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# Democracy and the Unconscious

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# Democracy and the Unconscious[1]

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between democracy and the unconscious. It does so by understanding democracy through the repressed desire for shared power by a collective actor that has episodically realized itself, in ways that haunt political languages, practices, and aspirations. Democratic flourishing rests upon erotic practices through which the demos transgressively transforms politics by embracing what we refer to as democratic narcissism. Democratic decline and impasse are symptomatic of repressed desires for power that have required the people's abjection rather than coalescing into a self-affirming narcissism of the demos.

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"We have wandered into a psychoanalytic wonderland."

– Judith Butler[2]

"The unconscious…can reach God knows where. There we are going to make discoveries."

– Carl Jung[3]

## Introduction: Democracy and the Unconscious

There is a growing scholarly consensus: democracy is in trouble. The viability of democracy is being challenged from multiple directions: the breakdown of longstanding norms and institutions; critique of its seemingly ineluctable structural exclusions; and its perceived inefficiencies and unresponsiveness to the people's desires. We maintain that this moment of crisis is ambiguous, containing promise as well as peril. Despite rising symptoms of discontent, the desire for a more democratic form of life persists, evident in the endurance of widespread protest politics and insurgent activism. This persistence testifies to deeper, erotic desires to transform self and world, but these desires lack adequate vehicles of expression beyond moments of frustration. We argue that the democratic desire to transform the world is repressed, meaning that there is an

[1] We would like to acknowledge the contributions made by audience members at the 2021 Western Political Science Association Conference and at a session of the Five Colleges Faculty Workshop. In addition, we would like to gratefully acknowledge the suggestions and input of George Shulman.

[2] Butler, "Genius or Suicide," *London Review of Books* 41 (20), October 24, 2019.

[3] Jung in Richard I. Evans, *Conversations with Carl Jung and Reactions from Ernest Jones* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2020).

unconscious register of desire in need of study. To elaborate this argument, this essay examines the democratic possibilities of the unconscious.[4]

Here we follow many social and political theorists who use psychoanalytic categories derived from clinical contexts to consider social and political problems.[5] In particular, we begin by identifying two contending political theories of the unconscious. The first theory imagines how unconscious desire might be put into words and incorporated into hegemonic articulations of liberal democratic politics. Developed in the work of Noëlle McAfee, this political theory of the unconscious is largely meliorative and progressive in its orientation – it offers an image of politics as collective therapy, whereby traumas and exclusions can be surfaced and addressed. Processes of "working through" manifest in more inclusive democratic practices such as deliberative fora and other participatory institutions. Absent this therapeutic mode of politics, demagogues or populist ideologies can exploit unintegrated socio-psychological material in ways that precipitate democratic decline, if not collapse.[6]

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[4] Although interpretations of the unconscious vary depending on psychoanalytic allegiances, we begin from an understanding on which these different approaches converge: the unconscious names the territory produced by the loss of primal union, occasioned by disruption or breakdown, which has in turn produced defenses – repression, splitting, disavowal, projection, and others – against accepting this condition of separation or lack.

[5] Our work is situated alongside previous scholarship on fantasy, psychoanalysis, and political theory. Some have explored the relationship between political life and fantasy: Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017) and Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); the "dream life" of American politics: Elisabeth Anker, "The Cinematic 'Dream Life' of American Politics," *Political Theory* 44 (2), 2016, 207 - 218; or examined the motivations of political figures or affiliations in terms of unconscious drives: Butler, "Genius or Suicide." Others have focused on the racialized fantasies of our present moment, rooted in histories of supremacy: Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8 (2), August 2007, 149 - 168, 2007; George Shulman, "Psychoanalysis and Politics in the work of Michael Rogin," *Political Theory* 44 (2), 2016, 164 - 178. More broadly, political theorists have often turned to the resources of psychoanalysis to explore the derangements and disavowals of American political and cultural life, e.g. Michael Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (London: Routledge, 1975) and Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), and the ways in which those disavowals transfigure, in George Shulman's words, the interior life of Americans to "sustain domination, close spaces of plurality, and suppress the political" ("Psychoanalysis and Politics in the work of Michael Rogin," 165).

[6] David McIvor provides a different account of the relationship between psychoanalysis and democracy that is still consonant with Noëlle McAfee's deliberative and participatory approach to a politics of "working through." We take McAfee as our interlocutor here because she explicitly links liberal democratic imaginaries to an

We argue that McAfee's account cannot adequately respond to a second theory that see the unconscious as inherently racialized. Instead of understanding the unconscious as a reservoir of thwarted or twisted desire to be included in a political system, this theory argues that the unconscious is produced by and reinforces structural exclusions within the category of the human. We explore this second theory with Frank Wilderson III's argument that a racialized, anti-Black partition structures notions of the human and articulations of the psycho-political that rest upon them. Wilderson's theory provocatively maps the disavowal of racial domination characteristic of many liberal polities, yet it does not fully elaborate a democratic politics adequate for addressing this impasse. Without further political theorizing, this account of the unconscious arrives at a zero-sum politics of continued anti-blackness or a violent, revolutionary "end of the world."

McAfee and Wilderson provide insight into the psycho-political conditions inhibiting democratic flourishing; neither, however, adequately probes the possibilities for democratic desire and its registers of erotic exuberance, play, and plasticity. According to Norman O. Brown, the unconscious is the shadow of a repressed memory of the erotic, embodied, and inherently narcissistic desire for pleasure. Brown understands desire in terms of "primary narcissism" -- a simultaneous fullness of self and oneness with everything -- that exists prior to repression.[7] For Brown, the repression of primary narcissism is a tragic story that can only be undone within a "post-tragic" world, something that McAfee and Wilderson, each in their own way, disavows. Cultivating polymorphous desire involves simultaneously reshaping self and world, or what Brown calls, following Sandor Ferenczi, "auto- and allo-plastic" adaptation.

Brown's theory of embodied desire for pleasure allows us to elaborate the democratic potential of the unconscious. A democratic theory of the unconscious names the repressed desire for shared power by a collective actor, a desire that has -- episodically and fugitively -- realized itself in ways that continue to haunt political discourses, practices, and aspirations. We develop this reading of the unconscious in conversation with Sheldon Wolin's description of ancient Athenian democracy. Viewing Wolin through Brown's theories of the unconscious and polymorphous perversity, we argue that democratic flourishing rests upon auto- and allo-plastic, erotic practices. Wolin, on the other hand, provides an account of power that Brown's theory lacks.

