fall into this futurist trap, establishing a new order within the already dominant order to delineate who among the minorities is most deserving, most competent, and/or most rational and thus most able to properly "represent" a minoritized community. This delineation is then mobilized in futurist terms, where then the imperative becomes to manage and correct individuals within the community with the understanding that solving the issues that face the community are fundamentally about changing the behavior of the community and managing the expressions it makes. More often than not, this leads to a doubling-down on the original structure of oppression, where the preferred behaviors are those that most align with the dominant ontological and epistemological structures and genres of being.

In the concluding chapter of this project, I am interested in not just "looking forward" to a future where I assume things will be better because individuals are acting in more reasonable and rational ways, but more in "looking around" to see what political

practices are being mobilized to do work in the present and that are often misnamed as "identity politics" or "political correctness." While I have already shown that signifiers like "identity politics" are suspect due to their reliance on eugenic-like thinking, my intention is not to "advocate for" the kinds of political labor that the term claims to refer to. In this chapter, I explore different kinds of political labor referred to by those signifiers and how they mobilize temporality in their political imaginaries. I argue that some iterations of minority politics can indeed be harmful, but not because, as those such as Lilla have argued, that they wrongfully dilute or disorganize a previously whole political sphere, but due to the fact that they tend to re-mobilize and re-inscribe eugenic-like logics that are fundamentally invested in policing and proscribing patterns of behavior and modes of being that reinforce rather than struggle against the dominant genre of Man. In this chapter, I turn to scholars who give attention to supposedly "progressive" logics that invoke minorities and their texts as positive forces that nevertheless rely on similar tropes and similar understandings of the future as the ones I have focused on critiquing in this thesis. After reviewing these political logics, I turn to the concept of a "non-corrective" anti/politics to grapple with and account for those modes of politics that refuse to manage behavior and instead enact a critical political practice that refuses demands for purity and recognizes the anti/political work that is already-present and already-surrounding dominant modes of politics and being. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks and reflections on this thesis and how it fits into my overall academic project, as well as considering how political futurity and speculation may be mobilized as a driving impetus for the production and distribution of livable life.

**Reductive Reiterations of Identity**

Rhetorical tropes like "political correctness" and "identity politics" have been in continuous use since the 1990s to refer to many different kinds of political labor and labor perceived as political. These terms assume their own accuracy and indeed assume that the kinds of labor they are referring to are similar enough to collapse under a single signifier, homogenizing phenomena as diverse as opposition to the Confederate battle flag, critiques of comedians like Jerry Seinfeld, social initiatives such as permitting trans individuals to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender, and social movements such as Black Lives Matter. This rhetorical flattening is one of the key effects of these signifiers that I find so problematic. In their desire to map the political as a struggle between proper and improper politics, they must necessarily collapse any number of diverse political moments together in order to make identity-based thought and movements seem more coordinated and thus more threatening than they really are. In this opposition to the rhetorical flattening of diverse political moments, I find it necessary to explicitly elaborate on those kinds of labor that can be called "identity politics" or "political correctness" that I do not find critical or helpful. That is to say, as part of my project of disturbing terms like "identity politics" and "political correctness" as those which misname political labor, I want to take the time to explain that I am not arguing for an understanding of the many different types of misnamed labor as inherently liberatory or critical. In other words, simply being "identity politics" to the eyes and ears of people like Mark Lilla does not make one inherently revolutionary; assuming so would perform the same rhetorical flattening that I am critiquing in this project. In this section, I want to

explore a few iterations and logical patterns of what could be called "identity politics" that are indeed problematic but not because they pose a threat to the political, as critics like Lilla imagine. To the contrary, they mobilize and reframe narratives very similar to those of Lilla and the eugenics movement in order to stake a claim to the political, ironically echoing the very social forces they claim to fight against. In categorizing and naming these patterns of political phenomena, I am not intending to imply that they are inherently and logically discrete; the logics these "types" of identity politics rely on often overlap and inform one another.

The first of three patterns of "identity" I want to trouble in this section is a kind of essentialism that collapses minoritized subjects with their texts and assumes that any kind of text or utterance produced by a minoritized subject is fundamentally and properly authentic. This is a type of political logic that assigns a kind of blanket value to any statements or texts produced by subjects with marginal identities. This logic can be found in a wide range of contexts and across the political spectrum. What these examples have in common is an assumption that any and all statements made by those with marginal identities are politically valuable in that they reflect a supposed "authenticity" that insulates them from any kind of critique or critical engagement.

