

Chapter One

TOWARD AN AMERICAN PROTEST ESSAY TRADITION

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but *at once* a better government . . . I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can.

—Henry David Thoreau,
“Resistance to Civil Government,” 1849

By comparison, black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps this is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narrative, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together, or perhaps this is because black people have never felt themselves guilty of global, cosmic sins.

This comparison does not hold up in every case, of course, and perhaps does not really hold up at all. I am not a gatherer of statistics, only a curious reader, and this has been my impression from reading many books by black and white writers.

—Alice Walker, “Saving the Life That Is Your Own,” 1975

American protest essayists participate in a tradition anchored both in the personal essay originating in Europe and in American political oratory rooted in social movements. As Henry David Thoreau and Alice Walker attest, the role of the essayist in America—especially when speaking on behalf of those excluded from the nation’s loftiest promises of equality—is commensurate

with the role of a curious, thinking citizen. Whether the response to injustice is to retract from unjust national practices for Thoreau, or to gather and celebrate the voices of the oppressed for Walker, writers invested in addressing national division often turn to the essay. In doing so, they create a distinct strand of the form: the American protest essay.

When W. E. B. DuBois ushered in the twentieth century by identifying the “problem of the color line,” his announcement pointed to crises of racially policed boundaries in literature as well as to the sociological and historical significance of color in America. Writers must then ask: How to address division without reinscribing it? For DuBois, querying the burden of race in America required a diverse cache of forms: sociological survey, elegy, historical sketch, fable, political treatise, and ethnographic study, to name some of the most prominent forms in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Hazel Carby notes the importance of *Souls* to African American culture, and as a model for racial spokespersons, or Race Men. Carby describes the book as “a series of tightly bound ideological contradictions”¹ in which DuBois speaks to a national community through the specificity of racial experience. In *Souls*, Carby argues, “it is the descendants of African peoples who are proclaimed the legitimate inheritors of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and DuBois inscribes the symbolic power of nationalism directly onto Black bodies.”² To effectively protest and examine the persistent problem of race in the aftermath of Reconstruction, DuBois requires a form in which his speaking voice can address the fomenting racial divisions defining America. In *Souls*, DuBois assumes a speaking position that inhabits, and crosses between, both sides of the racial veil. The essay, for DuBois and many others, provides a form—Gerald Early suggests the African American essay can even be a “pulpit”³—in which divisions among a citizenry are made visible, while still remaining a problem.

It is important to consider DuBois’s place in the essay tradition because, even more so than the sorrow songs and lyrics adorning each chapter, the essay is the grand form holding his important book together. But this poses a problem because the essay itself is a curiously under-theorized genre despite its prevalence across periods, geographies, and ideologies. Like DuBois, most major writers have penned something akin to an essay. Yet the essay remains known as the most formless of forms. O. B. Hardison explains, “Of all literary forms the essay most successfully resists the effort to pin it down.”⁴ In turn, Graham Good attempts an encyclopedic overview of the essay, but wonders, “How can the essay’s elusive multiplicity of forms and themes be contained within the systematic scope of an encyclopedia?”⁵ Perhaps this is because the essay is, as Cheryl de Obaldia suggests, a “literary hybrid” able to incorporate classical elements of lyric, drama, and epic.⁶ Though individual essays elude strict formal description, scholars persist because, as G. Douglass Atkins contends, we are not content to think of the essay as a “mere lump.” In key early

work on the essay, Theodor Adorno and George Lukacs praise it as the most undogmatic of forms. Most critics follow their lead and praise the essay's independence, or what de Obaldia calls an "essayistic spirit" of free inquiry. The essay tradition, for most scholars, begins with the work of Michel de Montaigne and includes important writers like Francis Bacon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, E. B. White, perhaps more contemporary essayists like James McPhee or Annie Dillard, and sometimes writers from minoritarian literatures like James Baldwin.⁷

DuBois's essays in *Souls* are paradigmatic of what we recognize as key traits of the genre following Montaigne: open-ended, digressive, tentative, experiential, and occasional. In topical essays whose titles directly echo Montaigne, like "Of the Meaning of Progress" and "Of the Passing of the First-Born," DuBois moves among different occasions, both national like the creation of the Freedman's Bureau and personal like the death of his son. He also moves among different locations, both integrated like the literary realm or some New England schools and segregated like the Black Belt or a Jim Crow car. He crosses cultural traditions such as British literature and African American sorrow songs. DuBois can also connect different experiences—both his own and others like Alexander Crummel's. DuBois's embodied movement evidences how essays value experience over abstract truth, especially as the essayist uses various anecdotes to deliver meditations on philosophical or political questions. DuBois also creates intertextual conversations by transporting the words of others into the essay such as in his extended dialogue with key black leaders and the Declaration of Independence in "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others." In these personal meditations, DuBois invites readers on a trip with him through the segregated nation because, as Atkins explains, in the essay "you talk about something by talking about yourself."⁸

DuBois fits well in the company of esteemed personal essayists, but that tradition does not fully capture his project, especially his urgent political concerns about inequality for black people. For instance, the speaking self is not always the cornerstone of DuBois's essays, especially as he documents the unjust experiences of others, like in his fable of the two Johns who represent the exclusion of African Americans from the promises of the nation. In this way, DuBois's essays waver at a key orientation usually prized in the essay tradition: the desire to move beyond the immediate or the particular and toward the enduring or the universal. Atkins suggests that the essayist must unite "immanence and transcendence" to "deriv[e] meaning in, of, and through experience" in a meandering, even "sneaky" approach to universal truths.⁹ But for DuBois, and as we shall see for most American protest essayists, particular experience is not solely the pathway to the universal; in fact, it is often in direct conflict with universalist utterances of equality. Even though DuBois famously avers, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not,"

he does not leave behind pressing political concerns as he enters the literary pantheon, nor does he prematurely announce the unification of a divided citizenry.

