BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEW ESSAY

THE POLITICS OF COMPLICITY REVISITED: RACE, RHETORIC,
AND THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF RECONCILIATION

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Over a decade ago I attempted to explore “the gulf between principles and practice” that has historically characterized American race relations through the theoretical lenses of complicity and coherence, two conceptualizations of rhetoric that I believed had the potential to transform our understanding of racial difference and division.1 In the years that have passed since my first forays into the politics of complicity, I have revisited those second thoughts about the social construction of racial equality that marked my earlier work, and I have now reached a dramatically different conclusion. Whereas I once believed that discourse had the potential to redefine how we understood and enacted racial realities, I have since reconsidered the role that rhetoric might play in bringing about “the beloved community” envisioned by Martin Luther King Jr. and embraced in my early work. Indeed, my most recent thoughts about the redemptive possibilities of discourse have led to me wonder, as did

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James Golden and Richard Rieke over three decades ago in their assessment of the persuasive tactics and strategies of black Americans, whether racism is a problem that is rhetorical or, to use their terminology, “psychiatric.”

Few rhetoric scholars have attempted to answer their query, but with the emerging intellectual and public discourse and discussion about reparations, racial reconciliation, and racial (in)difference in the post–civil rights area, it seems appropriate once again to revisit the rhetoric of racism and rethink the politics of complicity. Several important recent works offer insights into the historical and contemporary roots of racial reasoning, their impact on our contemporary conceptualizations of racial difference and identity, and our potential for racial recovery and reconciliation in the twenty-first century. They also offer an opportunity to reconsider some of our most basic assumptions about the ways in which African and European Americans are implicated in the historical and contemporary complicities of race, racism, and the redemptive possibilities of rhetoric.

My exploration of that implicature begins with Alfred Brophy’s account of contemporary public and intellectual debates over the issue of reparations for slavery. Next, I turn to historical accounts of slavery and reconstruction as chronicled by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jennifer Frank and by Nicholas Lemann to illuminate the failure of law and policy to address adequately the inequities and iniquities of racial inequality. Finally, I turn to the work of theologian and civil rights activist Charles Marsh, who suggests that the failures of rational public discourse and deliberation to achieve social and political equality might be redeemed through a spiritually inspired militancy, a fundamentally Christian commitment to racial justice. Marsh offers an account of the potential for moral suasion to achieve racial transformation similar to that which marked my early work on the rhetoric of racism, and he echoes the sanguine sentiments of contemporary rhetoricians on the possibility of racial reconciliation.

These sentiments are grounded in a fundamentally optimistic view of human history and character, a belief in our potential as a species to overcome through discourse the divisions and differences that separate us from our better natures, and from the spiritual and material coherence of beloved community. That potential, however, realized perhaps most powerfully in the possibility of racial reconciliation, remains elusive: indeed, the shift from traditional to modern or symbolic racism, from the rhetorics of redemption and reconciliation that destroyed the nation’s first reconstruction and derailed its second, to the more subtle and insidious rhetorics of racial recovery, reversal and resistance, that have come to dominate public discourse on the subject of race, compels us to revisit the rhetoric of racism and rethink the politics of complicity. Such a rethinking has emerged in the works of scholars struggling with the role of
rhetoric in the social and symbolic construction of a redemptive dialogue of reconciliation.

John Hatch’s important work extends complicity theory in this direction in its call for a tragicomic reading of the rhetoric of racism as a way of moving toward dialogic coherence. Similarly, Jacqueline Bacon’s reading of the reparations debate concludes with a call “to begin to replace antagonistic arguments with healthy dialogue.” The difficulty of doing so is made powerfully evident in Alfred Brophy’s analysis of the debate, which offers a balanced and thoughtful exploration of the legal and legislative problems and possibilities posed by contemporary public conversations about reparations in the United States. “Faced with differences between blacks and whites in wealth, poverty rates, educational achievements, and health care, scholars and activists in post–civil rights America have increasingly turned to ‘reparations talk,’” which Brophy observes “has grown exponentially” (xi). This growth circumscribes one of the most divisive contemporary contexts within which the question of rhetoric’s transformative potential and the possibilities it holds for racial reconciliation is being reconsidered.