A fairly explicit example of what I am discussing here emerges in a short op-ed in the New York Times titled "A Conservative Case for Identity Politics" by a self-described conservative university professor named Jon Shields. Doing "identity politics" for Shields means explicitly laboring to have a diverse set of authors on his syllabi, a very common kind of academic labor that many critics of "identity politics" sneer at (2018).

However, Shields is not motivated by an egalitarian drive to correct long-standing citational practices that discount the work of marginalized scholars. Instead, he is motivated by his student's own lack of reasoning and logic to consider arguments that they do not agree with and he has personally found that assigning students Black authors who, for example, "criticize hip-hop culture or defend white police officers," are less likely to be dismissed as bigots because of their Blackness (2018). Shields laments that "the power of an argument should not depend on the person making it, nonetheless, it does," and argues that humans are "hive-minded animals" and that his students are ultimately "partial, tribal beings — not rational automatons" (2018). Note here that Shields is making his argument by appealing to an image of his students (even as he claims to be speaking about all humans) as psychologically deficient and unable to properly and logically detach themselves from identity in order to read a text logically. His strategy to more or less trick his students into considering different viewpoints relies on an understanding of identity as a kind of essence and the idea that one who possesses this essence have some sort of essentially authentic claim to speak on behalf of this essence.

Even though Shields' choices can easily be called "identity politics" in that they fulfill a goal that is explicitly associated with identity, the way that identity is mobilized here is to essentially trick presumed non-rational students into engaging with ideas because someone with that identity produced those ideas. This logic, a mere rung above the oft-cited "but my friend who is Black/gay/trans says…" anecdote, plays out the same narrative of college students who lack reason and logic and, instead of offering correction

through critique, subtly attempts to exploit this supposed lack of reason to promote certain ideas and ideologies. In short, Shields mobilizes and promotes an essentialized notion of identity for the purposes of reasoning with those who cannot otherwise be reasoned with by presenting a token possessor of "identity" to advocate for a certain cause, thus insulating the cause from anti-racist, anti-homophobic, and anti-transphobic critique. This mobilization of "identity" is one we should be skeptical and critical of, even as it wants to be known as "identity politics."

Another, perhaps more subtle, mobilization of "identity" in an uncritical way that reproduces logics of pure and impure politics is highlighted and critiqued by Linda Martin Alcoff in her piece "The Problem of Speaking for Others." In this piece, Alcoff argues that a trend in disciplines like women's studies exists that dictates that certain people cannot "speak for others" because they are located in different identity categories. For example, this understanding plays out as something like "only Black individuals can speak for Black people" or "I can't talk about trans* issues because I am not trans*." Alcoff notes that identity is mobilized in a pointedly essentialized way in this logic, noting that it "[reduces] evaluation to a political assessment of the speaker's location where that location is seen as an insurmountable essence that fixes one, as if one's feet are superglued to a spot on the sidewalk" (1992, p. 11). Alcoff also notes that such a logic implies that "one can retreat into one's discrete location and make claims entirely and singularly within that location that do not range over others, and therefore that one can disentangle oneself from the implicating networks between one's discursive practices and others' locations, situations, and practices" (1992, p. 13). What Alcoff

highlights here is a similar logic to the one deployed by Shields that considers the texts

and utterance of those in a certain identity category about an issue that concerns their

identity to be more true or authentic and thus more valid than others. Deploying identity

in this way reinforces notions of liberal individualism and posits the notion that a proper

politics is one that matches up certain statements (about identity) to "correct" subjects

(those who have the identity), thus foreclosing on what Rancière would call the

possibility for politics in favor of a police order where utterances are always already

matched up to proper subjects. In this formulation, identity supports dominant systems of

ordering and management, rather than troubling them. When identity is mobilized and

understood in this way, the potential for appropriation and exploitation, as in Shields'

case, increases.

