American Prophecy
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Ode to Failure

Many prophets have failed, their voices silent
ghost-shouts in basements nobody heard their dusty laughter in family attics
nor glanced at them on park benches weeping with relief under empty sky
Walt Whitman viva’d local losers—courage to Fat Ladies in the Freak Show!
    nervous prisoners whose mustached lips dripped sweat on chow lines—
Mayakkovsky cried, Then die! my verse, die like the workers’ rank & file
    fusilladed in Petersburg!
Prospero burned his power books & plummeted his magic wand to the
    bottom of dragon seas
Alexander the Great failed to find more worlds to conquer!
O Failure I chant your terrifying name, accept me your 54 year old Prophet
    epicking Eternal Flop! I join your Pantheon of mortal bards, & hasten this
    ode with high blood pressure
rushing to the top of my skull as if I wouldn’t last another minute, like the
    Dying Gaul! to
You, Lord of blind Monet, deaf Beethoven, armless Venus de Milo, headless
    Winged Victory!
I failed to sleep with every bearded rosy-cheeked boy I jacked off over
    My tirades destroyed no Intellectual Unions of KGB & CIA in turtlenecks
    & underpants, their woolen suits and tweeds
I never dissolved Plutonium or dismantled the nuclear Bomb before my skull
    lost hair
I have not yet stopped the Armies of entire Mankind in their march toward
    World War III
I never got to Heaven, Nirvana, X, Whatchamacallit, I never left Earth,
    I never learned to die.

—Allen Ginsberg
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This book is animated by a central paradox: Though prophetic language is a passionate frame of reference that sets the horizon of American politics, the Hebrew prophets are not typically included in the canon of political thought, and neither their language nor their heirs figure in currently prevailing forms of political theory. By exploring how great critical voices have revised prophecy to reshape ideas of American nationhood and democratic politics, especially in regard to race, I assess prophecy’s danger and value as a language in and for politics.

My premise is that prophetic language is axiomatic in American life. Almost 30 percent of Republican voters declare themselves “born-again” Christian evangelicals, but Rev. Jerry Falwell and Rev. Pat Robertson were not speaking only to this constituency when they declared that 9/11 was God’s just punishment of his chosen people for tolerating abortion and homosexuality. According to polls, roughly 60 percent of American adults expect Jesus to return, and they say the book of Revelation is a prophecy of apocalypse they take literally and believe is being fulfilled now. But when President George W. Bush described his war on terror in moral terms of good and evil and in millennial terms of redeeming the Middle East from captivity, his language echoed even more widely.1

For the idea of a chosen people and “redeemer nation,” called to redeem all humanity from despotism and immorality, resonates even among avowedly secular citizens. Such redemptive language entwines democracy and a special American nationhood: Only forty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked redemptive language to cast racial apartheid as a national failure to honor a democratic promise; now, evangelical Republicans narrate a “jeremiad” depicting the nation’s decline from its sacred and virtuous origins. Both draw on a deep symbolic structure and prevailing narrative form to name the circumstances, confront the vicissitudes, address the meaning, and authorize the reconstitution of collective life.

Stories of special origins, corruption, and renewal; ideas of sin and
individual responsibility; standards of moral judgment; symmetries of crime and punishment; tropes of suffering; pleas for forgiveness; promises of rebirth; poetics of redemption—this language is not marginal to American politics, nor is it a possession of the “Republican Right.” Those canonized as the Hebrew prophets forged this language, which first shaped the entire Bible and now inhabits American culture, gripping even those who would escape it. It concerns not only nationhood but morality, not only religion but the personal meaning of freedom, not only codes of conduct but intimately lived senses of personhood. An originally biblical language is now a vernacular for ordinary as well as political life, providing the stories and the narrative frameworks by which people—singly and collectively—give purpose to life. Falwell’s claim about God’s punishment is intelligible to those who reject it, because it bespeaks an unthought symbolic order and a daily idiom of which “religion” is only the surface.