**Reparations in Black and White: Race and the Politics of Negative Difference**

The emerging discussion of reparations in the United States has taken place within a more widespread global conversation about reconciliation, largely fueled by the “miracle” of South Africa’s transition from white supremacist Apartheid to multiracial democracy. Numerous rhetorical scholars have pointed to the South African experience as an example of the potential of discourse to bring about racial transformations. The limitations of that potential are made clear in Alfred Brophy’s sobering account of this debate in Reparations: Pro and Con. Brophy suggests the debate over reparations is framed by larger ideological and political struggles, noting that conflicts over group rights and responsibilities are central issues in reparations debates in the United States, and he acknowledges that “reparations talk” is much more divisive than any of the other debates of the culture wars, largely because such talk is fundamentally about race.

Brophy begins his analysis by defining reparations and explicating the diverse modes and modalities of compensation that have been associated with the term. He defines reparations as “programs that are justified on the basis of past harm and that are also designed to address and correct that harm and/or improve the lives of victims into the future” (19). He notes that this singular definition is characterized by numerous efforts, including truth commissions, apologies, and civil rights legislation, and he explores how opponents and
proponents have alternately drawn upon the symbolic resources afforded by each of these efforts to advance their arguments for and against reparations. From cash payments to community building efforts, the various forms that reparations can take seem always to create conflict and contentious debates waged by those who would request reparations as well as by those who would ridicule the idea. The contentiously complicit character of reparations talk, then, constrains and contains conversations about the value and validity of reparations in the present as well as the numerous forms that it has taken in the past.

Those forms are documented by Brophy in an historical account of the role that reparations have played in addressing injustices over the course of American history. Although reparations talk may be a relatively recent phenomenon, calls for reparations have been a part of the nation’s public deliberations for centuries. Although some of this discourse called for restitution for people of African descent who had suffered under slavery, much of it called for compensation for slave owners. The tragic ironies of reparations talk are revealed in the mythologies of Northern innocence and the fallacies of special pleading that are conveniently ignored by reparations proponents and concealed by the historical discourses of white “redemption” and “reconciliation.” Such discourses frame and constrain the contemporary debate over black reparations by drawing upon the ideological resources of white innocence, both the self-satisfied claims of the liberal North’s disgust with, and distance from, the system of Southern chattel slavery and the South’s “Lost Cause” rhetoric of resistance to Northern “oppression.” Despite these different discourses, white Northerners and Southerners remained largely resistant to compensating black Americans for stolen labor and legacies, despite calls by “radicals” for compensation. During the period of Reconstruction that followed the Civil War, the political and legal machinery of white America made limited concessions to people of African descent, mostly in the form of legislative acts and actions. Such reparations were, however, short lived, as white Southerners launched campaigns of terror and intimidation against newly freed blacks.

Brophy documents a list of “eclectic” programs and proposals that, he argues, represent attempts at reparations dating from 1725 through 2004. He points to reparations given to other groups such as Native and Japanese Americans, Holocaust and Apartheid survivors, and the indigenous peoples of Canada and New Zealand as models for African American reparations, and he cites Randall Robinson’s book *The Debt* as an important contribution to the conversation about reparations. After the publication of Robinson’s book in 2001, reparations became a subject of much discourse and deliberation, with proponents calling for critiques of racial supremacy and privilege that had largely been silenced by conservative domination of the public sphere. Such critiques reveal the diverse and sometimes divergent goals and objectives
of reparations proponents, ranging from monetary compensation, to spiritual renewal, to racial reconciliation. Yet all have in common a demand for an acknowledgement of and accounting for the history of racial discrimination and domination created and sustained either actively or passively by a majority of white Americans.

Indeed, despite their differences, most reparations proponents seek at some level white atonement for their complicity in the social institutions that contributed to the economic and political disparities that continue to plague many African American communities. But as Brophy explains, “[T]here is little interest among white Americans in atonement: indeed, there is little sense among them that there is anything to atone for” (74). Although clearly sympathetic to the need for some accounting of the past, Brophy suggests that the legal and political barriers to implementing reparations remain formidable. He focuses first on the potential for legal actions to result in reparations, noting first that lawsuits formed a key strategy in the fight against legal discrimination and segregation, documenting how legal attempts to gain reparations for slavery have been hampered not only by the legal requirements necessary for a successful lawsuit, but also by the complicity of the legal system in the maintenance and perpetuation of slavery. He concludes that “the likelihood of successful lawsuits is extremely limited” (140), and so looks to legislative action as a possible route to achieve reparations.