Another pattern of invoking identity that remobilizes eugenic analogies and

narratives of citizenship focuses more on creating a "respectable" version of an identity

that is assumed to be reasonable, natural, and compatible with civilization and able to

properly "represent" the identity, as opposed to others within the group whose practices

of life are seen as degenerate and evidence of excess. Terrion Williamson writes about

this in her critical examination of the beratement and eventual sacking of a radio host

who referred to the women of the Rutgers women's basketball team as "nappy-headed

hos" on the basis that the Rutgers women were classy, talented, and articulate, and thus

did not deserve to be labeled as such (2015). Williamson compares this to the relative

lack of media coverage of a long line of serial murder cases involving Black women and

posits that this may be because the murder victims were not respectable in the same way

as the Rutgers women and did have a greater proximity to the "nappy-headed ho" stereotype (2015). Extrapolating from this implicit act of valuing, Williamson writes that:

> What I did then and do now have some serious misgivings about, however, is a conceptualization of worthiness (e.g., what one deserves) that fundamentally relies upon the same formulation it is purportedly at odds with in order to make its case for itself. Here, the argument that proceeds along the line of unmitigated disavowal inherently functions to avow the very thing it purports to strain against, and the outraged claim that the Rutgers women were not nappy-headed hos suggested that it was not that particular configuration of terms that was the problem as much as it was that those particular women were being associated with it. (2015, p. 97)

Williamson's attention to a "conceptualization of worthiness" and the proper matching of terms with individuals and how this logic functions to "avow" the very reasoning it struggles against is exactly what I desire to highlight as a particularly problematic form of invoking identity, one that creates "proper" and "improper" classes of a minority subject based on acceptable standards of behavior and, in this specific case, proximity to a stereotype. The well-meaning attempt to use a proper identity (the Blackness of the Rutgers women's basketball team) as a rationale to prevent the circulation of harmful texts (stereotypes about Blackness), in this case, actually mitigated larger structures of values attached to particular ontologies and ways of being in that they implied the lack of value of those who do bear proximity to the stereotype of the "nappy-headed ho." What identity functions as in this case is a regulatory impetus, one that must necessarily devalue and push away certain unruly minority subjects in order to privilege a more proper, reasonable, and respectable subject.

Another example of a similar kind of invocation of identity in as a justification for the further creation of "proper" and "improper" political subjects is the relatively successful proliferation of what scholars like Lisa Duggan call "homonormativity," which posits a "proper" lifestyle and political subjectivity for gays and lesbians. Duggan connects the emergence of homonormativity to the proliferation of neoliberalism and culturalization of neoliberalism in the 1990s (2009). Duggan uses Andrew Sullivan and Bruce Bauer, two gay men and theorists of a gay political center, as primary referents for what she is analyzing in her article. She notes that both take to attacking public displays of sexuality and advocate for a depoliticized understanding of sexuality that can pose no threat to the majority because sexuality is, by nature, involuntary and unchanging (2009). She even notes that Bauer specifically invoked the notion of "most gay people" being a part of a conventional and reasonable "silent majority" of Americans, as opposed to the rude and loud irrationality of Leftist "queerthink" (2009, p. 182) . The re-deployment of the "silent majority" framed through the terms of identity is not coincidental; it reflects the very same fundamental understanding of "most (gay) people" who are assumed to be reasonable and the proper representative subjects of their community being drowned out by loud, irrational, and angry minorities. This logic reinscribes notions of respectability and the proper performance of identity as a prerequisite for social value.

Andrew Sullivan used a similar rhetorical strategy in what is now known as the first serious overture for gay marriage in The New Republic. In his essay, his rationale for supporting gay marriage is rooted in an opposition to the "abuse of already stretched entitlements" that domestic partnership offered, a creeping fear of the "social

disintegration" that not promoting marriage would allegedly engender, and the desire to create a "genuine public health measure" designed to push the "necessity" of "gay responsibility" in the "wake of the AIDS crisis" (1989). Despite the lucent conservative tropes present in Sullivan's article, including the demission of social insurance ("already stretched entitlements"), gay-blaming for the AIDS crisis ("to be gay and to be responsible has become a necessity"), and the manifest pro-nuclear family complexion of the essay (marriage "would foster social cohesion, emotional security, and economic prudence"), this call for gay marriage (explicitly articulated as a way for gays to gain access to "an already established social convention") as the defining teleological objective of gay activism defined the way LGB folk across the political spectrum organized for the next two decades, demonstrating the political efficacy of this particular brand of "identity politics" (1989).