These claims are not novel to scholarship in American studies, which shows the cultural vigor and political importance of biblical religiosity and the “jeremiad” as a “prophetic” story. By redefining the founding principles and purposes of a special “American” identity, many scholars argue, elites and social movements authorize contrasting claims and action. Tropes of corruption and redemption have been used repeatedly to justify domination and exclusion—in the name of defending a chosen people against subversion linked to female desire, independent women, demonized others, nonreproductive sexuality, and urban life. Currently, indeed, prophetic language authorizes imperial power, racial domination, and patriarchal codes. Yet compelling voices in American politics also use prophetic speech to defend democratic projects claiming to redeem “America” as a symbol of possibility. To project the communitarian face of liberal individualism, or to contest this liberal nationalism and enlarge the democratic imagination, differently situated critics take up and rework prophetic language.²

Prophecy in America is thus a biblical genre, a vernacular idiom, and a political language, gripping and yet capacious, available for opposing uses. I turn to prophecy, therefore, not to find a philosophic answer to the question of political theology but to engage a rhetoric crucial to American life, not to document its importance but to assess its political bearing. Sociologist Robert Bellah once depicted a salutary political dialectic within a dominant “civic religion” between biblical language and
constitutional liberalism, but, especially since 1980, the language has been captured by or ceded to “Christian” or “New Right” constituencies in the Republican Party. During what Michael Rogin terms a “counter-subversive” moment, whose twinned aspects are “culture war” and “war on terror,” I pursue political questions in rhetorical form: Should small-\(d\) democrats reclaim and revise this language, so deeply tied to domination and to struggle against it? If a language has such power to harm, can that power be used differently? If it frames what politics means for Americans at axiomatic levels, must we rework it because we are mute without it? Or must we work through it to move beyond it?

When I began this book, it seemed obvious that prophecy is inherently a problematic genre for democratic politics. We may recall that Hebrew prophets criticize social injustice and idolatry of wealth and ritual, but also that they speak in the name of a God whose higher authority is beyond question. In liberal theory’s terms, they recognize neither “negative liberty” nor inalienable rights as they declare what God requires. Hebrew prophecy is remembered for questioning pervasive practices long deemed legitimate, but in Aristotelian terms, it does not credit a valid contest among compelling truths and worthy goods; no prophet argues that freedom depends on this plurality and its public mediation by citizens engaging in speech and action. After all, they militantly defend monotheism against what we now call multiculturalism! Their God makes profound demands for justice, but also for a unitary community purged of “other gods.” God’s messengers presume there is one right way to view and live in the world; other ways are not worthy adversaries but false prophecy dooming the nation. They courageously speak truth to power, but they seem to demand assent, not invite conversation.

Reading back from Falwell to biblical forebears, appeals to divine authority seem inescapably dogmatic, and community under God seems to impose excessive cultural unity. By figuring Hebrews as the children or the spouse of God, prophecy casts adult agency as willful rebellion or self-destructive adultery; a rhetoric of fidelity or corruption thus seems to moralize social practices and demonize cultural difference on behalf of an impossible purity. Whereas a story of decline from origins seems to idealize the past and reify first principles, a messianic story of redemption seems to escape history, devalue politics, and justify—even generate—violence. Even if we grant that prophetic language raises fundamental political questions—about authority, the constitution of
community, the meaning of suffering—biblical answers seem to justify closure rather than openness, unity rather than plurality, nostalgia rather than experiment.

Justifications of racial domination and culture war in American history are enabled by the monotheist cultural politics that frames biblical prophecy. Claims to divine authority and absolute moral truth and narratives of corruption and redemption do engender self-righteousness and violence, which close spaces for political contest. Redemptive language still weds moral dichotomy to violent purification of practices, people, and impulses deemed an unacceptable stain on human life. Given Christian Right evangelism and the long shadow of 9/11, it seems credible to count prophecy as a language to avoid. Against those who serve higher authority and unequivocally defend the one right way to live, figures like Machiavelli, Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt, and—not least—Groucho Marx seem a needed countertradition.

This argument captures the dangerous impact of the hegemonic form of prophecy in American history, but it is too simple. I develop a more complex view through engagement with the figures I analyze in this book: Frederick Douglass and Henry Thoreau in the nineteenth century, and Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison in the twentieth. Why do I write more generously about them than about the Hebrew prophets? Less because these figures are so different—though the differences matter greatly—and more because of what they oppose: white supremacy, not the worship of gods other than Yahweh. Whereas biblical attacks on idolatry seem to discredit a pluralism I value, opposition to white supremacy in the name of equality is deeply appealing. But critics of slavery and of white supremacy link injustice to idolatry, which they interpret less as a mistaken idea (of God or race) and more as reified categories tied to domination and enabling its disavowal. Like the Hebrew prophets, they depict not a plurality among valid ways of life but a regime of power whose constitutive practices make the freedom (and identity) of some depend on the servitude of others.