Although more hopeful, he remains nonetheless guarded about the potential for deliberative bodies to reconcile the problem of racial injustice. Legislative processes, he asserts, have in the past functioned to express “the conscience of the community” (142) and can address claims for reparations with contextual specificity and with a larger range of remedies. Brophy focuses on four such remedies: “truth commissions, apologies, community-based reparations, and payments to individuals” (143). Like legal remedies, each offers benefits and drawbacks: whereas truth commissions and apologies can help us “reframe the collective memory of events,” “even if we can frame that collective conscience, it remains to be seen how that change will affect legislative and judicial policy” (144). Ultimately, Brophy contends, any plan for reparations must take into consideration the moral and constitutional implications of attempts to reconcile past harms. Yet here again the differences between legal and political responses begins to blur.

Moral arguments become constrained by the type of causal connection demanded by legal structures. Similarly, constitutional arguments are ultimately decided by the Supreme Court, which with its reliance on “strict scrutiny” as a standard for evaluating race-based remedies, would be even less likely to support reparations claims than it has calls for affirmative action. Here, Brophy touches upon one of the central issues that define this debate in contemporary
studies of rhetoric and race: whether any evidence would be acceptable to those white Americans who have shown marked, persistent resistance to racial justice and an unwillingness to come to grips with their complicity in the nation’s long history of racial injustice. Brophy fails to develop this point, perhaps because he assumes (as do many Americans) that the legal and political institutions of American society are essentially sound, and that slavery, segregation, and racism are aberrations of those institutions.

From this perspective, these institutions have simply failed to secure the social contract for Americans of African descent, but will ultimately be able to do so if only the correct calculations of loss, harm, and damage can be discerned. This view has been soundly critiqued in Charles Mills’s *The Racial Contract*, which exposes the moral and rational incoherence of Western moral and political philosophies and practices premised upon the abstractions of a social contract that remain unrealized by virtue of the realities of the racial contract. Consequently, Brophy concludes, “Reparations talk has, quite simply, advanced to the point where it needs concrete proposals” (167), as if such proposals will simply be accepted on the basis of their rational or moral value. Here we find the issue at the heart of rhetorical studies of reparations: whether rational or morally suasive discourse can in fact effect a change in the deep-seated attitudes and basic beliefs of white Americans.

Brophy ends his analysis with a sobering assessment of the future of reparations: “Reparations may prove to be yet another instance in which black Americans will have to be content with the knowledge that they have contributed more than their share of blood to the development of America” (179). The debate over reparations might also prove that white Americans are unwilling or unable to recognize their corporate responsibility in the construction of that knowledge or their complicity in a history stained with black blood, of which they remain largely ignorant. The sources of that ignorance, as well as attempts to challenge and unmask it, are explored in two important works on slavery and its resurrection in the system of segregation that emerged in the aftermath of Reconstruction.

**White Complicity and Redemption from Slavery to Segregation: Revisiting the History of American Racism**

Brophy’s suggestion that the reparations debate may bring about increased awareness of and attention to slavery and segregation in America’s past is supported by two important recent works by several white scholars who are attempting to set the historical record straight. Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank’s *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*, and Nicholas Lemann’s *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil*
War, both offer recollections of the nation’s racial past that implicate that past squarely in the present. Both also attempt to demystify the basic beliefs and claims about slavery and segregation that fuel the antireparations rhetoric of both neoconfederates and neoconservatives. Taken together, these two works offer powerful insights into the challenge of reconciling America’s racial history with contemporary white resistance to racial reparations and reconciliation. They also reveal the degree to which America’s political and legal institutions not only failed to secure for Americans of African descent the promises of the social contract, but also actively enforced and embraced the racial contract.

Farrow, Lang, and Frank begin their excavation of the past with an acknowledgment of its impact on the present: “Several years ago, on its front page, The Hartford Courant published a story with an extraordinary headline—“Aetna ‘Regrets’ Insuring Slaves”—concerning an overdue admission and apology from one of Connecticut’s oldest and most prestigious companies” (xvii). This discovery led writers to investigate how their own newspaper, and ultimately their state, was implicated in slavery. As they further unearthed the past, they began to realize the degree to which slavery was not simply a Southern institution, but an American institution: “The truth is that slavery was a national phenomenon. The North shared in the wealth it created and in the oppression it required” (xxvi). The authors offer a careful and compelling analysis of a plethora of primary documents to make their case against the mythologizing of America’s racial past.