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account of the unconscious: McAfee, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); McAfee. *Fear of Breakdown: Politics and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019); McIvor, *Mourning in America*: *Race and the Politics of Loss*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016; McIvor, "The Cunning of Recognition: Melanie Klein and Contemporary Critical Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 15 (2016), 243-263.

[7] Primary narcissism must be differentiated from secondary narcissism, which is a compensatory and defensive structure of the ego characterized by grandiosity, overwhelming selfishness, and lack of concern for others.

Our democratic theory of the unconscious calls attention to the stunted politics of the present moment in American democracy. McAfee, Wilderson, and Wolin are each, in their own way, responding to the (failed) possibilities of liberal democracy in the post-war era. Brown offers a glimpse of a way out from democratic crisis, which we develop into an account of democratic desire expressed through embodied erotic-political practices. Our democratic theory of the unconscious points to transformative transgressions and generative collective practices of desire in order to envision a new, erotic form of democracy. Calls for more participatory practices or emancipatory social movements must tap these largely unconscious reservoirs of democratic desire.

The Democratic Politics of "Working Through"

Noëlle McAfee and Frank Wilderson III present two contending political imaginaries -- the first of a quasi-Kantian emergence from immaturity whereby individuals and collectives learn to articulate repressed desires and anxieties, and the second an apocalyptic vision of world-ending breakdown precipitated by the unsustainability of totalizing repression. Here we unpack the theories of the unconscious that underlie these political imaginaries. Although both McAfee and Wilderson highlight the ultimate irreducibility of the unconscious, we suggest that neither addresses the failure of political theory and praxis to enlist and cultivate democratic desire. A democratic reading of the unconscious reveals how it can serve as the site of struggle towards transformation of oppressive and inhibiting forms that obstruct or constrain the expression of collective power.

Informed by the work of Julia Kristeva and the object-relations tradition, Noëlle McAfee's work combines democratic and psychoanalytic theory to elaborate a therapeutic style of democratic politics. McAfee's *Democracy and the Political Unconscious* starts with the challenge of making the unconscious *public*. For McAfee, the political unconscious is an effect of processes of social marginalization. She locates political mis-development in practices of silencing and exclusion that result in collective traumas in need of working through. The political unconscious thus emerges as an artifact of both (intra-personal) repression and (political/social) marginalization. It calls for public spaces and practices such as truth and reconciliation commissions and deliberative fora for its public articulation.[8]

McAfee's concept of the political unconscious is rooted in a philosophical anthropology that views human development as the transition from "speechlessness to participation."[9] According to McAfee, maturation happens through the move from speechlessness to speech, and this implies that an inclusive public sphere is not merely a prerequisite of a democracy but of human development as such. Such a process of translating frustrated desire into communicable language is, in turn, a process of subject-formation that links self to others. It is also a source of public happiness because it represents the reconciliation of desire to a world shared with others. Importantly, for McAfee this account of the unconscious reconfigures the Freudian picture of drive psychology. The

[8] Compare McIvor, *Mourning in America*.
[9] McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, 13.

drives, rather than being asocial strivings, are "socialized" since they *only appear* through sublimation. Sublimation, in the words of Kelly Oliver, "liberates" the drives by giving them a form. Absent this form, the drives have no substance.[10] From this perspective, alienation is not the compromise of a substantial desire but occurs when either aphasia or misrecognition block sublimation. The alienated individual "suffers as much from not being heard as from not being able to speak."[11] Sublimation is simultaneously a means of coming-to-speech and connection to others. Repression, on this account, is not the forsaking of asocial drives, but the failure to give the (amorphous) drives form through articulation and social relations.[12]

This discursive account of the drives and its corresponding treatment of sublimation is complicated by McAfee's more recent book, *Fear of Breakdown*. There, McAfee turns to D.W. Winnicott's theories on infant development to consider the fact of *primary* repression. She zeroes in on the infant's experience of having to manage the transition from plenum, or primal union, which names a state of undifferentiated identification with its caregiver. Instead of focusing on the developmental trajectories inherent in coming to speech, McAfee argues that the unconscious takes shape as the infant learns that it cannot have its mother at all times. Infants must learn to be alone as they mature, yet the trauma of the infant's split from the mother continues to persist in the unconscious. How infants manage this feeling of emptiness, through the use of transitional objects, informs how the psyche addresses breakdown. The typical defenses against the experience of breakdown — whether splitting, projection, or denial — show up not only interpersonally but also politically.[13] The psyche that cannot establish social relations with others holds onto an illusory plenum in which it was omnipotent, but only because it borrowed the powers of others (i.e. the mother) and fantasized its independence.[14] The refusal to accept and work through the "experience" of primary repression underlies, on McAfee's reading, the resurgence of authoritarian populism.[15]

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[10] Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
[11] McAfee, *Democracy*, 15.
[12] McAfee's discussion parallels the debate within feminist psychoanalysis that critiques Freud's account of sublimination as being rooted in the Oedipus complex, which both seemingly denies sublimination as a viscissitude available to women and occludes the pre-Oedipal with the mother. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex That is Not One* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985) and Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989).
[13] McAfee, *Fear of Breakdown*, 53.
[14] Lewis Gordon advances a similar argument about what we would view as the narcissistic grandiosity undergirding white democracy in *Fear of Black Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Straux, and Giroux, 2022).
[15] "Experience" is in scare quotes because, for Winnicott, primary repression happens prior to the infant's development of a capacity for experience. This explains the haunting persistence of a fear of breakdown throughout life.

The supposedly reassuring appeals of reactionary populism reinforce illusions of plenum and forestall the painful process of coming to terms with interdependence.[16]

On this updated account, the coming-to-articulacy of the unconscious is restricted or obstructed by a fear of breakdown originating in the rupture of plenum. McAfee describes the haunting presence of "an unintegrated state" that emerges from the unconscious:

> The agony is literally both a longing *and* a dread of falling back into an unintegrated state, a boundaryless being without a body to own, an inability to engage with the world in any meaningful way. This gets us closer to what a fear of breakdown really is: an uncanny anxiety over that unlived experience of primary repression, an anxiety that it might one day *be lived*. The temporality of this phenomenon is perplexing and complex, a dread in the present of something at once past and future.[17]

What McAfee names as the "unlived experience of primary repression" stems not just from the transition from plenum but also from the social environment into which the infant is born. The psyche is unwittingly shaped by the political unconscious of the social environment. "Individuation emerges through social identifications" with the family, group identities, nation, and more.[18] These large group identities are real even if they are founded upon myths or imagined histories (i.e. public fantasies). Social and historical forces leave deposits in the unconscious, McAfee writes, that remain mysterious and even foreign to the self that is constituted by them.[19]

McAfee's reading of the unconscious in *Fear of Breakdown* is a more pessimistic account. The unconscious retains an aspect of "radical alterity" and thereby represents a "sting of the negative."[20] For McAfee, plenum represents a selfish eating up of the world such that everything is included in the self; thus this experience and the way it dissolves the boundaries between self and other, is undesirable from the perspective of healthy psychic and social development. Union with others remains a fantasy that is subject to manipulation by demagogues. The alternative is a politics of democratic maturation, which McAfee conceptualizes through a wide array of political practices that help citizens work through the residual anxieties and imaginaries stemming from the unlived experience of primary repression. While separation from plenum is a "tragic but unavoidable feature of human development," McAfee maintains that "democratic work .