Their prophetic critique of slavery and white supremacy compels a rethinking of our assumptions about dogmatism and plurality, about judgment of injustice and openness to difference, about the conditions of fundamental as opposed to incremental change. Their prophetic rhetoric also seems an extraordinarily resonant form of political speech. Partly, critics use prophecy to address enfranchised citizens: about the disavowals that imprison them in captivity and despair and the acknowl-
edgments—of racial domination and of the democratic principles—that might free them. Partly, critics of white supremacy use prophecy to invert the sacred iconography of American exceptionalism: Casting the Promised Land as Egyptian bondage or Babylonian captivity, they forge a subaltern political community between nation and empire. From prophecy they draw modes of address and registers of voice by which they try to reconstitute an exclusionary regime and redeem the catastrophic history of a subjugated people.

To face race in America is to be compelled toward prophecy. For American liberalism is constituted by disavowing its deep connection to racial domination, and cognate forms of “democratic theory”—from rational choice to discourse ethics—echo this willful innocence. By avoiding race, liberalism defaults on a democratic project and offers a conception of politics that is impoverished by fear of what it takes race (as blackness) to signify: passion, irrationality, embodiment, impurity. At worst, liberal norms of pluralism, tolerance, or deliberation are the smiley face of white supremacy. At best, they prove inadequate to the task of naming, let alone confronting, it. Critics of white supremacy repeatedly turn to prophecy, therefore, to pose questions unvoiced in—and dimensions of experience silenced by—the liberal ordinary. In principle, these critics could use other genres of political speech besides prophecy, but they are gripped by it, and they see no other powerful vernacular to provoke acknowledgment of domination and its disavowal, to depict accountability, to affirm democratic commitments, and to redefine collective purpose. They do not cede this language to adversaries, but rework it.

Because white supremacy compels critics toward prophecy as a political language addressing domination and collective action, and because they would animate a democratic politics by avowedly prophetic speech, I have come to discern political values and democratic resources in a voice I had only feared, to see a tension rather than a polarity between prophecy and politics. By focusing on race, therefore, this book works out that tension and dramatizes prophecy’s ambivalent meaning, to rethink how we theorists conceive what is political.

I still find Jeremiah in Jerry Falwell, so to speak, but now also in Frederick Douglass, Henry Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr., who inflect theism very differently, as well as in James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, who revise prophecy in nontheist ways to bring an erotic poetics to national politics and to reimagine diasporic community. How do these
figures echo Jeremiah? They insist faith is a condition of worldly freedom. They announce realities we must acknowledge if we are to flourish. Depicting the freedom of some premised on the subordination of others, they make unequivocal judgments of constitutive injustice and of we citizens who disclaim it. They depict a culture beset not by an ignorance to be remedied with more information but by a systemic derangement about what (and who) we count as real. They depict not a plurality of faiths but a disavowal of reality. To address audiences invested in denial, they take up a complex rhetorical task and political office: By acts of witness and narration, they try to shift how people judge the past and its meaning, to provoke acknowledgment not only of what is forgotten or disavowed but also of the meaning of principles they have practiced in viciously exclusionary ways. Only such “repentance” frees people imprisoned by willful innocence of their history while signaling their capacity to practice their principles differently. Baldwin thus makes whites the protagonists in a tragedy of crime and misrecognition, characters whose captivity, haunting, and contingent redemption he narrates to initiate democracy in America.

We theorists may interpret “abolitionist” voices as dogmatic, yet equality stands fast for us as a commitment, and we are unequivocal about the evil of white supremacy and its unfortunate centrality in American history. We worry about the dangers of redemptive rhetoric, but we too want whites to acknowledge and overcome—why not say repent of and redeem?—a history of racial domination. We value pluralization of perspectives, but we recognize that not every version of history enables a fruitful relationship to the past. We even may credit that a story making white supremacy central to our history is a condition of democratic possibility, period. Because prophecy depicts such fateful judgments and choices about practices and stories, it is a needed—albeit dangerous—political practice.

Because the danger is great, it is tempting to split good and bad forms of prophecy, as if to exorcize Jerry Falwell but save Frederick Douglass, as if defining “true” prophecy could separate valuable and dangerous uses, to assure democratic outcomes. But the voice of judgment—adversarial and aggressive—that I reject in one seems appealing and justified in the other. Indeed, what attracts my figures to prophecy and gives their language compelling political resonance are the very registers of voice that political theorists may spurn under the sign of dogmatism, moralism, or fundamentalism. To take prophecy whole is to discover how its
political value is inseparable from what we find dangerous about it: the exercise of authority in claims about willful blindness and judgment of injustice, in uncompromising and aggressive calls to conflict over fateful and costly choices, in intense avowals of solidarity, in urgent demands for accountability on behalf of reimagined community, and in poetic promises of redemption—not to mention intensities and cadences of speech that raise the temperature in the body politic.