They begin by illustrating the clear connections among Southern cotton, Northern shipbuilding and manufacturing, and the enormous economic investments made and gains enjoyed by Yankees across the economic spectrum. Northern participation in the trade was particularly strong in New York, the nation’s emerging commercial center, which welcomed Southern cotton to its ports and markets and Southern slaveholders to its cities and towns. Further north in New England, the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, underwent an industrial revolution that solidified its connection to cotton produced by Southern slaves. New York and New England, however, were not the only Northern locales that benefited from the slave trade, and even the protests of Northern abolitionists did little to sever the economic and symbolic bonds that rationalized black bondage.

The links that held those bonds together cut across the boundaries of numerous Northern states and social contexts: from Massachusetts to Philadelphia, rhetoric and racism went hand in hand in justifying the “peculiar institution” of slavery. The burning of Fort George in March of 1741, for example, unleashed a language of oppression that echoed the rhetoric of Southern (in)justice: “The powerful language of the trial—of the justices, the witnesses—even that of onlookers in the streets reveals more than the fears of a city under siege;
it speaks to white society’s distrust of a growing population of its members depended upon for slave labor,” explain Farrow, Lang, and Frank. “Slaves were referred to as ‘black devils’ and ‘sable fiends’ who had hatched ‘a hellish project in the cabinets of Hell’” (88–89). Demonizing blackness was by no means only a Southern preoccupation, nor as the trial indicated, were lynching and burning black bodies peculiarly Southern forms of justice. And just as in the South, slaves in the North were consumed by “a bottomless anger” that revealed itself in acts of resistance and rebellion, the consequences of which were the same in both regions.

Northern complicity was also manifest in the compromises struck with the South that enabled what the authors describe as “the other underground railroad.” Even before Northern enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, the safety of black people in the North could not be guaranteed, nor could that of white abolitionists, the “hated heroes” of the North who condemned the institution of slavery. Women like Prudence Crandall and men like William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel May, Elijah Lovejoy, and John Brown were subjected to harassment and violence, both public and institutional, in the North as well as the South. The most outspoken and committed abolitionist, John Brown, was particularly incensed by the North’s complicity in slavery. Perhaps more than any other white figure in the history of American abolition, Brown represented the profound paradox that confronted European Americans: what price were they willing to pay to extend to the Africans among them the same freedoms that they held to be so dear? For Brown, the price of that freedom was death.

The rationales and rationalizations for slavery lived on in the North, not only in public resistance to protest, but also in the justifications offered by Northern “race scientists.” The “vicious circle” of Southern rhetoric that embraced the tautology of “black equaled slave equaled black” found sympathetic support in the “scientific” writings of such Northerners as Samuel Morton, Louis Agassiz, and Josiah Nott. Race science replaced the religious “children of Ham” hypothesis, and books such as Morton’s Crania Americana and Crania Aegyptiaca replaced the Bible as “empirical” explanations of black inferiority. Just as science was implicated in the perpetuation and continuation of racial domination, so too was art and entertainment in what the authors describe as a “plunder for pianos.” In the “bleach houses” of Connecticut, where ivory was processed into Victorian objects of leisure like piano keys and billiard balls, evidence of Northern complicity in the slave trade reveals its truly international character. Just as the slave system connected the North and South, through the ivory trade it implicated the North in the exploitation and destruction of African cultures, peoples, and natural resources.

Slavery, the authors illustrate convincingly, was thus an American phenomenon that had international implications. Richard Lemann further documents
these implications in *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War*. Like Farrow, Lang, and Frank, Lemann draws upon primary sources to resurrect a past long since buried beneath the white lies of mythologized historical memory. Lemann weaves these sources into a powerful narrative that exposes the terrorism and violence that led to the demise of Reconstruction in the deep South, where white supremacy would reign unfettered well into the twentieth century. *Redemption* is a story of white complicity, duplicity, defiance, and denial of the very facts of history that shape contemporary discussions of race, reparations, and reconciliation.

In his note to the reader, Lemann contests the view that the end of the Civil War and the constitutional amendments that followed settled the matter of the exploitation of a people who had once been property and now were dependent upon its acquisition to survive. “The dream of ‘forty acres and a mule’ for every black family—of a race of independent yeoman Southern farmers—depended on the availability of land, but in the end the United States government declined to take away land from its prewar white owners” (x). Focusing on a series of violent events that took place in Louisiana and Mississippi, Lemann illustrates how the government also declined to protect the rights and lives of its newly freed black population. From Easter Sunday of 1873 in Colfax, Louisiana, to the invention of the Mississippi Plan in 1875, Lemann uncovers the tactics of terror and intimidation used by whites to transform the dream of emancipation into the dark nightmare of disenfranchisement, death, and the dissolution of black hopes for equality, as well as economic, social, and political participation.

