

Introduction

What I have learned as a farmer I have learned also as a writer and vice versa. I have farmed as a writer and written as a farmer. This is an experience resistant to any kind of simplification. I will go ahead and call it complexification. When I am called, as to my astonishment I sometimes am, a devotee of “simplicity” . . . I am obliged to reply that I gave up the simple life when I left New York City in 1964 and came here. In New York, I lived as a passive consumer . . . whereas here I supply many of my needs from this place by my work (and pleasure) and am responsible besides for the care of the place. My point is that when one passes from any abstract order . . . to the daily life and work of one’s own farm, one passes from a relative simplicity into a complexity that is irreducible except by disaster and ultimately is incomprehensible. It is the complexity of the life of a place uncompromisingly itself, which is at the same time the life of the world, of all Creation. One meets not only . . . the wildness of the world, but also the limitations of one’s knowledge, intelligence, character, and bodily strength. To do this, of course, is to accept the place as an influence . . . as a part of the informing ambience of one’s mind and imagination.

—Wendell Berry¹

This is a book about death—and life. Perhaps better put, this is a book about the politics of death and life.² We hope that the politics exhibited

1. Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 47–48.

2. In *After Christendom?* I (Hauerwas) wrote, “Genuine politics is about the art of dying. That places the church at cross purposes with the politics of liberalism, built as it is on the denial of death and sacrifice” (43). I am not sure I knew what I was talking about

in this book—a politics we try to enact with the joint authorship—is one that refuses to let death dominate our living. We believe that the people at the center of the book—Ella Baker, Bob Moses, Will Campbell, Jean Vanier, Ernesto Cortes; as well as the movements, organizing efforts, and communities such as SNCC (in its early days), the IAF, and L’Arche—represent a politics of life. They do so because they refuse the seduction of a politics that attempts to defeat death by promising “results.” Even as the more frequently recognized ends for which they struggle (e.g., education, wages, jobs, health care, infrastructure) are of great importance, we find these people most exemplary for how, with patient intensity, they cultivate modes of attention and political engagement that perform a redemption that is otherwise than immortality.

We also believe that politics is slow and frustrating work. It is so because it is not finally about results (though good results, too, are difficult to come by in a world of subjugative powers). Politics is about relationships between people dead and alive, relationships that are as painful as they are unavoidable. Yet much of recent political theory, including accounts and justifications of democracy, has tried to avoid the subject of death and by so doing has put forward accounts of politics that are, ironically, insufficiently political. We are therefore very sympathetic with critiques of liberal political theory (such as Sheldon Wolin’s and William Connolly’s) that take liberalism to task for being insufficiently “political.”³ We think the liberal avoidance of the kind of politics we advocate

when I wrote those sentences, but I was under the influence of Augustine. I suspect I was continuing to reflect on the argument I had begun in *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering*, where I tried to understand why the suffering and death of children seems to render our world unintelligible. Drawing on Alfred Killilea’s *Politics of Being Mortal*, I argued that there was a relation between our use of medicine to try to get ourselves out of life alive, and liberal political theory and practice. I suggested that the fear of death is at the heart of the liberal democratic project just to the extent the liberal project tries to secure cooperation between individuals who have nothing in common other than their fear of death (123). As a result, one of the legitimating characteristics of liberal regimes is to provide “the best medical care available” to ensure that we will not have to die early. I wrote *Naming the Silences* before I had read Foucault, but I suspect his influence was in the air. In an odd way I regard *Naming the Silences* (renamed by the publisher using only the subtitle) as my most extended discussion of political theory. I should also point out that *After Christendom?*, which was given the subtitle, by the publisher, of *How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*, was written in 1991. The 1999 edition has a new “preface” I wish some might read before they take too seriously the subtitle.

3. In *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy*, Coles offers a

has everything to do with the general tendency of much contemporary political theory and practice to avoid (if not to deny) the reality of death. Empire, global capitalism, the megastate, and even many forms of cosmopolitanism name systems of power that frequently proliferate death in the name of a life that would be free of it. No less pertinent are the quotidian practices of corruption and oblivion that are conditions of these systems' possibility and integral to (but not exhaustive of) the soulcraft through which we are all brought into being. The deaths we organize our lives to resist and escape, then, are not only the big ones that await each of us at the end, but are also (and relatedly) those that occur in the passing away of boundaries and identities in our vulnerable, lived encounters with the world of others and things.