In his constant movement across—but not erasure of—the color line within individual essays and in epigraphs that bind African American spirituals to European cultural texts, DuBois dwells on lines of social division at a moment in U.S. history when Reconstruction failed to enfranchise black folks. Good argues that even though the essay resists definition, there is a unifying factor: “At heart, the essay is the voice of the individual.”¹⁰ But DuBois argues for the urgency of immediate change to bring value to black folks generally, not to himself. In this way, DuBois’s urgent address to a starkly divided nation risks falling from the vaulted realms of the literary. Yet de Obaldia suggests that “the divide between the literary and the extraliterary operates within the province of the essay itself.”¹¹ And Butrym praises the essay’s “formlessness, which allows us to speak beyond ourselves—or beyond persons much like ourselves—scatters the essay so broadly that it sometimes seems marginally effective as literature.”¹² While this may be generally true for traditional conceptions of the essay, DuBois also exemplifies the under-recognized American protest essay strand of the essay tradition.

This opening chapter traces some common stances of the American protest essay as it develops into an available tradition able to combine the open-ended formal conventions of the essay and the urgency of political oratory to address a divided national audience. Like DuBois’s color line, literary debates in the first half of the twentieth century often sought to distinguish literature from mere race literature. Further, Jerry Ward explains, “In twentieth-century usage, ‘protest,’ a word inextricably associated with ‘race,’ might be taken as pure product of America. Protest was a code word for work of inferior artistic accomplishment.”¹³ Most famously, in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1925), Langston Hughes argues, “But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”¹⁴ Much the same can be said of problematic appraisals of women’s literature, or between literary and political advocacy. The protest essay is particularly vulnerable to these distinctions, especially since, as Cheryl Wall contends in her study of Walker, “Indeed, I would make the case that Walker, despite her reputation as a novelist, short story writer, and poet, has done her best work in the essay, a genre that has at present little critical currency.”¹⁵ Wall’s astute account of Walker’s reputation can be said of most literary figures who also serve as political advocates, and who often choose the essay for that enterprise. In response, we need a better appreciation of the form and function of the American protest essay tradition.

DIVIDED CITIZENS AND
REPRESENTATIVE SPEAKERS:
A SKETCH OF THE AMERICAN PROTEST ESSAY

Protest essayists address a deeply divided American citizenry and seek to bring together that citizenry, or at least a portion of it. They provoke anxiety about social exclusions that jeopardize national unity and question promises of full participation for all. Therefore, the American protest essay concerns itself more with the publics it addresses than the speaking self. That is why it is important to recognize its roots in American oratory in addition to the personal essay tradition of Montaigne. Personal essays connect individual experiences and ideas to the world beyond, which leads to what Atkins and Phillip Lopate refer to as the possibility of the “stench of ego.”¹⁶ American protest essays, however, seek a “we”: a collective space to speak among and across lines in a divided audience. This “we” is often more interested in the experience of others, especially as those experiences test the veracity of dominant narratives of national belonging. In this way, the American protest essay veers far into the terrain of political oratory, especially oratory allied with social movements.

The dual heritage of the American protest essay—the European-born personal essay and American political oratory—necessitates a dual approach: formalist attention to some of its dominant conventions and historical attention to an essay’s specific audience and context. In this section, I identify six common rhetorical “stances” available to protest essayists in the U.S. context. Because the protest essay’s elements of oratory are less studied than the formal elements of the personal essay, this sketch will emphasize the former over the latter. This emphasis also informs my selection of representative texts: I choose writers and orators who may not yet be fully celebrated as practitioners of, or precursors to, the essay. At the outset, let me caution that this sketch will not provide an exhaustive account of the protest essay, nor will it exhaust a literary discussion of each representative text. Instead, I illustrate common stances that allow essayists to position themselves between the representative experiences they recount and the divided citizenry they address. Further chapters explore some examples of how key practitioners adopt and adapt these stances as appropriate to their historical situations.

STANCE I: COLLECTIVITY AND THE PARTICULAR READER

Remember that you are THREE MILLIONS.

—Henry Highland Garnet, “An Address
to the Slaves of the United States of America”
(Rejected by the National Convention, 1843), 1848

Protest essayists stand among deeply factionalized audiences, while pointing them toward inclusive national promises. American protest essayists, then,

inhabit a stance between particular readers and collective ambitions. In doing so, they endeavor to give voice to a group, more so than an individual, amid the earnest goal of achieving the loftiest promises of the nation. That is why some scholars nod to the democratic aspects of the essay, such as Cristina Kirklighter's work with the essays of Thoreau and Emerson as progenitors of a politically minded Latin American essay tradition.¹⁷ In the U.S. context, we must place the creation of, and identification with, particular audiences at the center of our understanding of the protest essay. At first glance, the most obvious starting point for a project about American protest essays might seem to be Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1849) as a precursor to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "A Letter from Birmingham City Jail" (1963), or a political pamphlet like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1777) as a precursor to essays by Gore Vidal that also question conventional political thought. But this approach might draw attention away from the audience in the protest essay's desire for substantive national belonging amid practices of exclusion. So, black feminist writer June Jordan's response at the end of the twentieth century to Thoreau's foundational essay better shows how protest essayists stand between collectivity and the particular reader, and the protest essayist's debt to political oratory.