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[16] Davide Tarrizo's Lacanian account of the political unconscious identifies a similar tendency of democracies to succumb to authoritarianism through illusions of plenum-like union, due to the structural lack within political subjects as emphasized by Lacanian approaches to the unconscious: Tarrizo, *Political Grammar: The Unconscious Foundations of Democracy* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford, 2021).
[17] McAfee, *Fear,* 52 (emphasis original).
[18] McAfee, *Fear*, 57.
[19] McAfee, *Fear*, 56.
[20] McAfee, *Fear,* 5 and 42.

. . can help release bodies politic from the grip of past traumas and ongoing fantasies of foundational origins."[21]

Democratic work comprises six key practices: imagining politics as public practice; having a self-understanding as citizens not subjects; identifying and thematizing problems; deliberating with others; harnessing public will; and radical questioning. Together these constitute "the wetlands of democracy" where McAfee centers the "contingent, fraught, and easily derailed" passage to "reflexive sociality."[22] If taken seriously, these six practices can animate public life, providing citizens with a sense of agency and mature connection to one another. In turn, this would make individuals and groups less susceptible to fantasies of omnipotence and narcissistic plentitude.

Yet McAfee's insistence on working through leads her to consider those who refuse her terms of democratic practice as politically immature. "Democratic politics . . . calls for growing up, moving beyond the black and white of adolescence and toward a more mature understanding of the complexities and ambiguities in politics."[23] Immaturity is marked by fantasies of omnipotence. Democratic maturation entails rejecting both "the illusion of possible perfection" and "the politics of negation" lest we "sink into the despair of nihilism and psychosis."[24] For McAfee, the world is amenable to working-through and we can find better ways of doing so within the bounds of existing democratic institutions and aspirations. Even if there is a somewhat tragic acceptance of the inevitability of loss and trauma, McAfee offers a therapeutic democratic politics in which the losses can be identified, named, and worked through. Here McAfee's account of politics shows its debt to the object-relational school of psychoanalysis, which begins from an assumption of fundamental interdependence that must be acknowledged as a step toward maturation and the integration of the personality.

On McAfee's reading, utopian accounts of giving birth to a new world are a kind of infantile fantasy to be relinquished. Yet this is a truncated reading of the forms that omnipotence and narcissism might take — or might need to take— in order to motivate democratic practices. It also risks dismissing the structural obstacles to the politics of working through. For McAfee, even the "harms of racism" in the United States -- "at work today in police brutality, mass incarceration, economic inequality, and ongoing racism" -- must be patiently, democratically worked through.[25] In other words, there is no abolitionist horizon within McAfee's account, because the claims and counter-claims over the living legacy of racialization must be pressed through the sieves of public discourse and existing liberal democratic institutions.

The Anti-Black Unconscious of Frank Wilderson III

[21] McAfee, *Fear,* 40 and 13.
[22] McAfee, *Fear,* 9 and 40.
[23] McAfee, *Fear,* 149.
[24] McAfee, *Fear,* 149 and 232.
[25] McAfee, *Fear,* 149.

The second theory of the political unconscious, in contrast to McAfee's, both asserts a racialized unconscious prior to politics and refuses all political forms of working through. It implies that the brokenness of social life is reflected in a racial partition at the level of the unconscious. Hence not only are conscious attempts at mediation prone to failure, but political desires, imaginations, fantasies, and aspirations are pre-determined. This is the image of the political unconscious offered by Frank B. Wilderson III. While McAfee imagines that the "fear of breakdown" can be democratically entertained and, to some extent, worked through in progressive fashion, Wilderson's pessimism reads breakdown as a path to a kind of terrible wisdom that nothing short of the end of the world can undo an anti-Black unconscious.

Wilderson introduces this idea by narrating his psychotic breakdown. Washing his face one morning as he prepared to commute to the campus of UC Berkeley, where he was a middle-aged graduate student, Wilderson's body suddenly snapped. A sensation of heat on his face and tightness in his chest returned him to the feeling when as a child he felt he couldn't face the taunts at the White grammar school he attended in suburban Minneapolis. His flesh hummed as if abuzz with insects while the memory of that frightened little boy washed over him. A stanza of poetry fluttered just out of reach, yet he couldn't quite remember or hear it. It was there and not there, unretrievable through his sudden vertigo. "Help me, somebody," he sobbed into his neck. "Please, somebody help me."

Wilderson's breakdown is an eruptive symptom of how anti-Blackness shapes the political unconscious. To reach the anti-Black unconscious requires peeling back two preceding layers: the notion of "the human," which is constructed in antithetical relation to the enslaved; and the libidinal economy in which Blacks function as "inert props" for whites' desire for power.[26] The human, in Orlando Patterson's words, is parasitic on the slave. Alienated from birth and isolated from any possible genealogy, the slave was condemned to social death. This condition made the slave an ideal tool, "flexible, unattached, and deracinated."[27] "To all members of the community, the slave existed only through the parasite holder, who was called the master."[28] The parasite feeds on the body of the slave, denying its human subjectivity in the process. As Saidiya Hartman puts it, "the slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body."[29] The human being who stands at the center of the liberal polity – and who would undertake McAfee's project of working through – thus exists through the negation of the non-human, objectified, enslaved.[30]

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[26] Here Wilderson joins arguments by Sylvia Wynter about the constitutive exclusion of Blackness from the supposedly universal category of the human. See Wynter, "Human Being as Noun."
[27] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 337.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.
[30] This echoes the terminology of captive bodies developed by Hortense Spillers, who calls attention to the role of Black women in sustaining the racial order: Spillers,