Both of these examples show claims to identity being made by implicitly or explicitly devaluing another less "proper" or "civilized" iteration of that very identity. Whether its "nappy-headed hos" or sexually irresponsible queers, these deployments claiming to do work on behalf of an identity actually reinforce the very structures they otherwise claim to be resisting. This formulation of identity plays very well with concepts like "citizen" and "silent majority" in that they imagine a pure, rational, and apolitical identity that can easily be reconciled with already-dominant standards of being. Even though these claims are mobilized on behalf of "identity," the underlying logic they mobilize is ultimately quite similar to the logic of eugenics and the genre of Man. Furthermore, they may be characterized as a kind of "freedom with violence" in that they

claim to protect reasonable, proper subjects from the illegitimate violence of racism and homophobia while deploying a legitimated form of racism and homophobia against supposedly irrational political subjects. In this formulation, racism and homophobia are wrong because they expose otherwise reasonable, upstanding citizens to violence, not because they partake in a fundamental ordering of society and the ascribing of value to that order.

Another unsettling pattern of identity being invoked in a positive way for uncritical ends is when it is called up as a kind of consumable and depoliticized aesthetic that exists to provide a reasonable and valuable contrast to normativity in institutional and public spaces. Sara Ahmed addresses this in her study of diversity and diversity workers within institutions like the university, where diversity is assumed to be a non-political and non-specific aesthetic of "good taste" that can manage difference effectively while providing value to the institution (2012). Ahmed writes that "the enjoyment of diversity is narrated as that which can take us beyond racism, which in turn is reduced to poor or bad taste... but if diversity is digestible difference, then other forms of difference become indigestible, as that which the organizational body cannot stomach" (2012, pp. 69–70). This understanding of identity as something that possesses a consumable value in public or institutional spaces preserves the logics of property and a particular type and amount of identity as "proper" to certain spaces. By carving out a concept to mark "digestible" difference, logics of "diversity" can reproduce structures whereby some difference is seen as non-valuable and non-reconcilable to the institution, thus reproducing the same dilemma that critics Lilla, Nixon, and Robertson all claim to be

fighting against: a surplus of unreasonable (in the sense that the surplus is excessive and identity itself is without reason) difference communicated as identity.

In highlighting these uncritical invocations of identity, I want to show how "identity" itself is not an inherently liberatory analytic, nor does it do anything by itself that actually challenges dominant logics or modes of belonging. Identity can just as easily be appropriated and reconfigured to fit dominant ideologies and ordering logics. Critics like Lilla actually overstate the efficacy of "identity" alone as an analytic that can challenge and de-order dominant social structures. As these examples demonstrate, "identity" as a concept is not inherently structured in such a way that it is always already critical of dominant social patterns. Treating identity as discrete and naturally-occurring and thus essentialized and non-political *object that may be advocated for politically* rather than as a relational process *always already bound-up with politics*, social structures and the violence those structures perpetuate keeps open the possibility of appropriation and redeployment by dominant social forces and structures.


**Politics Without Correction, Life Without Management**

What the previous examples all have in common is that they leave intact an understanding of politics as something other than and inherently separate from identity, which is assumed to be natural and a simple fact of life. Thus, while it may logically be an object of politics, it cannot ever be a proper ground for politics. These examples imagine futures where identity and politics are not necessarily connected because identity groups are self-regulated, only speak on behalf of what they already are, and add an

amount of "good taste" to social and institutional life. What I find compelling are not these formulations of identity and politics, but alternate understandings of an "identity politics" that acknowledges the necessary and ongoing enmeshment of these two terms. In this section, I explore what a desirable "identity politics" may look like that does not rely on logical structures that must necessarily reproduce social structures of subjugation.