Thoreau's essay, originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government," inhabits a posture of individual dissent from his present government as a path to a better government in the future. In part, this essay fits well within a personal essay tradition since, as in E. B. White's essays, Thoreau's space of solitude—be it Walden or Concord jail—allows him to mull over personal experience as a means of questioning accepted beliefs and accessing experience-tested larger truths. But solitude and collectivity come into direct tension as Thoreau veers into the terrain of the protest essay. In response to state-sponsored activities that he finds disagreeable (the Mexican War, the fugitive slave law, public taxes supporting clergymen), Thoreau indicts citizens' unthinking adherence to the state. For Thoreau, this obeisance threatens "the progress toward a true respect for the individual" (Thoreau 245). He publicly urges a general reader to question the state from a position of privilege: the individual should choose not to support unacceptable state-sponsored activities by claiming a tradition greater than the immediate state (of natural rights, of democracy, of revolutionary independence), which leads to total refusal of civic participation via taxation. In short, Thoreau embraces the individual and advocates divestment or retraction from official collectivity. When he left Walden to walk through the town of Concord, he ended up in the town jail, which affords him a unique vantage—at once removed from and at the center of town—through which to see American society. Thoreau poses individuals in opposition not only to the government but also the collective public, both of which are ultimately coercive.

Nearly a century and a half later, Jordan, whose work I explore more fully in chapter 6, explicitly rejects Thoreau's posture of retraction; she instead advocates entering into collectivity. In her essay, "Waking Up in the Middle of Some American Dreams" (1992), she questions the safety, and the privilege, of Thoreau's individualist stance. Thoreau's dominant vision of political (non)participation holds up the individual as a "higher and independent power" over the state. In her examination of the Reagan–Bush era through the perspective of African American experience, Jordan explicitly inhabits Thoreau's space of solitude and finds a "willful loneliness" when she borrows a cabin on her "pseudo-Walden Pond."¹⁸ Throughout the essay, she rejects American myths of individuality; she also builds on mid-twentieth-century social movements to show that coalitions form the basis of true democracy.

The danger of Thoreau's stance of isolation and divestment becomes clear when Jordan inserts her particular black woman's body into the philosophical space of the traditional essay. Jordan recounts how, while writing alone in her rented drawing room, she is raped. As she considers the meaning of this violent personal event in the public form of an essay, Jordan explains, "Someone had insinuated himself into that awkward, tiny shelter of my thoughts and dreams. He had dealt with me as egotistically as, in another way, I had positioned dealing with anyone besides myself. He had overpowered the supposed protection of my privacy, he had violated the boundaries of my single self" (14). For Jordan, if we focus solely on the individual speaking self in the personal essay and value divestment from society, we rip the speaker from her world, not unlike the experience of sexual violence. Jordan's feminist strategy of politicizing rape calls attention to the privileged space of an essayistic speaker who can retract from the public sphere. Only those who already hold power to give up that participation are allowed the luxury of Thoreau's social divestment strategy.

As she questions the isolationist pull of a Thoreauvian protest essay, Jordan offers an alternative stance: collectivity. To do this, Jordan builds on the unrealized dream of American democracy by embracing the people at the center of the democratic project. Jordan explains, "*Demos*, as in democratic, as in a democratic state, means people, not person" (19). Jordan wakes up from the American dream of individualism and strives for the "civilized metropolis that will validate the democratic state" (19). Collectivity, not divestment, is the rightful heir of American democracy. Jordan's essay narrates her reconnection with other state subjects. The speaker at the heart of her essay becomes a collective "we." It is only upon her return from her space of isolation that her American "dream" will materialize. Further, "we" appears in the essay, but it can only be made real when accepted by a *demos*, a readership.

Nevertheless, divestment from an unjust state remains a powerful narrative in the American protest imaginary. Thoreau writes, "Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also prison"

(235). However, even this space of extreme divestment is not as individualist as it might first appear. Thoreau presents prison as a cross-cultural site of interaction not unlike Jordan's *demos*: "It is [in prison] that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race, should find them; on that separate, but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not *with* her but *against* her—the only house in a slave-state in which a free man can abide with honor" (235). Thoreau risks fetishizing prison and blackness like Norman Mailer would do a century later in "The White Negro" (1957). Yet it is important to underscore that the essay form allows Thoreau to connect his individual speaker to other partial and non-citizens under the state's thumb. In allegiance with these figures, Thoreau swears unallegiance to the state: "When the subject [not citizen] has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned from office, then the revolution is accomplished" (235). Thoreau removes himself from a collective stance because he "'do[es] not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined (236).'" Thoreau offers thinking allegiance as an alternative, but he still emphasizes non-participation. For instance, with gentle sarcasm, he states, "If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find a complete list" (237–38).

With Jordan's revision of Thoreau in mind, we can turn briefly to King's influential Civil Rights essay, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," to see that it builds on Thoreau, but also that it belongs in the collective-minded tradition of Jordan. Whereas Thoreau addresses a general citizenry, King specifically addresses eight progressive white clergymen anxious about the strategy of civil disobedience. From his own Thoreauvian jail cell, King speaks on behalf of a disenfranchised black citizenry because "we were the victims of a broken promise,"¹⁹ and he speaks to the nation through the conceit of the clergy audience who are "men of genuine good will" and whose "criticisms are sincerely set forth" (King 289). By presenting his divided audience this way, King delivers an open letter to a deeply, violently divided nation within a form that prizes reasoned, experiential, philosophical treatises on how the nation can live up to its best promises. King connects celebrated figures like Thomas Jefferson and Jesus to the experiences of the dispossessed who are locked in an "'I-it' relationship" (293) with white citizens. King crosses lines of segregation to invoke a national "dialogue" among co-citizens (292). He argues, "Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, to transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood" (296). Though King writes from an isolated jail cell, he imagines—and in the process of doing so, may help create—collectivity outside the cell.