In the light of Wilderson's argument, the institutions of liberal democracy or democratic practices of working through serve only a white desire for power ultimately premised on anti-blackness. An anti-Black economy of desire sustains the hegemony of whiteness and its corresponding institutions by "saturat[ing] the collective unconscious."[31] In Jared Sexton's words, a libidinal economy "underwrites and sutures" the social dynamics of the liberal polity.[32] White desire requires Blacks as "inert props" for its satisfaction.[33] Such desire seeks not only the surplus value extractable from a slave-based economy; it also seeks reinforcement of sexual and political hegemony. The Black Man is a "sentient implement to be joyously deployed," as David Marriott writes.[34] "What will these white people do to my flesh today?" Wilderson asks, "Anything they want."[35]

The racist unconscious cannot be articulated, let alone worked through. "The collective unconscious," Wilderson writes, describing Hartman's argument in *Scenes of Subjection*, "did not recognize consent as a possession of the slave."[36] While slavery has formally ended, the collective unconscious underpins disavowal of Black injury. Blacks are not people, neither holders nor bearers of rights and claims that might be violated. Blacks function as implements. "Who ever heard of an injured plow?" Wilderson writes.[37] The racial saturation of the collective unconscious even produces in Blacks a repressed hatred of the self. A "white" unconscious provides "the only semblance of psychic integration." Even the Black embraces the white ideal, destroying itself in the process. As David Marriott puts it,"What do you do with an unconscious that hates you?"[38]

In this account, the only available psychic health – if it can be called that – depends on adjustment to the reality of Black death and its corresponding structural existence in the production of (white) humanity. As Wilderson explains, "The violence of social death (slavery) is actually subtended to the production of the psychic health of all those who are not slaves."[39] The psychic health of democratic maturity, on this reading, disavows its vampiric dependency on Black suffering. In such a world, "Black death functions as

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"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* (Summer 1987): 64 - 81.

[31] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 13.

[32] Jared Sexton, "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique* 90 (Spring 2015): 159 - 178, 167. Wilderson references Sexton's argument in his text.

[33] Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020), 15.

[34] Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 167. Wilderson also references Marriott's argument in his text.

[35] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 304.

[36] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 191.

[37] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 225.

[38] Marriott, *On Black Men*, 56.

[39] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 224.

national therapy."[40] McAfee's democracy as therapy cannot account for the ways in which anti-Black violence is therapeutic to white democracy.

The anti-Black unconscious thus precludes the practices of solidarity that democracy requires. Revolutionary theorists might try to illustrate solidarity in political interests such as shared subjection to systemic oppression, but they fail to confront "the way the unconscious mind refuses to calibrate with political interests."[41] The unconscious remains structured by anti-Blackness. Genuine liberation necessitates a "politics of refusal" so deep and so revolutionary that it appears as "the embrace of disorder and incoherence."[42]

Wilderson's arguments leave democratic theorists at a loss. Anti-Blackness prevents any solidarity between Blacks and non-Blacks; the constitutive exclusion of Blacks from Humanity precludes any working through of past trauma. Even when "at the table," Blacks will not be fellow human beings; they are and will be objects incapable of intersubjectivity. "Anti-Black violence is a paradigm of oppression for which there is no coherent form of redress, other than Frantz Fanon's 'the end of the world," Wilderson tells fellow activists of color at a gathering in Copenhagen's Folkets Hus.[43] In other words, the construct of the human, the libidinal economy that underwrites this, and the political institutions constructed on the basis of this libidinal economy must fall in order for anti-Blackness to end.

Yet Wilderson's commitment to "the end of the world" coexists, perhaps uneasily, with his participation in movements for liberation in the extant world – as evidenced by his addressing fellow activists in Copenhagen – as well as a broader concern for what he calls "mak[ing] it through the day."[44] Wilderson's emphasis on practices of getting through, which he associates with the praxis of Black psychologists and psychoanalysts, suggests that social death is not fully descriptive or determinative of Black experience.[45] The often-times unacknowledged clinical context for Afropessimism appears originally in the work of Fanon, which posits a structural lack within the psycho-political imaginary that can never be fully worked through. Instead, the emphasis is on "getting through," pursuing a kind of infra-politics of community survival that helps Black people endure the constant injuries of an anti-Black world. Yet these survival tactics can be seen to create a revolutionary space simply by articulating the impossibility of Black life. As Jasmine Syedullah writes, "pessimism is most powerful as an unrelenting

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[40] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 224.
[41] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 244.
[42] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 250.
[43] Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 171.
[44] "We're trying to destroy the world" Anti-Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III." https://thebasebk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/frank-b-wilderson-iii-were-trying-to-destroy-the-world-antiblackness-police-violence-after-ferguson.pdf. Accessed May 20, 2022.
[45] Nancy Luxon makes a similar move in her evaluation of David Marriott's reading of the work of Frantz Fanon: Luxon, "The Disalienating Praxis of Frantz Fanon," *Cultural Critique* 113 (Fall 2021), 165 - 193, 185.

political process of coming back to life."[46] The unresolved paradox in Wilderson is in how a shared intramural understanding of social death does not asphyxiate Black life but rather implies an ongoing praxis of life against death.[47]

In the next section we engage the paradox of such life against death to develop an account of the unconscious that centers an erotic and embodied politics whose significance neither McAfee nor Wilderson has fully considered. For McAfee, liberal democracy has failed to live up to its potential; for Wilderson, however, its potential has always been predicated on anti-Black violence and therefore must be rejected *tout court*. While they might then appear incommensurable, these authors each usefully names obstacles to greater democratic flourishing. However, they do not yet speak to the desire for such flourishing that remains largely unconscious in a time of democratic frustration.

The Unconscious as a Refuge for Democratic Desire: Norman O. Brown

We now begin to sketch an alternative reading of the unconscious and its possible relationship to democracy, indebted to the work of Norman O. Brown.[48] Brown's reading of the unconscious is rooted in a re-appreciation of Freud's concept of primary narcissism, understood as the source of plentitude and of connection to the world. This in turn informs a vision of politics less disfigured by repression as well as a more multifaceted account of desire and its pathways, which could surmount historical patterns of violence and oppression (in tension with both McAfee and Wilderson). Our reading of the unconscious opens a theory of auto- and allo-plastic adaptation, which names the basic instinct to shape both self (auto) and world (allo) in ways that demand and enable a realization of the desire for power, which can only be achieved and sustained collectively. In this section, we trace Brown's reading of the unconscious; in the following section, we expand on the radical and participatory democratic politics that flesh out this articulation by turning to the work of Sheldon Wolin.