As already discussed, the political labor referred to pejoratively by signifiers like "identity politics" is both misnamed and miscategorized with deployments of identity that are uncritical and reinforce dominant social structures. Those like Mark Lilla and Wilmot Robertson based their theories of the political on the notion that individuals possessing certain identities posed an existential threat to the proper reproduction of the political and society at large. Although I have troubled these arguments by closely examining their logics and placing them within a larger context of social domination as well as troubled the notion that "identity" possesses some inherent liberatory or critical potential, I would not characterize my desired project as one that seeks to "do away" with identity or decry all invocations of "identity politics" as either pejorative rhetorics or uncritical politics. In this section of my thesis, I want to "play" with the concept of identity and speculate about what identity might do to the political and vice-versa. My intention is not to offer a normative prescription for what politics should be, but instead to probe and explore alternatives conceptions of both identity and politics that trouble the overdetermined genre of Man that Wynter identifies, that keeps performing the miscount (and perhaps questions why one needs to be counted) posed by Rancière, and that refuses the freedom with violence that Reddy identifies and analyzes. In short, I am playing with both

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"identity" and "politics" and asking what may come of either/both of them if we shift our current notions of ontological and epistemological horizons of possibility.

For this section, I choose to consult the Combahee River Collective Statement as my primary source. I do this for several reasons, some more related to the formal logics of this particular and specific project and some more personal and reflective of my ongoing general scholarly project and my own affective investment in it. On the one hand, I am motivated to make the Statement a site of resistance and political theory in direct contrast to those like Lilla, who use it as a referent for "fraudulent politics" and wish to discount its impact and significance as a work of political and social theorizing. On the other, the Statement is one of the very first texts I read in my introduction to women's and gender studies course, one of the very first I assigned when I taught that very course two years later, and one that I find myself coming back to over and over again in my scholarly work. The way the Statement theorizes identity and politics together as an "identity politics" is very different from what Lilla claims it to be and how "identity" is mobilized in the uncritical ways in which I described in the previous section. Furthermore, the Statement was published within a few years of Robertson's *The Dispossessed Majority* and around the time of Nixon's ascent to political influence, making it a source that is in many direct and indirect ways responding to the social forces I have taken up in this thesis project. In performing a close reading of this text, I hope to gesture both to the ways in which this document resists Lilla's reading of it and Robertson's notion of the political produced in a similar temporal moment in addition to

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the ways it remains a text, a theory, and an archive of speculative politics and political futures that are committed to already-existing life that is not in need of correction.

In addition to the Combahee River Collective Statement, I also use Fred Moten's and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* as a sort of companion piece to the Statement in this section. Moten's and Harney's project is very concerned with re-defining long-standing conceptions about what the political is and how it functions, and I believe their project converses well with the Statement and that both works inform one another in important ways. I want to emphasize here that I am reading *The Undercommons* alongside the Statement and not using it as a lens through which to "read" the Statement, which would privilege *The Undercommons* while objectifying the Statement, which is exactly the type of work I am trying to avoid. Instead, I am thinking these pieces as in conversation and studying (a concept found both in the Statement and Moten's and Harney's work) with one another. In connecting these two projects, I hope to demonstrate that the Black feminist and the Black radical traditions are offering alternate visions of politics, polity, and belonging that are not necessarily predicated on notions of purity, contamination, and, ultimately, the dominant genre of Man.

The first important strand of thought in the Statement I want to examine is the willingness to maintain the tension between the anti-Black and anti-woman basis of the political and the necessity of continuing to do political work and be involved in politics. The Statement's oft-cited quote on identity politics states that "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as

opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). As cited as this quote may be, presenting it outside of the context of the full Statement can be misleading because of the way the Statement conceives both "identity" and "politics." "Identity" in the statement is never conceived of as something separate from the political sphere that provides a "pure" ground from which to speak or perform political action. Instead, the Statement acknowledges that "the synthesis of these [racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class] oppressions creates the conditions of our lives," highlighting racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class identity as the products of the interaction between life and social structures of oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977). "Identity" is not a pre-existing quality in the statement, as some like Lilla have read it, but instead the "condition" of life produced and reproduced by interactions with social structures. This relationship then leads to an "extremely negative relationship" between Black women and the American political system (Combahee River Collective, 1977). This understanding of identity is important because it highlights the necessary and continuous enmeshment of identity and politics and that there can be no "pure" refuge in identity on which to base a politics, made clear by the Statement's rejection of lesbian separatism. In short, the Statement conceives of identity as a relationship between subjects and sociopolitical structures, rendering any kind of "identity" work as always already in relationship to systems of social oppression and domination.