If King and Jordan depart from Thoreau's model of individual dissent, and also from the personal essay's focus on the individual speaker in favor

of a collective “we,” to what roots can we best locate their concern with the particular reader and national collectivity? In addition to the essay tradition, the American protest essay is steeped in the rich American oratory tradition from the Puritan sermon to the speeches of King and Malcolm X.²⁰ Therefore, in addition to Montaigne, the American protest essay tradition can trace some of its roots to the Christian Indian preacher Samson Occom. In 1772, Occom delivered an execution sermon upon the public hanging of a fellow Indian (Moses Paul) for killing a white man. He addresses consecutively three distinct factions—whites, Indians, and Moses Paul—though each faction is present to overhear Occom address the other segments. Michael Warner and Myra Jehlen describe the yoking of three audiences in one address as “something of a rhetorical feat.”²¹ With the sermon’s publication, Occom became the first American Indian in English print culture. The scene of address and the circumstances of publication are especially stark illustrations of the stance adopted by protest essayists to address factions simultaneously as co-citizens, or at least co-audience members. In a protest tradition where divisions within a national public are a given, the presence of—and ability to address—a heterogeneous audience is fundamental.

In its printed form, Occom’s sermon provides a key early example of the protest essayist’s stance between particular readers and collective aspirations. Occom begins in a generalized “we” related to “mankind” who are joined by a common experience (or threat) of death. At the rise of the U.S. nation-state and its attendant doctrine of individual/natural rights, Occom carves out a position beyond the particulars of race, by which he means nations. Drawing on Christian traditions that supersede social divisions, Occom speaks in a “we” that can speak to and for “Negroes, Indians, English, or of what nation soever.”²² There is also a rhythm in the sermon: Occom shifts between a general “we” and a particular “we” or “you” as he moves between segments of his audience, and as he yokes Indians and whites together then splits them apart. Occom first calls his audience an “auditory in general” (653) then differently addresses “sirs” (i.e., white men, 656) and “my kindred” or “my brethren” (i.e., American Indians, 657).

Upon conclusion of his tripartite address, Occom appends a moral ostensibly directed to his “poor kindred” (Indians) but also applied without difficulty to the white audience. He exhorts, “O let us reform our lives, and live as becomes dying creatures, in time to come. Let us be persuaded that we are accountable creatures of God, and we must be called to an account in a few days. You that have been careless all your days, now awake to righteousness, and be concerned for your poor never-dying souls” (658–59). On the surface, Occom seemingly condemns nonwhites and non-Christians, but his strategy of speaking also to the unaddressed allows him to protest actions by whites that do not live up to the ideals of Christianity and nationalism. Rather than

simply excoriating non-Christians as heathens, Occom also protests the killing or displacement of Indians in the birth of the nation. The public hanging offers Occom a platform to address a divided American public, and his sermon also allows him to bring together fellow Indians in public witness. As the whites in the audience overhear Occom's diatribe against an increasingly ambiguous need for reform, Occom dexterously groups under "us" and "we" the indirectly addressed white audience, whose "never-dying souls" are in danger if ever they become accountable to the standards of justice—whether Christian or national—they created. In turn, Occom's *demos*, like Jordan's, stands as the true inheritor of justice.

By anchoring Jordan's and King's essays in the example of Occom as well as Thoreau, we account for the dual heritage of the modern American protest essay, especially its emphasis on divided audiences and collective desires. When essay scholarship places Montaigne almost exclusively at the head of the tradition, we privilege American writers who fit well within the personal essay tradition, from Thoreau and Emerson to White and Ralph Ellison, but we deemphasize protest essayists who are also indebted to American political oratory. In fact, historical research on Montaigne is beginning to uncover elements of oratory and urgent desires for social change, which might make Montaigne look a bit more like Occom. For instance, George Hoffman explores oral aspects from Montaigne's dictating some essays to his secretary,²³ and in her study of Latin American essays Kirklighter explores some of the historical contexts of Montaigne's essays to demonstrate his engagement with the immediate political world.²⁴ Nevertheless, the nearly universal starting point in Montaigne assumes a cultural history (sixteenth-century Europe) that might miss the full context of American protest essays. For example, Michael Hall provides an important historical study of the essay as he traces a tradition based on a "common attitude" of Montaigne, Francis Bacon, John Donne, and Sir Thomas Brown: "a spirit of exploration," which he locates in the Renaissance idea of discovery.²⁵ He explores how European gentlemen employ the essay in "the examination of received opinions, to search for inward truths as well as outward."²⁶ From their drawing rooms, these writers reflect upon world-shattering discoveries of empiricist scientists and New World explorers, and they respond to the *idea* of discovery with a new genre. The essay allows these writers "to put their world back together, to reestablish relation and coherence" in the face of newness itself.²⁷ The form, then, embodies a colonial or imperial relationship between the essayistic speaker and the new subject matter to be explored and made familiar.

In the American context, however, the essay emerged after the European era of discovery and the initial conquering of the Americas. The American protest essay developed during the rise of the modern nation-state, and it responds by underscoring and questioning divisions within newly formed

publics. Practitioners like Thoreau and Emerson adapted Montaigne's model for their transcendental meditations on American identity and democracy.²⁸ In his influential study of mass printing and eighteenth-century America, Michael Warner tracks the rise of a print-mediated public sphere.²⁹ For Warner, print culture triggers the creation of a *public* where readers imagine themselves existing among different people reading the *same* text. His later work extends this insight to *a* public, publics, and *counter*-publics.³⁰ With the rise of print-mediated publics, new kinds of individuals are invented: individuals who understand themselves as represented by print culture in the modern state. But for Warner, the rise of the public sphere creates a complex fraud of civic subjectivity based on "the pretense that representational democracy derives its legitimacy from the people and their law, when in fact it performs what it claims to describe."³¹ The protest essay uses American print culture and oratory stances to perform the democratic public for which they call. Further, they simultaneously employ and question the tenets of representational democracy and universal citizenship because they insist that we acknowledge the presence of excluded bodies and audiences within the public sphere.