For us, Brown's value comes from his focus on repression of the desire for power as the starting point for understanding human civilization. As Brown writes: "Man is the

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[46] Syedullah, "'When I Fall': A Reparation of Despair," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 128 - 134, 133.

[47] George Shulman raises similar questions in his engagement with Wilderson: Shulman, "Theorizing Life Against Death," *Contemporary Political Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 118 - 128.

[48] Brown is hard to characterize within existing psychoanalytic debates. His centering of plentitude puts him at odds with Lacanian traditions that emphasize lack. While Brown sits more comfortably with object relations theorists such as Michael Balint or D.W. Winnicott, his allegiance to Freud's account of primary narcissism belies this resemblance. Brown's work is perhaps best characterized as a radical reread of Freud, much like Erich Fromm or Herbert Marcuse, notwithstanding Brown's debts to cross-cultural mystical traditions. Brown's radical reread of Freud also resembles feminist critiques of Freud's Oedipal politics, which have no place for motherhood or for the feminine.

animal which represses himself and which creates culture or society in order to repress himself."[49] The other side of repression, however, is desires for self-determination that are made unconscious through humankind's super-egoic and cultural masochism. For Brown, the unconscious is best understood as a reservoir of desire to reshape self and world. Brown invokes Freud when describing this desire in terms of the pleasure principle and primary narcissism; for Brown, the demand left behind through repression is the inherently erotic demand for joy, play, and pleasure—for the polymorphous perversity that he locates developmentally in the narcissism of the infant. Contrary to the popular understanding of narcissism as self-centeredness (secondary narcissism), primary narcissism refers to the infant's inability to distinguish itself from other objects.[50] While for McAfee, the world tragically frustrates the infant's desire, leading to its repression and the end of plenum, Brown says that "the Garden of Eden is real, and we have all been there," when as infants our body was a polymorphous pleasure-body. As he puts it, "in infancy [the human] tasted the fruit of the tree of life, and knows that it is good, and never forgets."[51] The demand for pleasure is simultaneously the demand for playful connection and association with the world, reflective of a lost feeling "which embraced the universe and expressed an inseparable connection of the ego with the external world."[52] For Brown, association with others is not a replacement for primary narcissism (as it seemed to be for Freud) but the latter's telos. Once again, far from the popular understanding of narcissism as grandiosity and an inability to relate, for Brown narcissism is both a sense of plentitude *and* connection to the world that can serve as the basis for radical critique and praxis in the name of a *post-tragic* form of existence.

For Brown, primary narcissism does not haunt so much as inspire: the repressed pleasure principle does not seek regressive fusion through the return of an undifferentiated state of plenum, but instead identifies "a way out of the human neurosis" through the appearance of a "sensuous and erotic" body of "self-enjoyment."[53] Importantly, this does not imply a specter of non-cognitive or non-discursive bliss but a thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting body in touch with its own powers and in touch with the *source* of those powers, i.e. the erotic drive. In this respect, McAfee's vision of democratic maturity carries more than a hint of pessimism by acceding to Freud's view of inescapable discontent within human culture — namely a "strengthening of the intellect" and an "internalization of the aggressive impulses" — alongside a forsaking of so-called childish things.[54] But it is precisely those "childish things" that animate human life and, under repressive conditions, persist within the unconscious. As Brown says,

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[49] Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), 9.
[50] This highlights a clear contrast with Jean LePlanche for whom narcissism is a function of the ego; for Brown, "narcissistic love is fundamentally a desire for pleasurable activity of one's own body": Brown, *Life Against Death*, 45.
[51] Brown, 31.
[52] Quoted in Brown, *Life Against Death*, 45.
[53] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 311, 314.
[54] Brown, *Life Against Death,* 153.

quoting Freud, "only a wish . . . can possibly set our psychic apparatus in motion," and the basic wish is to recapture plentitude and union in a socially realizable form.[55]

Brown's work offers a philosophical anthropology that restores desire and plentitude, as opposed to renunciation and lack, to pride of place in the human motivational schema. Human desire is here interpreted as a narcissistic wish for self-enjoyment in, and *as,* the world. Desire, moreover, is best understood not in terms of possessiveness or conquest but as erotic allegiance to what Spinoza called a body "fitted for many things," i.e. the polymorphously perverse body that "delights in the activity of all of its organs."[56] For Brown, desire is *of the body*, and in particular the body of "play and erotic exuberance," which then demands a world as exuberant and playful as itself.[57]

Brown maintains that Eros is inherently narcissistic. By interpreting Eros as narcissism Brown appears to risk solipsism, in which the self becomes the center of the universe through delusional fantasies and wishes. Once again, however, this is a misreading of narcissism, however—or "plenum"—because the need for the other is built into its experience as a need for mirroring *without which the self could not appear*. In fact, narcissism goes beyond the dualisms of self-other and subject-object; for Freud, narcissism "makes a representation of happy love…[which] corresponds to the primal condition in which object-libido and ego-libido cannot be distinguished."[58] Narcissistic love is closer to what Nietzsche describes as the "blessed" or "wholesome healthy selfishness that wells from a powerful soul . . . around which everything becomes a mirror."[59] Drawing upon William Blake, Brown sees narcissism in Dionysian terms: "the cistern contains, the fountain overflows."[60]

By planting narcissistic Eros at the root of his theory, Brown emphasizes plenitude as opposed to loss and mourning, and therefore he disparages "working through" as a means of adjustment to repressive reality. For Brown, psychoanalysis testifies not to idiosyncratic deviations from the healthy social norm but to *universal* neurosis. As he puts it, "neurosis is not an occasional aberration; it is not just in other people; it is in us, and in us all the time."[61] In particular, neurosis is the living effect of the repression of narcissism, with its history of polymorphous plenitude and its (unwritten) future. Therefore we have to understand psychoanalysis in terms of cultural critique, as opposed to its common, clinical manifestation in individual therapy. If it is restricted to the latter space, psychoanalysis becomes akin to the catechisms of a government censor.

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[55] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 8.
[56] Brown, *Life Against Death,* 48.
[57] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 51. Spinoza has been a touchstone for contemporary critical theory in other registers. For instance, see Judith Butler, "The Desire to Live," in *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (New York: Penguin, 2009).
[58] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 44.
[59] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 51.
[60] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 49.
[61] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 6.

Instead, for Brown, clinical psychoanalysis is ideally a practice whereby the forsaken possibilities of human happiness are detected and compiled into an arsenal for cultural critique. Psychoanalysis is political, then, not because it provides a practice of individual or even collective therapy that could become more socially available, but because it directly aims to inform and transform human culture.