However, the "extremely negative relationship" that Black women have to the political is not used as a ground to advocate for the abandonment of the political or of political work. To the contrary, the Statement acknowledges and commits to various

types of political work, such as workplace organizing and setting up rape crisis centers. The necessary antagonism between the political and Black women is not conceived of as a rationale for abandoning political work or disowning other political groups. Instead, the Statement acknowledges that struggling with others against political forces while also struggling against those same others (as in the case of Black men specifically) is a necessary result of the "pervasiveness of our oppression" and a necessary condition of political work (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The Statement, while putting forth a vision of a Black feminist identity politics, never conceives of this as a politics of purity that is located somewhere other than the political sphere from which it can critique it without being involved or in relation to it. To put it another way, the Statement understands "identity politics" not as politics emerging purely out of an individualized and ultimately apolitical identity, but as always enmeshed with the political, requiring different types of work that may necessarily have some level of contradiction.

The enmeshment of subjugated individuals within institutions and political arenas that they are fundamentally antagonistic towards is discussed by Moten and Harney in their text. They write that politics and the commons is always co-existent with the surround and the undercommons, noting that "politics is an ongoing attack on the common – the general and generative antagonism – from within the surround" (2013, p. 13). They discuss the relationship between the subjugated and the commons further, writing:

> The false image and its critique threaten the common with democracy, which is only ever to come, so that one day, which is only never to come, we will be more than what we are. But we already are. We're already here, moving. We've been

around. We're more than politics, more than settled, more than democratic. We surround democracy's false image in order to unsettle it. Every time it tries to enclose us in a decision, we're undecided. Every time it tries to represent our will, we're unwilling. Every time it tries to take root, we're gone (because we're already here, moving). We ask and we tell and we cast the spell that we are under, which tells us what to do and how we shall be moved, here, where we dance the war of apposition. We're in a trance that's under and around us. We move through it and it moves with us, out beyond the settlements, out beyond the redevelopment, where black night is falling, where we hate to be alone, back inside to sleep till morning, drink till morning, plan till morning, as the common embrace, right inside, and around, in the surround. (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 19)

The focus that Moten and Harney give in their project to the "surround" is their way of reconciling the sometimes contradictory labor necessary for survival that often means working with and for institutions like the university that perpetuate violence and colonization while also opposing those processes and working to end them from within the insitituion through a variety of subversive practices. They liken this to "stealing" from the insitituion and propose this formulation as a way out of the "do we stay or do we go" issue that plagues so much of social organizing thought (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 26). For Moten and Harney – as well as the Collective – this choice is not necessary or a determinant of action. For both texts, political subjects can occupy the space of the political and of institutions while subverting and resisting them within the undercommons and the surround.

Another important strand of thought in the Statement is the articulation of mutual belonging and love for one another for what one already is as the basis for political belonging, as opposed to a type of belonging that specifies correction as the basis for community. Moten and Harevy discuss "correction" as the general thrust of politics and policy at length, writing that "we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are

there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were good already in the mutual debt that can never be made good" (2013, p. 20). In other words, the ways in which we are already living and practicing life are sufficient and valuable and should not be made to conform to ideas of "correctness." This stands in clear opposition to reductive notions of identity and properly matching behaviors and utterances to specific and correct identity categories. The project Moten and Harney pursue in their text is one that wants to imagine what belonging may look like without the mediation of politics, accounting, or management. They propose "study" as an alternative mode of belonging and knowledge production which does not presume interest or knowledge as a means to an end that can be quantified and use the concept of debt without credit ("We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything") as a way of thinking about belonging that refuses quantification and counting altogether (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 20).

The Statement pursues a similar project of belonging, declaring that "our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work," establishing an affective relationship that is rooted in an already-present admiration of one another as the basis for their political relationship. This, along with the Statement's concern with not "messing people over" in the name of politics, establishes the Statement's politics as one that is attached to already-present forms of life and living, rather than trying to imagine a correctional politics that is fundamentally concerned with "correcting" life, as Moten and Harney note is the thrust behind politics and policy (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The reason I find this so

important is because it reconfigures our understandings of what the political may be. Those like Lilla, who imagine "citizenship" as a kind of eternal standard of public and civic life that ought to guide the "correction" and "progression" of political belonging, participate in a project that is invested in that struggle of genres that Wynter identifies. Works like the Statement imagine political change, work, and engagement without ever necessarily calling for the "correction" of certain kinds of life or belonging. There are no normative demands for certain behaviors, performance, or patterns of life to be enacted; the thrust of the Statement is to carve out a political vision that is about co-habitation and mutual love even while entangled in violent political systems. This, alongside the Statement's own use of "study" as a mode of belonging and imagining political action, is a significant participation in and reconfiguration of the political as it is currently imagined.