A profound ambiguity thus marks the political meaning of prophecy: Registers of speech we find disturbing or potentially antidemocratic can perform truly democratizing and politicizing work. In form and content such speech and claims are essential, but essentially risky, in a democratic politics. We thus trace how critics use prophecy to make visible crucial dimensions of politics, and how their speech can go awry; seeing how risk is tightly wound with value, we face claim making about practices and choices as a needful political act, and a terrifyingly contingent one, because we cannot guarantee a good outcome. But fear of doing evil deprives us of the capacity to do good.

Whereas many theorists respond to neoliberal and post-9/11 politics by reaffirming constitutional liberalism, investing in deliberative democracy, or imagining an ethos of pluralization or cosmopolitanism, I have concluded that we lose too much if we simply abjure prophetic language. The political challenge is to fashion political counterprophecy, democratic forms of prophetic speech. Rather than dismissing a prophetic voice as inherently flawed or seeking an alternative to it, I use critics of white supremacy to analyze not only that voice’s danger but its powerful appeal, capacity for reworking, and political value. Partly I explore how these critics work both with and against inherited prophetic idioms. Partly I explore how they fashion counterprophecies to confront the limits of liberalism by making democratic claims in political ways. Partly I explore how they try to politicize the redemptive rhetoric bequeathed by biblical prophecy as they struggle to imagine and foster a possibility for new possibilities.

My approach has obvious limitations. I set aside other idioms in the American ordinary to focus on those I identify here. Some may say I read liberal political thought ungenerously. But liberalism already has many defenders and elaborators, most of whom (not all!) repeat what I find here: a sustained complicity with white supremacy that cannot be overcome solely by liberalism’s methods—rights claims, juridical redress, public policy, legislative politics. These need to be animated—and also
unsettled—by prophetic practices that unrelentingly expose the hierarchies held in place, not undone, by the liberal ordinary.

Focusing on the figures in this book, however, also means simplifying the complexity of the American racial system in which a black–white binary intersects with a category of “ethnicity” and so with the subject formation of native peoples, Mexican natives, and Chinese laborers in the nineteenth century; Europeans in the twentieth century; and immigrants from Asia, India, and Hispanic cultures since 1965. I focus on the black–white binary not to depict this complex reality but to invoke the political meaning of “race.” For in American political rhetoric, “race” is not just a powerful biologic fiction; it denotes a history organized by slavery and the specific historic experience of African Americans. In the democratic imaginary, then, “race” is also a trope connoting the reality of power and inequality, of embodiment and difference, in contrast to prevailing idioms of formal equality, individualism, ethnic mobility, or multiculturalism. In turn, my figures address white supremacy mostly as a black–white dynamic, but they thereby raise issues—of idolatry and finitude, domination and disavowal, embodiment and agency, accountability and collective purpose—at the heart of democratic life.

Indeed, to address the crisis, and sense of crisis, in American life now, visionary storytelling by those who bear witness seems ever more essential: To name the constitutive exclusions, amnesia, and anxious dream of sovereignty that make imperial power and repressive action seem credible answers to wounded national identity. The office of those who bear witness is not only critical or disenchanting, though, for by passionate language that seizes audiences, prophetic testimony can make dead bones live. Prophecy can elevate people’s “expectations and requirements,” Thoreau says, by animating values they imagine as static, dramatizing commitments they reify by forgetting, and energizing democratic solidarities they invoke in name only. In these and other ways, prophetic visions, questions, claims, demands, and energy—provoking, recalcitrant, haunting, passionate, and poetic—may be especially needful now.

The example of these critics, at least, suggests how we ourselves might wrestle with the legacy of this language in the world and within ourselves. To explore how Douglass and Thoreau and Baldwin, King, and Morrison take up—in some regards reworking and in other regards resisting—this language, is to create what Alasdair MacIntyre calls an “argumentative retelling” of prophecy. Situated in relation to prophetic idioms, their
political concerns, theoretical insights, and rhetorical strategies speak powerfully to each other and to us. For as each figure retells American history to confront racial domination, together they form a conversation about the deepest issues in American life, about the political and rhetorical difficulties in addressing them, and so about the value and danger of prophecy as a language in and for politics. To invoke the ambivalent conclusion of Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, “this is not a story to pass on”—we must not pass by or ignore this story, but nor can we simply bequeath it to others unchanged.6
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