Narcissism, according to Brown, presses not only for the realization of the erotic drive within the individual subject, but calls for the entire world to imitate this plentitude. Repressed or fugitive desires require "enactment"; desires must "go out into external reality before they can be perceived by consciousness."[62] To know thyself is, then, only partially a cognitive or discursive matter; it requires erotic attempts to reconstruct self ("auto-plastic") and reality ("allo-plastic") such that both can be loved as they once were. As Brown puts it, "only when we can love the world can we have true knowledge of ourselves."[63] Knowing thyself implies the restoration of a "pure pleasure ego," which in its fullest embodiment, again, is characterized by a feeling of interconnectedness between the ego and the external world.[64] In other words, narcissism is not to be forsaken in the name of the reality principle; rather, the reality principle is to be reconstructed on the basis of narcissism.

Of course, as argued by Wilderson, the world seems far from loveable. For Brown, this condition means that we remain consciously ignorant of ourselves and of the possibilities of life. Adaptations to this reality — or attempts to make it slightly less damaging — merely intensify repression and its concomitant anxieties. Psychoanalysis's midwife function, then, begins by attuning us to these compromises and their maladaptive effects; in turn this causes "an immense withdrawal of libido from the macrocosm of the external world" towards the "microcosm of the internal world."[65] One might call this a kind of critical, preparatory narcissism; if patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel, narcissistic withdrawal is the first refuge for an erotic power that contains within it an inherent demand to change the world.

To retreat from an unlovable world "represents an advance in reality thinking," as against the dictates of the reality principle. In this respect, Brown and Wilderson form common company. However, withdrawal becomes its own form of repression—and even a "private psychosis" — if it does not take a secondary step by "mak[ing] external reality such that it can be loved."[66] Auto-plastic eros of polymorphous perversity is simultaneously an allo-plastic love for a world that might yet be. This is where Wilderson's call towards infra-politics of "getting by" shows its limitations. Narcissism inherently presses for the mobilization of built-up libido in order to transform reality. In this respect, narcissism is a political project.

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[62] Brown, *Life Against Death,* 148.
[63] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 151.
[64] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 45.
[65] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 151.
[66] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 151.

Even though Brown gives us a novel reading of the unconscious, the political vision that follows from this is thin, even on a generous interpretation.[67] Brown's account of narcissism and the unconscious requires something that Brown was not positioned to provide — namely, a theory of democratic power. To flesh out a democratic reading of the unconscious, we turn in the next section to Sheldon Wolin's theory of democracy, spanning both its fugitive appearances and its concern for forms.

## Democracy as Polymorphous Perversity: Sheldon Wolin

Sheldon Wolin's defense of radical democracy acquires new significance in light of Brown's reading of the unconscious. Wolin's account of democratic transgressions in ancient Athens can be read as eruptions of democratic narcissism against the repressive confines of an undemocratic reality principle. Bringing Brown into conversation with Wolin positions us to develop a democratic reading of the unconscious that constellates seemingly disparate attempts to revivify public life and political imagination in the contemporary world. The account of democracy we offer here helps to stage a more productive, agonal conversation between competing — some say incommensurable — accounts of the unconscious.[68] It does so by joining together a call for democratic maturity and forms (McAfee), an account of polymorphously perverse, narcissistic eros (Brown), and a reversal of values by which the socially abject come to fashion a collective identity that changes the world (an appeal, perhaps, to Wilderson).

Wolin's writings over decades centered on the concept of "the political," which he defined in terms of "moments of commonality" that arise when "collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity."[69] The political is distinguished from "politics" by virtue of its being, historically, "episodic, [and] rare" whereas politics—contestations over public resources and positions of authority—is "ceaseless and endless."[70] Democracy is "one among many versions of the political" but it is linked to its competitors because it is "the one idea that most other versions pay lip service to."[71] Democracy, as Wolin defines it, is a "project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens" and with their "possibilities for becoming political beings."[72]

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[67] George Shulman criticizes Brown for replacing politics with ethics, abstracting from the conditions of political life: Shulman, *American Prophecy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12. See further Herbert Marcuse's review of Brown's *Love's Body* as well as Brown's response: Marcuse, "Love Mystified: A Critique of Norman O. Brown," *Commentary* (February 1967) and Brown, "A Reply to Marcuse," *Commentary* (March 1967).
[68] We thank George Shulman for pushing us on this point.
[69] Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays,* edited by Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 100.
[70] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 100.
[71] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 100.
[72] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 100.

These influential definitions take on a new light when seen through Brown's concepts of narcissism and polymorphous perversity. For Brown, the substantial demand of the unconscious is for the narcissistic, pure pleasure body, enacted through polymorphous Eros that is inherently relational. Brown's invocation of auto- and allo-plastic adaptation resonates with Wolin's call for collective self-realization in moments of the political, while also suggesting transformational possibilities for democracy beyond its fugitive appearances.

Wolin's account inspires our *democratic* reading of the unconscious, understood as the desire or demand for *power*, equally shared and mutual sum, realized through politics as *play* and *mirroring*. The democratic possibilities of the unconscious have been obscured — repressed — through both the Western political tradition and by the tradition of political theory. Wolin was sensitive to the symptoms resulting from this repression — expressed in widespread feelings of powerlessness and other indicators of democratic discontent — although he lacked a psychoanalytic vocabulary for understanding and explicating them.

Wolin's understanding of the emergence of democracy through transgression helps elaborate this democratic reading of the unconscious. Transgressive democratic moments, such as the Athenian revolution, reclaim the memory of collective power, which is made unconscious through repression. This interpretation helps clarify a seemingly confusing claim in Wolin where he argues that participants in fugitive democratic moments are "renewing the political . . . without necessarily intending it."[73] "The political" for Wolin, then, includes an unconscious element that transcends yet motivates particular acts of democratic renewal. Reading transgression as a response to the repression of narcissism provides a psycho-dynamic account of radical democracy, explaining why the desire for democratic power persists despite its near constant historical suppression.