The final strand of thought I wish to examine closely is the acknowledgement that Black women disrupt the "call to order" (as Moten and Harney would call it) of conventional socio-political movements, and how the Statement privileges non-hierarchical modes of being and (non-)organization whilst also making an important and convincing call to political action to change social structures of racism and sexism. Moten and Harney discuss ordering and legibility in the terms of NGOs in their text, writing that:

> …the true ethos of the NGO is not to speak for a group that's not speaking, but to somehow provoke that group to speak for itself. It's all about, 'this group has to find its voice and speak up for itself against the dam, and this kind of thing.' On the one hand, you think, 'well, fuck, what else could you do? I mean, you've gotta fight the dam.' On the other hand, it does seem to me that you're asking people to

call themselves into a certain form of identity… But there are always elaborations of social life that are not comprehended or exploited by capital. Capital, in its agency, just doesn't get it, necessarily. Governance is a way to make it more legible to them in certain ways… that in order to be recognizable, you have to answer the call to order – and that the only genuine and authentic mode of living in the world is to be recognizable within the terms of order (2013, pp. 124–125)

Moten and Harney's understanding here is that governance and the political requires participating individuals to be legible and ordered in a specific way. They go on to use the example of a teacher in a classroom using a "call to order" to organize the classroom for proper knowledge production, which they argue presumes that the pre-ordered classroom cannot be a site of study, planning, or proper belonging (Harney & Moten, 2013, p. 126). In other words, the presumption of the political is that order and legibility are prerequisites to political labor, similar to how Lilla establishes "citizenship" as the basic ordering identification of the properly political. Furthermore, Moten and Harney speculate about what may occur if calls to order are refused and what kind of work that is usually foreclosed upon by demands for legibility and order might proliferate in their absence. To put it another way, Moten and Harney are asking what is lost when we call for order and what types of labor and study cannot be ordered in certain contexts.

In a similar vein, the Statement acknowledges in several ways how Black women are often forced to "correct" themselves in the face of various "calls to orders" and what kind of work those orderings foreclose upon. In some places, the Statement even goes farther than that, noting that it is "difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists" (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The Statement acknowledges the invisibility of Black women in the larger political sphere and the call to order it issues

while also highlighting the nested call to orders that occur within sociopolitical groups.

The Statement highlights how "the reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative" and that Black women, especially Black women naming themselves as feminist, are seen as agents of division, interrupting a pure "Black struggle" and inhibiting its growth (Combahee River Collective, 1977). The assertions out of male-dominated Black nationalist groups that locate the Black woman as the natural counterpart to the Black man in the realm of the home that the Statement highlights should be read as a kind of "call to order," one that interrupts study between and among Black women in favor of enforcing a corrective prescription for how bodies and belonging ought to be organized. The Statement acknowledges the disruption of Black feminism to this call to order and corresponds to the excess of study and work that Moten and Harney note is cut off when calls to order are issued as the basis for producing a proper common arena in which to speak and organize.

To summarize my observations here, I am reading the Statement as a work of and from the undercommons of politics, an undercommons that occupies the same conceptual space as the political while working with and against it in complex ways. The Statement's emphasis on continuous involvement with the political, its recognition of affective belonging without correction, and its understanding that its very existence is in excess of various nested calls to order makes the Statement not only a work of politics but a work that reimagines what politics may look like outside of eugenic orderings of life, majoritarian claims to proper leadership, or supposedly universal political imaginaries such as the "citizen." Furthermore, the complex ways in which the Statement

understands identity make it a sort of "undercommons" of what is usually understood as the intersections of identity and politics, in that it labors at this intersection while also subverting and reconfiguring how "identity and politics" are usually thought.

This thesis serves as a nodal point in my ongoing work to understand and interrogate how those outside of the dominant genre of Man interact with the political, that "complex sum of human relations," what forms those interactions take, and what those interactions make possible. In performing this work and crafting this text, I hope to provide both a means by which to respond to dominant political logics that govern and manage how minoritized subjects interact with the political sphere in addition to beginning a longer project of imagining what the political may look like without these logics.