American protest essays invoke urgency as they incorporate the immediate context of their divided audience in print form. To move among this audience, protest essayists must be able to speak as full, partial, and noncitizens. Print culture allows this because, as Warner explains, "Print discourse made it possible to imagine a people that could act as a people and in distinction from the state."³² For Warner, the text creates a public distinct from the state, and his later work suggests that *a* counter-public distinguishes itself from *the* public. Further, many of the texts I label *protest essays* are speeches later written down and published. The publics created by printed oral texts like Occom's incorporate a direct correlation to a present audience. These American protest essays are excellent examples of Warner's republican print culture: "He or she now also incorporates *into the meaning of the printed object* an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading. For that reason, it becomes possible to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people that cannot be realized except through such mediating imaginings."³³ Occom does not address an amorphous national people; his differentiated audience serves as a power map for his readers, who can no longer innocently imagine themselves part of a homogeneous national people. In order to imagine a nation at all, they must place themselves within Occom's trisected audience. Depending on where readers map themselves, they imagine lines of citizenship as inclusive or exclusive of themselves, the speaker, the accused, and the addressed.

A brief look at another protest speech distributed in print form—this one by the free black abolitionist Henry Highland Garnet—provides a final

example of how political oratory shapes the protest essay's stance between collectivity and particular readers. In his 1848 address to the slaves of the United States (an address rejected by the abolitionist movement on the grounds that it was too "war-like"), Garnet uncovers the tension between the idea of a national people and those particular groups excluded from the benefits, or even status, of citizenship. Garnet does this by employing state-sponsored discourses of natural rights alongside the basis of slaves' exclusion from citizenship: their race (if not individual members of his audience) was born in Africa. Garnet exhorts, "Think of the undying glory that hangs around the ancient name of Africa:—and forget not that you are native-born American citizens, and as such, you are justly entitled to all the rights that are granted to the freest."³⁴ In his address ostensibly directed at slaves, Garnet uncovers disparities in freedom and presents them as contradictory to the idea of common humanity on which abolitionists based their political stance. European origins are shed in the unification of a national people; African origins, however, persist to exclude slaves from citizenship. For Garnet, national pronouncements of equality lead to an inequitable citizenry, which he places in the shadow of African glory. Whereas Benedict Anderson shows how literature creates nations as imagined communities,³⁵ Garnet works within factional lines to address *particular* communities acutely aware of the presence of real division amid national pronouncements of unity, homogeneity, or equality.

Garnet generates a print-mediated collective seeking justice, and he does so along factional lines. Throughout the speech, Garnet addresses a "you" that purposefully lacks a definitive referent. Garnet follows Occom's model by partially yoking slaves and citizens, northerners and southerners, freemen and abolitionists, blacks and whites under the umbrella of a national people. Garnet underscores lines of division within a national community in order to provoke abolitionist horror at hypocrisy: the practice of slavery exists within an official democracy! As a partial citizen able to move among his divided audience, he gradually shifts the "you" to denote slaves in particular. By increasingly addressing slaves exclusively, Garnet displaces those whose citizenship is not in question (white abolitionists) and shuttles power across lines of exclusion to those of African origin. Garnet ends with the refrain, "Remember that you are THREE MILLIONS." Garnet creates and identifies with a faction inscribed within the national body. His incendiary call is not simply a reminder of injustice and hypocrisy. In the printed speech, Garnet remembers collectivity; he reforms the diaspora slavery created. Whereas Occom's printed sermon recreates the original audience, Garnet's address creates a public that supersedes the largely northern abolitionist audience of his initial speech. Garnet's call aligns freemen with slaves and it serves as a threat overheard by those *not* included in the three millions he seeks to convene.

STANCE II: REPRESENTATION AND THE SPOKEN FOR

Only the BLACK WOMAN can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*”

—Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 1892

In the epigraph, Anna Julia Cooper poses as *a* voice of a black woman, *a* voice from the South. This stance as a simultaneously personal and representative speaker is another means of accessing collectivity by addressing particular readers. Writing in 1892, Cooper is acutely aware of the tremendous disparity between the highly popular subject of race, slavery, and Reconstruction on the one hand, and the virtual absence of black women participating in that national conversation. Cooper uses her voice as a crowbar to pry open a space for the silenced voices spoken *about* but rarely spoken *for*. Mary Helen Washington reprimands this representative stance: “Clearly, [Cooper] sees herself as the *voice* for these women, but nothing in her essay suggests that they existed in her imagination as audience or peer.”³⁶ Washington is responding to feminist debates about the category “woman,” and she reasonably worries that Cooper fails to represent authentically the experiences of *all* black women of the South. Washington worries that Cooper fails to invoke a real community of black women that did not exist in her immediate literary and teaching circles, or to seek out the actual voices for whom she stood. But it is important to distinguish the speaker of Cooper’s essay from an autobiographical speaker. Joel Haefner argues that the (personal) essay genre presents a speaker “not as personal expression but as social discourse.”³⁷ This is especially true for Cooper since she inserts a speaking voice of *a* black woman into a national discourse that left no such space. Washington concludes, “Her voice is not radical, and she writes with little sense of community with a black and female past,”³⁸ but I place Cooper’s work in a robust protest essay tradition. Like Garnet’s relationship to current slaves, Cooper uses her relative position of privilege to speak on behalf of those who could not speak publicly for themselves.³⁹ Cooper’s voice is neither *the* voice of black women of the South, *nor even her own voice*. Rather, Cooper uses the essay to speak *on behalf of* those silenced bodies denied full citizenship and participation in national conversations.