The democratic reading of the unconscious is both a fugitive reality and a fugitive concept, because theories of political development largely ignore evidence for earlier, democratic forms of life while simultaneously linking political rationalization with the development of large states marked by hierarchical institutions.[74] Political theory similarly has a history of condemning democracy as a form*less* form of government, marked by license and excess, and counseling a kind of realism that amounts to repressing dreams of (democratic) happiness.[75] However, by arguing for a necessary level of repression, these articulations of politics lack an effective response to symptoms of social distress such as widespread feelings of powerlessness, civic withdrawal, and/or

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[73] Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 106.
[74] Yet see Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Disappearance of Hierarchy* (Chico: AK Press, 2005 [1982]); James C. Scott, *Against the Grain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017); David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2021).
[75] As Brown put it, "realists" are those who "apparently are made happy if they can prove . . . that their children and their children's children are condemned to be as unhappy as they are" (*Life Against Death*, 34).

"extremist" violence.[76] For Wolin, these civic maladies exist because current political systems "[do] not produce (popular) power."[77] The demand for power, then—for *kratos*—is an explicitly political version of Brown's demand for pleasure, and they are both "polymorphous" and, by the verdict of the reality principle, perverse.[78]

On the other hand, for Wolin democracy is not only rooted in rebellion against the "abuse and misuse of one's powers by others," but also requires institutional forms and civic practices.[79] Historically, for Wolin, democracy has always appeared through acts of transgression, yet while democracy originates in reclaiming the power taken from the people, this reclamation generates a collective *form* of power. Wolin's account of democracy in ancient Athens allows us to better see the many *forms* of polymorphous perversity. For Wolin, the demos in Athens — the heretofore excluded strata of Athenian society — was "driven by the needs of its nature" to strain against the limits of a society dominated by elites.[80] Through a long history of "popular activities of rebellion, disobedience, [and] protest," the demos constructed a political consciousness and identity. Only after this long struggle of what we would call "auto-plastic" gathering was the demos able to become a political force and engage in the "allo-plastic" activities of reshaping the political world. As Wolin puts it, transgression enables the political, as the demos "attempts to shape the political system in order to enable itself to emerge, to make possible a new actor, collective in nature."[81] Although Wolin insists, here and elsewhere, that this process is an evanescent experience, in Athens it reached full expression as it "succeeded in developing its own political culture" and the demos "became a political animal with its own paideia."[82]

This democratic paideia involved creating multiple *forms* of democratic emergence,[83] characterized by both equality and participation. Equality and commonality are (re)discovered during moments of the political. In Athens, the discovery and commitment to equality were articulated through practices of *isonomia*, equality of the laws, and *isēgoria*, equality of address. Yet to realize this commonality, the political had to take form in a dynamic way to "absorb" demotic energies, to give them not merely *a*

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[76] Sheldon Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays,* edited by Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 379.
[77] Wolin, "The People's Two Bodies," 380.
[78] Lucy Cane has noted that Wolin's *account* of democracy is "polymorphous." We argue here that democracy *itself* is polymorphous, akin to Brown's understanding of the erotically-charged body. See Cane, *Sheldon Wolin and Democracy: Seeing Through Loss* (London: Routledge, 2020).
[79] Sheldon Wolin, "Norm and Form," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays,* edited by Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 97.
[80] Sheldon Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," in *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, edited by Nicholas Xenos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 53.
[81] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 54.
[82] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 66.
[83] Our language of democratic emergence parallels Bonnie Honig's in *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

form but *many forms* (poly-morphs). The law courts, the assembly, demes, festivals, civic drama, and civic competitions: all these forms developed the demos not only as individual citizens but as a collective.[84] In this light, the polis is a kind of play-pen, a space that ideally enables the demos to "emerge" and to continually re-discover itself.[85] "A participatory and egalitarian politics . . . serves the political education of the demos," and this democratic paideia is both rooted in and in*forms* democratic desire.[86]

Wolin's reading of Athenian political forms and formation shows how polymorphous desire includes practices of political education akin to McAfee's call for democratic maturity. The Athenian demos was repeatedly associated with the physical characteristics of the body, in order to dismiss the grievances of the masses. According to Wolin, Plato was obsessed with the "elemental, physical quality of democratic power," likening the demos to a "great strong beast" whose anarchic desires famously dragged the polis towards tyranny.[87] For Wolin, this characterization is both a kind of homage to the actual, historical power of the Athenian demos and a disavowal of the ways in which the demos formed itself, in part by dealing with destabilizing elites. The so-called "beast" of the Athenian demos was motivated by conscious and unconscious striving for *kratos*—in fact Wolin says that the demos "*exists* as striving," and yet its deliberations required "repressing immediate gratifications . . . while recognizing the value of taking care of arrangements so that they will endure."[88] The Athenian demos fashioned itself into "a different being whose essence is civic . . .[and] the beast has somehow become a deliberating citizen."[89]

Wolin's attention to the dangerous edge of demotic energy also warns of the dangers of unbridled desire in ways that anticipate the violent anti-Blackness theorized by Wilderson. The two centuries of Athens' democratic flourishing, while continuous, were shadowed by moments in which the desire for power merged and transformed into a desire for domination: for example, Athenians insisting to the Melians that might makes right.[90] The Athenian democracy was, as M.I. Finley argued, a *slave* democracy dependent on what Wilderson would describe as racialized libidinal economies and

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[84] Josiah Ober's work details the institutional structure of Athenian democracy in many places. Especially relevant here is *Democracy and Knowledge*, with its account of the "multi-civic selves" (in Wolin's language) that democracy developed through many sites and modes of participation in democratic life. Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[85] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 54.

[86] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 56.

[87] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 64.

[88] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 61.

[89] Wolin, "Transgression, Equality, and Voice," 64.

[90] This is Wolin's suggestion, but it has empirical support in the broad analysis of Ober as well as the finer-grained study of *pleonexia* offered by Ryan Balot. Josiah Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Ryan Balot, *Greed and Injustice in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

partitions.[91] In such situations, power becomes abstracted, threatening to undo polymorphous expressions of democratic narcissism.[92] The inherent expansiveness within narcissistic eros can lead the demos away from the auto-plastic work of being in touch with the body and its powers by fixating desire on fantasies of domination external to the body, which incite democratic desire but paralyze its further development. Although the end of Athenian democracy came by other means, this possible pathway for the undoing of the democratic body provides a necessary interpretive caution for understanding contemporary threats to democracy.

Conclusion: Erotic Desire as Democratic Power

To understand the rising threats to, yet persistent aspirations for, democracy, one needs to confront the politics of the unconscious. Our reading of the unconscious points to the ways that democracy has not served as a vehicle for collective political desire. Political actors can struggle over what happens in extant democracy, but the idea that democracy can touch and come to reconfigure our everyday lives -- and thereby channel and express the basic desire for power -- is fugitive. This may lead some to conclude that democracy is past the point of no return; in other words, that the culture of democracy may appear either so thin or deranged it *cannot* serve as an adequate vehicle for carrying hopes of emancipation or flourishing. Yet here we address ourselves to those who keep the faith that democracy is not only a mechanism for curtailing abuses of power but the best expression of the desire for shared power with others.