Lemann begins with an account of the Colfax Massacre, which epitomized the type of violent defiance of federal law that would ultimately lead to the demise of Reconstruction and the end of black political participation in Louisiana and elsewhere in the South. It also laid the foundations for the myths of white heroism and “Negro domination” that would be used to justify and legitimize violence against African Americans for almost a century. Colfax confirmed that the basic beliefs whites had held before the war had not changed: black lives were meaningless, and white supremacy was the only law of the land worthy of obedience. Whites who failed to adhere to these beliefs, such as Mississippi’s provisional governor Adelbert Ames, would meet the same resistance directed at the federal government of Ulysses S. Grant.

From the beginning Ames encountered resistance that took many forms, both overt and covert. In Vicksburg, whites attacked Black Republicans during a Fourth of July celebration and attempted to use military force to deny African Americans access to the political system. Similar acts of organized resistance occurred in Louisiana, where White Leagues appeared, bent on the destruction of black and Republican political power through murder and assassination. Like the Citizen’s Councils that would emerge years later, these bodies
coded their rhetoric in terms like “fiscal responsibility” and “law and order” to mask their fundamentally racist intentions. On the surface, the white South was successfully reconstructing itself, though its motives remained firmly wedded to its deeper and darker commitments to white supremacy and racial superiority.

Spearheading the South’s rhetorical reconstruction was the influential congressman Lucius Lamar, whose use of “respectable argument” was influential in both the North and the South. As Lemann explains, “Lamar’s rhetoric was so powerful, his manner so forceful, and his stature as a fully reformed Confederate so solid that his speeches received an almost wholly positive reception, even in the Northern press” (106). The political resistance being mounted at both the state and national levels was accompanied by a resurgence of violence aimed at the disenfranchisement of black voters and the destruction of the Republican Party in Mississippi. African Americans’ attempts to retain power and defend their rights were suppressed through violence, and Ames’s attempts to secure assistance from the federal government were ignored. The formation of organized black militias created a situation in which whites recognized that any military encounter could force the hand of the federal government, and thus the use of political persuasion once again replaced popular violence.

White Liners resumed their campaign of violence against black voters, rationalizing and justifying their actions by recourse to their time-honored rhetoric of “Negro domination.” Lemann explains: “White Mississippi chose to believe things about Negro plans and activities for which there was no hard evidence, but which conformed to everything they thought they knew about Negroes’ nature and the proper order of the world. Believing these things permitted them to do whatever it took to take back political power in Mississippi—and in the fall of 1875 that is what they did” (154). White Mississippians, through political maneuvering and machinations coupled with terrorist violence, had successfully ended Reconstruction and revealed the inability and unwillingness of the federal government to protect the rights of African Americans. The events in Mississippi were instrumental in the resurrection of white supremacy across the South, and with the Compromise of 1877 that ended Reconstruction, the political and legal foundations for racial segregation were established.

Within ten years, civil and voting rights for African Americans would be effectively eliminated, and in less than a decade the South’s right to deny black rights was affirmed by the Supreme Court. Segregation became the law of the land, and the history of Reconstruction became codified in “a great library of unproven assertions—about ‘Negro uprisings’ and the excesses of ‘Negro rule’—which, with repetition, acquired the patina of fact” (205). Sixty years
later, even John F. Kennedy would, in *Profiles in Courage*, praise Lucius Lamar as a “hero,” and condemn Adelbert Ames as a “carpetbagger” (206). Kennedy’s acceptance of the white lie of Southern redemption reveals how, even as the social machinery that had created “separate but equal” was being dismantled, the consciousness that created it remained, for all intents and purposes, intact in the American mind.

Lemann’s work, like Farrow, Lang, and Frank’s, illustrates the degree to which a mythologized account of history informed the cultivation of that consciousness and the ideology of innocence it embraced. Northern complicity and Southern duplicity are two untold stories of American race history, the dark side of a past memorialized in Manichean terms that have historically masked the complex ways in which both regions were implicated in the maintenance and perpetuation of white supremacy. Farrow, Lang, and Frank’s *Complicity* and Lemann’s *Redemption* uncover that past, excavating and uncovering troubling truths that put the lie to notions of Northern nobility and Southern gallantry. These important works also point to the limitations of rational rhetoric to address the realities of race, as well as the inability of law and politics to extend to people of African descent the inalienable rights ostensibly enshrined in the foundational beliefs and expressed in their forensic and deliberative declarations. They return us to the questions of character raised by Golden and Rieke, confronting us with the possibility that race cannot be redeemed through rhetoric, that racial prejudice cannot be overcome by rational persuasion.