From privileged positions in front of national audiences, protest essayists speak not for themselves, but on behalf of those they seek to represent. In fact, some do not speak at all from personal experience. For instance, Hughes wrote the short essay “Emmett Till, Mississippi, and Congressional Investigations” (1955) for the *Chicago Defender* to bring Till’s murder to a national audience. On August 28, 1955, while visiting Mississippi from Chicago, Till was lynched by two white men for allegedly whistling at a

white woman. The notorious acquittal and the widely circulated image of his mutilated corpse helped to galvanize the early Civil Rights movement.⁴⁰ Like O'Connell's response to the occasion of the public hanging, Hughes uses the lynching and the acquittal as an opportunity to inhabit the perspective of the violently vacated place of the lynchee. In response to the threats and violence that stopped many African Americans from voting, Hughes argues, "If such intimidation of the United States . . . is not un-American, I don't know what is. Yet I have never as yet heard or read of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigating such activities."⁴¹ Hughes speaks not from his own experience, but from the experience of the lynching victim whose brutal murder is not included in Joseph McCarthy's official rhetoric of un-Americanness. To create a *demos*, Hughes's speaker seeks allegiance with the violently silenced lynchee, the intimidated voter, or any African American scared speechless. Further, Hughes joins a long protest tradition of black leaders demanding official inquiries into police brutality, extending to Rev. Al Sharpton's demands on the New York Police Department.

Hughes underscores racial divisions among the American citizenry in order to argue for the inclusion and importance of African Americans in the national imagination. Acts of lynching directly contradict elected officials paying lip service to American ideals:

It would seem to me nice if the white politicians in Washington would now repay those distinguished colored Americans who have sworn and double sworn their allegiance to democratic ideals, by investigating JUST A FEW of the white folks who hang fourteen-year-old boys to bridges and throw them in rivers and who frighten and intimidate colored voters away from the polls—not to speak of those who continue to segregate the public schools, uphold Jim Crow on the railroads, and bar not only Negro citizens of the United States but East Indian diplomats from getting a decent meal in a public restaurant. Just one little small investigation of these things, using just a wee tinnychee bit of our mutual tax money, and showing just one lynched body on TV, or forcing just one Southern mobster to take refuge in the Fifth Amendment, seems to me long overdue. (251)

To directly contradict empty political rhetoric, Hughes raises the specter of the lynchee to bring together the dispossessed. More so than the speaker, Hughes places the image of the dead body at the center of a loyal group denied full citizenship. Hughes is not pledging allegiance to empty rhetoric; he almost inhabits Till's dead body in order to pledge allegiance to as yet unrealized American ideals of racial equity, complete with a road map of where to begin. The ventriloquized experience of the lynched corpse, not Hughes's own experience with HUAC, speaks publicly against injustice. Till, not Hughes, is the subject of this very personal protest essay.

Hughes's later, more politically engaged essays are not as studied as his more literary essays. This may be because, by prizing the speaking self, scholars prefer essays that explicitly speak from personal experience. Phillip Lopate argues for a celebration of the personal essay because it is our most approachable and diverting form of literature. Lopate considers the personal essay implicitly democratic: the form signifies dialogue because the essayist recounts personal experiences so that the reader may reflect on the human condition when experience transcends social lines. The personal essayist, for Lopate, presents an honest or unmediated speaker in a pact of "friendship . . . based on identification, understanding, testiness, and companionship."⁴² In this vein, scholarly treatments of the essay typically credit Montaigne's role in the birth of the modern individual who speaks from the authority of experience. This speaking self convenes, questions, and sorts through what has come before: texts, doctrines, discourses, experiences, and aphorisms. Far from a self-centered enterprise, Atkins explains that the essayist "represents the self not for its own sake but rather as a crucible in which experience is tried and tested."⁴³ The personal essay creates a coherent self at the center of a tangle of traditions, texts, experiences, and ideologies. Similarly, in his study of the academic essay, Kurt Spellmeyer describes this patchwork function as "convention": bringing together potentially competing ideas, ideologies, and discourses into one textual space in order to question dominant ideals, or, for Spellmeyer, social conventions.⁴⁴ Hall explains that the essay's posture of tentative questioning allows "the reader to experience the movement of the author's mind and to examine the premises upon which his conclusions are founded."⁴⁵ Though the *content* of the essay may be received knowledge, social conventions, or any topic, for most essay scholars the *subject* of the essay is a speaking self corollary to the writer's mind.

So, if the aim of the protest essay is not necessarily to create an autobiographical "I" but rather to speak for those bodies denied a public voice, the American protest essay again finds its roots in the oratory of social movements as well as the personal essay. In his widely printed speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852), Douglass, like Cooper, does not speak solely—or even mostly—from his experience as an ex-slave, even though one might expect as much from the author of the most popular slave narrative of the day. Rather, on the abolitionist lecture circuit, Douglass speaks "from the slaves point of view"⁴⁶ in his complex critique of the fugitive slave law, the hypocrisy of celebrations of national independence, and the racial grounds of exclusion from the spoils of the war of independence. Douglass uses his position as public speaker to bring voice to those silenced by declarations of already achieved independence. Douglass delivers his speech to an audience whose citizenship is *not* in question: Congress and the packed house in Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, which serves as a particular index of the American citizenry in general. He asks, "What have I, or those I represent, to do with your

national independence? Are the great principles of freedom and of natural justice, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, extended to us?" (Douglass 115). Douglass does not divorce himself from the masses following Thoreau's blueprint. Instead, Douglass draws a sharp line between "us" and "them" while his speaking self stands as representative for a group lacking delegates in Congress.