In addition to this proper, "scholarly" purpose, this thesis has also served a less proper purpose, which has been to enrich and texture my personal understanding of how I relate to the political and how I communicate that relationship to others. Over the months of working on this project, I have watched my words leap off of the page and into my day-to-day life in surprising and often uncomfortable ways. I have found myself quarreling with friends, family, co-workers, and academic peers on many of the issues and topics I have raised in this thesis and I have often been asked to justify my insistence that identity ought to be considered as inextricably political, even if that consideration is seen as too alienating or too difficult to bear for those who are not forced to consciously consider their identity in their relationship to politics, the commons, and/or public space in general. Doing this labor and assembling this work was not only difficult because of

the academic labor involved, but also because of the very present affective investment I have in figuring these questions out. I hope that this work will serve as a reference point for anyone faced with these very powerful and dominant logics, whether that be in a classroom, across a dinner table, or at the other end of state-sanctioned violence.

The archive of frustration that motivated the creation of this work and my overall scholarly project continues to grow. I am still frustrated with politics, with the university, and with many people in my life who cannot see what I do or what others do without coming to know and mark that labor as "identity politics." However, in doing the work for this project, I am also filled with a kind of hope that recognizes that resistance can travel under many names and occupy an undercommons that is always with and against those identifications. In doing this work, I am reminded that politics is, quite literally, always already surrounded by what exceeds it, and it is in this surrounding that my hope is located. Projects, ideologies, and rhetorics of extermination and violence have the capacity to do incredible harm, but the resilience of those that steal away into that surround to produce other genres of life is what this project and my larger academic trajectory is anchored in. "Identity politics" or not, the work and hard labor of living other kinds of life is being done, even if it isn't always visible to the majority, citizenship, management, policy, and the "properly" political. I am frustrated and I struggle, but nonetheless I live on in the surround, stealing as much as I can from politics and hopefully putting it to good use.

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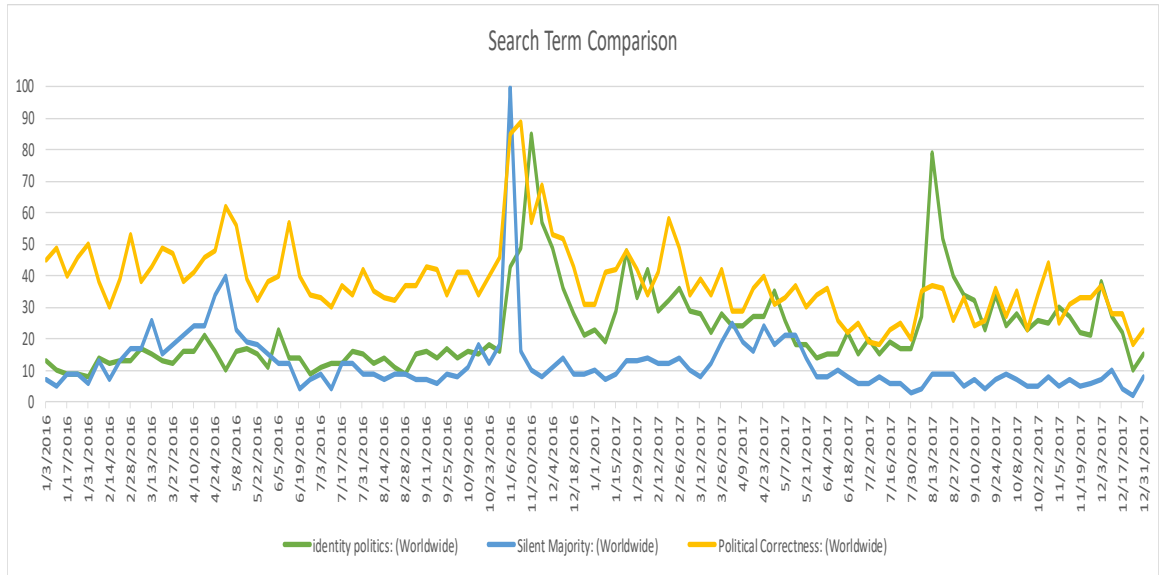
Figure 1. Search Term Comparison Graph