The debate over reparations appears to confirm this possibility: indeed, taken together *Complicity* and *Redemption* make clear the incoherence of anti-reparations rhetoric, its reliance upon half-truths and fallacies, and its troubling reconstruction of history. Both books also point to the resistance of white Americans to ethical and rational appeals for racial justice, and both suggest that the problem of the twentieth century might find its most promising rhetorical resources in the realm of *pathos*, in the spaces of emotional and spiritual coherence ostensibly closed off by the rigid institutional and attitudinal cognitive mechanisms of politics and law. The possibility of opening those spaces, and the promise such an opening holds for racial and social justice, is explored in Charles Marsh’s call for a reconstruction of the spiritual commitments and impulses of the civil rights movement, and a resumption of the search for beloved community that once motivated the interracial struggle for freedom and equality in this nation. His reading of the role of spirituality in the struggle for social justice offers a redemptive vision of rhetoric grounded in *pistis*, in faith, one that offers an optimistic assessment of the future of race relations that is difficult to find in recent judicial, legislative, or public discourses on race and reconciliation.
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?: RECONCILING RACIAL (IN)JUSTICE THROUGH FAITH IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

Marsh’s The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today is in many ways a continuation of his early work on the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer project, one of the nation’s last successful interracial struggles for racial justice and equality. Marsh begins with Martin Luther King’s emergence as a leading figure in the struggle for civil rights and revisits the grassroots interracial movements that emerged in the South in the 1960s. He then draws connections between these coalitions and contemporary faith-based initiatives that have emerged in the last part of the twentieth century. Marsh argues that the demise of the movement was largely a result of the incoherence of the spiritually inspired militancy that gave it birth, and contends that a return to its Christian beginnings is a necessity for the struggle to regain its lost momentum and influence. “The pursuit of beloved community gave the civil rights movement its sustaining spiritual vision,” (2) explains Marsh. That this vision ultimately gave way to the narcissistic secularism of white progressives and the racial essentialism of black power advocates is, for Marsh, the fundamental reason for its failure to achieve in practice the ideals the movement originally embraced in the “words, actions, and sacrifices” of its “lived theologies” (6).

Marsh begins his exploration of those theologies in Montgomery, Alabama, where a young, newly ordained minister by the name of Martin Luther King Jr. began a long journey from gradualism to radicalism in the struggle for civil rights, a struggle that gained its greatest momentum in the Montgomery bus boycott. Marsh documents the trials and tribulations King faced as the boycott gained and lost momentum in the face of internal fractures and divisions, and external pressures. Ultimately, however, King “emerged out of the ‘cradle of the confederacy’ and the gun slinging South as one of history’s most eloquent proponents of nonviolence, and he delivered his prophetic message to whites and blacks alike” (39). His message, and its appeal to interracial audiences, established the foundations for King’s belief in the possibility of beloved community, a possibility he embraced even when, on the eve of his death, he would admit that the nation was “sick,” troubled, confused, and seemingly incapable of being moved by the righteousness of God (50).

In the years that transpired between the boycott and King’s death, however, interracial communities of conscience emerged across America that embraced and sustained the vision of beloved community. Marsh documents the existence and persistence of those communities as well as the problems and possibilities they presented for proponents of racial reconciliation. He explores the religiously inspired movement in South Georgia that grew into the fertile
Koinonia Farm, for example. He also tells the tragic story of the rise and fall of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the radical interracial organization that transformed American democratic politics and “the racial landscape of the country” with an “invasion” into the most violent seat of segregation in America, Mississippi, culminating in an unsuccessful attempt to unseat that state’s segregationist delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention (117). The possibility of beloved community, for Marsh, lived in the realities of those interracial coalitions that emerged in the 1960s and almost died when those coalitions fell apart in the face of racial essentialism on both sides of the color line. From SNCC’s embrace of black power and its rejection of racial solidarity, to the rise of segregationist academies and Christian conservatism, the dream of beloved community that emerged in the 1960s became deformed and deferred in the decades that followed.