In this representative stance, Douglass speaks from his precarious position as a citizen only partially included in the rhetoric of democratic freedom. That is why he can move across stark lines of division to address his "fellow citizens" in the ventriloquized voice of slaves. Douglass refers to his personal experience *inasmuch as it embodies the experiences of those he represents*. As a former slave and popular orator, Douglass uses his speakerly privilege to straddle the line of disparity between the national audience and those violently excluded from citizenship. Douglass accuses, "I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common" (116). Douglass insists on particular social locations of "I," "you," and "we" in order to underscore the power and divisions that render fraudulent any declarations of independence. When the speaker vacillates between "you" (addressed citizens) and "us" (slaves, non-citizens), Douglass demands recognition of the inconsistency between past invocations of equality and the present moment.

Whereas the personal essay often concerns itself with the relationship between the speaker and a literary or philosophical community that came before, Douglass situates his speaking self in line with political and religious traditions informing representative democracy. Further, Douglass uses his public speaking voice and its print circulation to protest the quashing of the very voices he represents. In direct opposition to the self-congratulatory master narrative of independence informing his Fourth of July address, Douglass contends, "but, in regard to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence, and would hail him as an enemy of the nation who dares to make those wrongs the subject of public discourse!" (126). Douglass stands in for a voice that questions the nation's most profound stories of belonging, and therefore must be silenced. As Douglass underscores the divisions between the fellow-citizens he addresses and the slaves he represents, Douglass invites an antagonistic relationship to the audience ("you") since his voice marks the space of enforced silence of the slaves who are absent from the national audience, and he gives language to "the mournful wail of millions!" (116).

If the personal essay convenes the private writer and public world, the protest essay disaggregates the two when writers like Cooper take stands as representative speakers. In his study of Baldwin's essays, James Cunningham distinguishes between writer and essay by distinguishing between the rhetor-

ical “I” and autobiographical experience.⁴⁷ Following Cunningham’s insight, I am interested in the strategy of offering *others’* experiences in the stance of representative speaker. Even when speaking with an “I,” protest essays do not speak exclusively in autobiographical terms. Instead, they speak *on behalf of* the disenfranchised from a relatively privileged position of access to print culture. Protest writers are acutely aware of the power of their platform, and that their access is not shared by those whose unjust experiences they recount. Recognizing their relative privilege and their representative duties, protest essayists seek out specific experiences of exclusion that question general pronouncements of equality.

STANCE III: THE PARTICULAR AND THE GENERAL (JOURNALISTIC INFLUENCES)

Some years ago, after the disappearance of civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman and Schwirner [sic] in Mississippi, some friends of mine were dragging the river for their bodies. This one wasn’t Schwirner. This one wasn’t Goodman. This one wasn’t Chaney. Then, as Dave Dennis tells it, “It suddenly struck us—what difference did it make that it wasn’t them? *What are these bodies doing in the river?*”

—James Baldwin, *The Evidence of the Things Not Seen*, 1985

In part, protest essays exist to insert details of injustice into a public record that might otherwise ignore them. Therefore, protest essayists stand between specific historical details and universalist national promises, between the particular and the universal. Like Hughes, they dwell in historical detail in order to document real divisions and injustices for an American citizenry prone to discounting those divisions and instances. The essay in general is prized for its ability to dwell in ephemeral details and everyday life while transcending the bounds of the individual and aspiring toward universal, but experience-based truths. Atkins explains, the essayist “directs his attention, mind, and soul to the immediate, the concrete, and the particular.”⁴⁸ Kirklighter further suggests, “Nontraditional writers find that the essay’s qualities of spontaneity, self-reflexivity, accessibility, and truthfulness work well to meet their needs of transcending the personal and political.”⁴⁹ Paradoxically, the essay must also retreat from, or even disparage, the mundane, the overly specific, or the confining historical moment; essayists recount experience in order to access truths tested by the “crucible of experience.”⁵⁰ So, when an essay dwells too much in immediate details it may become a lesser form: journalism. In his seminal study “The Essay as Form,” Adorno describes the essay as an open-ended form of inquiry that can escape dogma because every essay must start anew and create its own system of accounting for the details (or data) that compose the individual essay. Adorno argues, “But the desire of the essay is

not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal."⁵¹ Nevertheless, for Adorno, the essay must exceed the ephemeral, lest the essayist drown amid the morass of mass culture. That is, essayists must fear the too particular.

The journalistic mode informs the protest essay tradition because the ephemeral is not subordinate to the general, universal, or transcendent. Protest essays typically use occasions of injustice not as mere springboards, but as a way of tracing patterns of exclusion from national promises. They document details of injustice, and these details often contradict, rather than lead to, universalist promises of equality. The epigraph to this section is from Baldwin's last prose work in which he continues his quest to uproot instances of racial violence that the American record forgets, covers over, or outright denies by investigating the Atlanta child murders of 1979–1981. Chapter 4 explores Baldwin's essays overall, but his final, most journalistic essay can illustrate the stance of protest essayists between historical detail and national promises, between the particular and the general. Like much of his later work, the essay was dismissed for its heavy detail—if read at all.⁵² Though the publisher describes a journalistic account of “facts and documentary evidence,”⁵³ for Baldwin the details of the story expose a larger pattern of American racism, historical neglect, and the failures of the Atlanta black bourgeoisie. In the epigraph, the partially covered corpses of unidentified Civil Rights workers are horrific manifestations of the journalistic detail a wandering, open-ended essay can dredge up. If Baldwin were to transcend these details to articulate a more general statement about America, he would risk re-submersing the corpses in the stream of a personal essay allergic to the journalistic mode.