A democratic reading of the unconscious emphasizes the repressed desire for shared power by a collective actor. This democratic reading of the unconscious rests upon a concept of erotic desire and accepts the inherent narcissism of this desire, understood as the attempt to recapture a lost plenitude, which is both onto-genetically prior to and potentially transcendent of McAfee's fear of breakdown. Moreover, and unlike the world-ending apocalypse at which Wilderson appears to leave us, this democratic reading of the unconscious offers what Brown calls "an open stretch of realization."[93] Brown's interpretation of primary narcissism paired with Wolin's account of the repressed desire for shared power yields the embodied and polymorphous democratic practices evident in exemplary democratic forms such as those Wolin describes in ancient Athens. We argue that democratic power requires narcissistic eros; it provides the fundamental drive to develop that most basic dynamic of democracy, namely, the people's capacity to do things.[94]

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[91] See also Michael Hanchard, *The Spectre of Race: How Discrimination Haunts Western Democracy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018).
[92] See J. Peter Euben, "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory." *Political Theory* 14, No. 3 (August, 1986), 359-90.
[93] Brown, *Life Against Death*, 305
[94] Josiah Ober, "The Original Meaning of Democracy: Capacity to Do Things, not Majority Rule," *Constellations* 15, No. 1 (2008). Our psychoanalytic account of the creative power of the people could be fruitfully contrasted with Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis or the work of William Connolly on swarming and creative micro-politics. Allo- and auto-plasticity differ from Deleuzean invocations of creativity, openness, and

This is not to deny ongoing challenges to democratic power. Hierarchies that structure this power can prevent its democratic realization. The heterogeneity of the demos can also preclude the felt efficacy of its power, in particular for persistently marginalized groups within the demos. Wolin's turn to Athens is suggestive but not determinative: the Athenian polis can illustrate how we might realize practices of equality – *isonomia*, *isēgoria*, and *isokratia* – yet it does not give specific instructions.[95] McAfee's attention to institutionalized spaces and practices that are deliberative and participatory holds promise, so long as these spaces and practices are not overly determined by a horizon of integration. Syedullah's reading of pessimism also suggests how confrontation with the limitations of racialized and settler colonial democracy can prompt re-imagination of collective life. Yet the specific shape of the political work that follows from these accounts remains unrealized.

To locate the varieties of embodied practices of narcissistic energy that could open pathways for the expression of democratic desire, we point to Audre Lorde's suggestion that being in touch with the erotic makes one less willing to accept powerlessness and resignation. Lorde directs attention towards political movements that explicitly enlist eros in both its auto- and allo-plastic manifestations to fashion collective identity. Lorde's regimes of self-care for women struggling against violent oppression mobilize auto-plastic practices toward allo-plastic ones: listening to one's body and journaling, for example, help repair not just individuals but the demos.[96] Self-knowledge serves an understanding of one's political position and possibilities for power, pointing toward the ways the world must change such that eros is no longer exclusively a private, personal affair.

What adrienne maree brown calls "pleasure activism" -- taking pleasure "as a measure of freedom" – illustrates another pathway for cultivating democratic desire. Writing to activists already engaged in social movements around the world, brown describes how practices of self-affirmation that begin with loving one's body and accepting polymorphous sexual desire support and sustain activists' whole lives. Dressing well, eating well, and self-acceptance become political when they enable people to show up for each other. Alexis Pauline Gumbs broadens these to include practices of sistering and kinship built around shared joy and pleasure. In other words, democratic practices

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fluidity because of its emphasis on forms or containers that channel and express democratic desire. This is precisely what Wolin adds to Brown. See Deleuze and Guatarri, *Anti-Oedipus* and Connolly, *Facing the Planetary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[95] For some suggestions about contemporary manifestations of Athenian practices of equality, see Joel Alden Schlosser, "Herodotean Democracies," *CHS Research Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (2016). http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:hlnc.essay:SchlosserJ.Herodotean_Democracies.2016 (accessed September 14, 2022).

[96] Lorde, *A Burst of Light*. For elaboration of this, see Ali Aslam, *To Turn the World Around: Democracy and the Politics of Repair*, forthcoming.

must cultivate fire, to paraphrase Audre Lorde: self-care work allows one to "be the meteor."[97]

Activist and poetic accounts of the relationships between pleasure and politics take on new significance in the light of our reading of the unconscious, which emphasizes the inherent narcissism of collective desire realizable only through embodied, often transgressive practices of connection and expansion. To further elaborate these possibilities, we would suggest dialogue between these Black feminist practices and psychoanalytic accounts of play and embodiment exemplified not only by Norman O. Brown but also by D.W. Winnicott and Marion Milner.[98] These practices unlock the twisted pathways of desire that cross the contemporary moment and herald an erotic democratic politics capable of transfiguring the disempowered demos into a polymorphous body politic.

Our democratic reading of the unconscious points in several additional directions for future inquiry: deeper histories of democratic transgression and instantiation, fleshing out Wolin's skeletal account of fugitive democracy to move beyond a narrowly-delimited "West" that began in Athens and is now constrained by modernity and its racialized partitions; grappling with the category of the human at the center of political thinking and practice in order to address its earthly entanglements; further elaborations of the psychodynamics of radical democracy, with particular attention to auto- and allo-plastic adaptations that channel erotic desire toward democratic worldbuilding; and the cataloging of emergent strategies and practices that renew and in*form* this erotic desire. All of these lines of inquiry could be constellated around — and help to build out — a more positive and non-defensive account of desire for democracy.

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[97] Lorde, *A Burst of Light*, 71. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's articulations of the aliveness of Black sociality offer further starting points for political and theoretical imagination and elaboration. As George Shulman puts it, anticipating our suggestions here: "To engage the rancor pervasive in society and develop a vitalizing attachment to life's wayward energies, a democratic *counterculture* also must exceed a logic of harm and redress and its juridical and moral framework. Moten's ante-political party -- in which public performance, festive anger, and playful assembly are pleasurable features of life in entanglement -- thus models energies and gratifications that could transform the practice and meaning of democratic participation in power" (Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals," p. 31; Emphasis Shulman's).

[98] See, e.g., Milner's *The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* (London: Routledge, 2017). Bonnie Honig's use of Winnicott in *Public Things* suggests another direction for such future inquiries.

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