In part two Marsh describes how the audacious dreams that emerged in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi became trapped in the nightmarish prisons of racial resistance and ethical incoherence. Marsh attributes the demise of the dream to the failure to connect the abstractions of religious faith to the concrete practices of Christian love, as King’s cogent critique of the nation’s moral intransigence became reduced to the convenient fiction of a “colorblind” America. Marsh notes that King saw that the possibility of redemption and reconciliation could not be achieved without atonement and coherence: “King resolved that America’s only hope lay in a spirit of repentance, in a broken and contrite heart, which must take the form of servanthood among nations of the world” (129). This was the forgotten King, the “inconvenient hero” who recognized the tripartite evils of racism, poverty, and militarism, who understood all too well the difference between freedom and license, and the troubling consequences of confusing one for the other.6

Marsh offers a cogent discussion of those consequences when he considers the failure to achieve in practice the principles of beloved community. The secularization of the spiritual, for Marsh, turns the dream of beloved community into a hallucination laced with self-righteous essentialism and self-absorbed narcissism. The first is revealed in the embrace of black power by black radicals, and the second in the retreat to flower power by white radicals. Each, according to Marsh, “exchanged its reformist commitments for ethereal delights and Gothic horrors and became incapable of national pride and meaningful engagement in political life” (134). America, the irredeemable, reduced the possibility of beloved community to “a liberal guilt trip,” and the countercultural currents that emerged from the 1960s struggle for social justice were diverted away from integration and affirmation and toward disintegration and opposition.

The same held true for the theological counterculture of “Christian radicalism,” which in its opposition to secular humanism failed to reconcile its
most troubling lapses of moral judgment and practice. Marsh’s critique of the architects of this radicalism reveals how it departed, like the secularism it critiqued, from coherence between principle and practice when the issue of race was at stake. The same “Christians” who had defended segregation during the civil rights movement in its aftermath turned their attention to the new “evils” unleashed by the radical left, and again they failed to recognize their own moral incoherence. According to Marsh, “the right’s campaign against abortion became a cynical posturing for a political edge that obscured its deep complicity in killing by other means” (144). “Deracinated from the poor and the excluded,” such campaigns produced a collective delusion of righteousness and the presumption of morality, and once again enabled white Christians to ignore their greatest historical burden, slavery and its legacy in legal and social segregation” (144). For Marsh, this delusion of innocence remains at the heart of (anti-)Christian resistance to racial reconciliation, redemption, and reparations.

In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the dream of racial reconciliation imagined by those who embraced beloved community was transformed in the popular imagination to be “more about rhetorical provocation, unleashed desire, and perpetual liberation than the difficult work of community building” (146). The rise of Southern resegregation, the shift of attention away from issues of racial justice and toward group rights, and the resistance to “illuminating the spaces of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation” all conspired to cripple the nation’s collective conscience and further defer the dream. “The dream,” Marsh concludes, “unanchored in the disciplines of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation, becomes an evasion of love’s duty in the everyday” (149). The search for those disciplines, he suggests, is the unfinished business of our time.

Marsh argues that the search leads us today to faith-based, community-building initiatives rooted in the social justice impulses of the civil rights movement. The theological vision of John Perkins, grounded in the organizing tradition born in the black freedom movement in the South and nurtured in the experience of redemptive suffering found at the heart of the black Christian mobilizing tradition, “charted a new course for building beloved community in America—one that defied conventional political categories” (176). Perkins is but one architect of these communities, and Marsh documents several others that he believes can guide the nation toward racial reconciliation and social justice. These faith-based movements establish the foundations and directions for activism in this century; they offer a much more resilient path to beloved community than that established and abandoned during the civil rights movement. “The civil rights movement had extended the gesture of reconciliation, only eventually to withdraw it in the face of hateful rejection; but the new Christian
radicals are finding the strength to keep the arms of mercy open, even in the face of restitution shirked and due reparations withheld” (206).

Like the activists of the 1960s, Marsh sees in these new Christian activists a promise for the future of our nation, crafted not in the institutional mechanisms of law and politics, but in the hearts and minds of young people of conscience. He concludes with this hope: “May they never relinquish the responsibility for the future to the men in high places who presume that the paradigm of war is the only way to peace, or at least to the prosperity they crave. And may we all be inspired by the story of the beloved community to long for a better country, and may we dare to dream again” (216). Marsh remains committed to the faith that King may very well have lost in his final attempts to see a path that would lead us from chaos to community. His analysis offers important insights for contemporary rhetorical scholars wrestling with the problems and possibilities of race, reconciliation, and the politics of complicity.