Baldwin's essay documents the murder of these bodies as it uncovers a systemic pattern that might account for their deaths, and those in the Atlanta child murders. R. Lane Kauffman describes the essay as an “unmethodical method” able to move through the “thicket of contemporary experience” because it does not adhere to prevailing ideologies. As a result, the essayist “swerves to explore the surrounding terrain, to track a stray detail or anomaly, even at the risk of wrong turns, dead ends, and charges of trespassing.”⁵⁴ Baldwin's essay performs Kauffman's geographical description: he explores the terrain around Atlanta and the Civil Rights South, collects evidence, and connects isolated incidents into an analysis of racism, American failures to live up to the promise of Civil Rights, and the willful disregard for the activists floating half-seen in the tributaries of movements for racial justice. Details are not incidental; they constitute the essay.

Well beyond Baldwin, many protest writers became involved in journalistic enterprises. For example, in the latter part of his career, Hughes heeded his own calls for more investigations of injustice as he moved increasingly into journalistic projects. In the 1940s, Hughes began writing regular columns for

the *Chicago Defender*, and was commissioned to write the official history of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), *Fight for Freedom* (1962). Even Gore Vidal, a writer not usually associated with social movements for racial justice, consistently delves into journalistic modes to document the inconsistencies of state policies and practices. In 1961, for example, Vidal reports an incident to *Esquire* in which he witnesses police brutality against black men in an essay titled, simply, "Police Brutality" and later collected in the National Book Award-winning *United States* (1993).

Essay criticism tends to view the journalistic mode as a digression from the traditional essay on the grounds that it is detail-heavy, too purposeful, and too wedded to the present moment and unreflective masses. Or as H. L. Mencken snidely quipped, "A newspaper is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier." In a study of early American periodical essays, Bruce Granger worries that little critical attention is paid to the American version of the English periodical essay because American writers are too subjective and lack detachment from the immediate. He argues that central to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's *The Spectator* (ca. 1711–1714) is "the creation of a persona [Mr. Spectator] . . . essential to the objectivity which periodical essays strove to maintain,"⁵⁵ and that American periodical essays do not live up to that standard.⁵⁶ For Granger, periodical essays value a "social point of view" that is based on the model of a "foreign visitor"⁵⁷ over a journalist overly concerned with documentary evidence of injustice. In this vein, literary studies distrust some basic tenets of the protest essay. In the protest essay tradition, however, the journalistic mode helps to uncover patterns of exclusion and injustice so that universalist promises of equality might one day prove true in everyday life.

STANCE IV: CLEAVING EXPERIENCE AND NATIONAL RHETORIC

How could Mr. Jefferson but say, "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind?" . . . He goes on further, and says: "This *unfortunate* difference of colour, and *perhaps of faculty*, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people." . . . For my part, I am glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his position for your sake; for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your own actions and not by what our friends have said or done for us.

—David Walker, "Article II: Our Wretchedness
in Consequence of Ignorance," 1848

Protest essayists document representative experiences of exclusion so that they can test universalist promises of equality for all. Montaigne speaks from

personal experience in order to question received knowledge writ large, and American protest essayists locate received truths in official state narratives of full equality for all. This national scope coupled with a trust in everyday experience affords the protest essayist a powerful position from which to question state promises through experiences that directly contradict national rhetoric of achieved equality. While essay criticism tends to emphasize how the form cleaves *together* discourses, texts, and experience, protest essays also cleave *apart* state rhetoric from certain citizens' lived experience. In his study of Richard Wright, Ellison describes "Wright's most important achievement: he has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going under-ground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America."⁵⁸ Though Ellison follows Emerson in literary and philosophical meditations on the nation, he also follows Wright to bring African American experience—and white experience—into the light of national promises. In his famous essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958) Ellison looks at "both sides of the joke" to see that white images of the Negro and Negro images of white people are both false. "What's more," Ellison writes, "each secretly believes that he alone knows what is valid in the American experience, and that the other knows but will not admit it, and each suspects the other of being at bottom a phony."⁵⁹ Because the essay can bring together discourses, writers, texts, and experiences across time, ideology, and identity, it seeks a national story of belonging that will prove valid in the lives of all citizens.

Within the protest essay, visions of equality and national belonging that have gained official currency must be tested against everyday experience. Perhaps the best example of the desire to achieve a synthesis of American history and experience is in Vidal's essays. Vidal's essay "Democratic Vistas" (2002) comments on the rise of American imperialism in the twenty-first century by citing an earlier desire to expand the boundaries of the U.S. democratic project during Reconstruction. Like Jordan's use of Thoreau, Vidal consciously cites not only state discourse but also takes the name of a famous essay by Walt Whitman. In doing so, Vidal simultaneously invests his project with national authority as well as re-imagines a nation that might live up to its best promises of democratic inclusion. Vidal recounts in journalistic detail the nation's activities under George W. Bush, while invoking specters of democratic visions past from Spiro T. Agnew to Grover Cleveland to James Madison, as well as Whitman. Vidal hews toward cynicism in his citation of foundational stories and avers, "Finally, those founders, to whom we like to advert, had such a fear and loathing of democracy that they invented the Electoral College so that the popular vote could be throttled, much as the Supreme Court throttled the Floridians on December 12."⁶⁰ By placing his meditation on voting rights and presidential power in the form of an essay