FROM COMPLICITY TO CONSILIENCE: RETHINKING THE RHETORIC OF RECONCILIATION

Charles Marsh offers a vision of racial reconciliation grounded in *pistis* and unconstrained by the oppositional impulses of law and politics, and ultimately one aimed at achieving coherence between the abstract principles and material realities of racial reconciliation. Marsh’s vision aligns itself along the contours of what John Hatch has discerned as a “tragicomic” reading of the rhetoric of reconciliation, one that looks beyond the limits of rational discourse to recognize the possibility of a common and coherent humanity. It also resonates with David Frank’s explication of “consilience,” a notion drawn from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, that focuses on rhetoric’s power to allow diverse and divergent groups to “jump together” in pursuit of common goals and values. Both Hatch’s search for coherence and Frank’s embrace of consilience are in direct response to my own thoughts on race and reconciliation, outlined at the beginning of this essay and articulated in the *Rhetoric of Racism Revisited* and several other works produced during the past decade. Frank’s notion of consilience is especially salient for contemporary considerations of rhetoric, race, and the (im)possibility of reconciliation.

Frank argues that Barack Obama’s 2004 Democratic National Convention speech exemplified the notion of consilience and approximated a rhetoric of coherence. In my coauthored article with Frank, I argued that Obama’s address relied upon the incoherent abstractions of racial reasoning and that his discussion of race, in particular, was profoundly problematic. Ultimately, we both agreed that Obama would have to address race more directly if he were to offer a satisfyingly coherent rhetoric, which he admirably accomplished in
his “Toward a More Perfect Union” address of March, 2008. In that speech Obama confronted the rupture between principle and practice that has historically crippled the nation’s ability to deal with race, speaking openly of the traumatic history and “stain” of slavery. He also considered the ways in which Americans on both sides of the color line become complicit in racial reasoning. Obama opened a space for all Americans to wrestle with what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature, and his courage, sincerity, and eloquence offered a persuasive and provocative example of rhetoric’s potential to remedy and heal the negative differences and divisions of American race relations.

Obama’s speech also opened a space in which the dark legacy of race came rushing out of the shadow of the word. It revealed the troubling specters of black oppositionality and opportunism, of white recovery and its ideology of innocence, which have marred communication between the races since the nation’s founding. It also uncovered the limits of the religious and secular impulses that circumscribe race in America: On the one hand, Pastor Jeremiah Wright’s conflation of the tradition of spiritually inspired militancy with a regressive and immature black nationality; and on the other hand, the flight of white supporters from Obama after the incident that gave rise to the speech and following its delivery. Both point to the tenuous character of interracial alliances in the post–civil rights era. Additionally, questioning whether working-class whites will embrace their party or racial identity is eerily reminiscent of the Republican Southern strategy that reshaped the American political landscape in the 1960s and 1980s. Indeed, Obama’s ascent toward a more perfect union remains fraught with the same stumbling blocks that have kept black and white Americans mired in an unreconciled past, uncertain about where we might go from here.

Obama’s rhetoric also offers an opportunity to rethink the politics of complicity, not as something that we can move beyond toward coherence, but as something that we must acknowledge and embrace in order to achieve consilience. Only then might we be able to engage in coherent dialogue about race and all of its shameful, traumatic, and painful truths. To paraphrase the noble truths of Buddhism, we cannot achieve enlightened coherence until we accept and embrace the complicities of delusion. Viewed from a psychological perspective, we cannot overcome the complexes of our past until we readily acknowledge the pathologies they have created in the present. Ultimately, for rhetoric to serve as a pietho, a talking cure, we will have to accept ourselves for who we are in relation to each other, and all of the ugliness that this entails, to move toward genuine reconciliation. Obama’s “more perfect union” speech may have created the possibility for all of us to acknowledge our implicature, accept our complicity, and then find refuge in consilience and coherence. Only time will tell.
So this may very well be an instance where we will have to take two steps backward so that we can move one step forward toward genuine reconciliation. This movement has become quite familiar to Americans of African descent, and perhaps white Americans might benefit from it as well. But for white Americans, those two steps backward will have to be toward a history that has been denied, disguised, and mythologized as “discovery” and the divinely affirmed advancement of “civilization.” For within those mythologies lay the complicity that sustains the chains of white supremacy from which people of European descent have yet to be truly freed. And until that freedom is discovered, it is difficult to believe that rhetoric can lead us to a reconciliation of race any different than that which occurred after the Civil War or after the civil rights movement—a reconciliation derived from the darkness of ignorance, innocence, and shame, a darkness within which the light of beloved community will forever be dimmed by a troubling color-blindness.

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