That our subject is life and death should make less odd that this is a book written by a Christian (Hauerwas) and a sympathetic but non-Christian radical democrat (Coles).⁴ Christianity, at least Christianity not determined by Constantinian or capitalist desires, is training for a dying that is good. Such good dying is named in the gospel as trial, cross, and resurrection. Radical democracy names the intermittent and dispersed traditions of witnessing, resisting, and seeking alternatives to the politics of death wrought by those bent on myriad forms of immortality-as-conquest. When it has managed to keep a critical reflection upon itself, radical democracy can be seen to be (in the words of Ani DiFranco) "working for the better good (which is good, at its best)."⁵ Both radical democracy and Christianity are lived pedagogies of hope inspired and envisioned through memories of the "good, at its best." Such training is

critique of political liberalism that focuses on the way liberalism seeks to secure a politics built on the denial of its own tragic finitude. In the Rawlsian account, this denial is paradoxically constructed by forcing all political phenomena through the transformative eye of a needle hollowed out by the frequent repetition of a particular account of ubiquitous death wrought by the wars of religion and of how we can avoid their return.

4. "Radical democrat" is a term that we try to display in our discussions of SNCC and IAF. It receives extensive theoretical treatment in the chapter on Sheldon Wolin. In brief, radical democracy refers to political acts of tending to common goods and differences. Such acts are dynamically responsive to a world that always exceeds our terms and settled institutional forms. They always exceed state formations that claim to be the exemplary shape of democracy. If "democracy" were not so persistently deployed as a rhetorical weapon to advance so many anti-democratic institutions and practices, we could simply say "democrat." "Radical democrat" is a rhetorical effort to distance ourselves from the erosion of the term "democrat" that results from this deployment.

5. DiFranco, "Grand Canyon."

a resource for sustaining the politics of the everyday, that is, the politics of small achievements. If Coles is right, radical democracy is the politics of small achievements. Such a politics takes time, which suggests that there may be some deep connections between Christianity and radical democracy. This is surely the case given the death-determined politics of our time, the politics of compulsory speed, which assumes that we do not have the time to take the time to listen to one another or to remember the dead.

Make no mistake: Christianity and radical democracy are revolutionary. Yet we are convinced that there are no revolutions (only histrionic returns of the same or the worst) that would be above and beyond—rather than through—the fine grains of the politics of micro-relationships and small achievements. We yearn for radical changes to systems that are destroying the world. We lend our bodies and minds to a number of efforts that seek such changes. Yet we believe that the locus of energies and intelligent visions for such projects are nourished in the textures of relational care for the radical ordinary. By radical ordinary we gesture to the ways in which the inexhaustible complexities of everyday life forever call forth new efforts of attention, nurture, and struggle that exceed the elements of blindness that accompany even our best words and deeds. And we think that nourishing these textures of relational care ought to be a chief aspiration of genuinely revolutionary (which is to say, “resurrectionary”) politics. We think so, not just because these textures are sources for systemic change, but also because we take the devitalization of practices of relational care to be our deepest poverty. Yes, we are impatient for change. Yet we work to fashion this impatience into what Adrienne Rich calls a “wild patience,”⁶ which we learn from Jean Vanier, Dorothy Day, Ella Baker, Myles Horton, and Michel Foucault, the last of which enjoined a “patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.”⁷ For we are convinced that the change we can call good—and paradoxically the quickest good change possible—will come largely from those who have time to take time to listen to one another and to remember the dead. And we believe that good changes will be those that nourish the futures of peoples who can give time, because they have time to take time.

6. See Rich's book, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*.

7. Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 319.

This book is about listening. We have had to learn to listen to one another. We have also tried to listen to voices that may seem speechless, believing that they have something crucial to say to us if we are to escape the politics of speed. Listening not only takes time, but it also requires a trained vulnerability that does not come easily. Vulnerability means that our life is not under our control, which means we must learn to trust others if we are not only to survive but flourish.

Such a politics is in sharp contrast to the politics of fear that characterizes current American life.⁸ That such a culture of fear possesses Americans is, according to Talal Asad, not accidental. Drawing on the

8. For an astute analysis of the fear-driven character of American life after September 11, 2001, see Scott Bader-Saye's, *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*. Particularly important is Bader-Saye's "Appendix: The Deep Roots of Fear," in which he locates the current culture of fear after September 11, 2001, by way of Hobbes and Judith Shklar's work. Also worth reading is Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz's *America's Battle for God: A European Christian Looks at Civil Religion*. Particularly impressive is Müller-Fahrenholz's draft of a speech he wishes President Bush might have given in response to September 11, 2001. For example, he suggests what President Bush might have said:

The assaults have shown us something we needed to know: we are vulnerable. . . . The experience of this immense cruelty is, at the moment of such great suffering, also our moment of truth about the vulnerability we share with others. For now we can empathize with other people who live through civil wars for years and even decades. . . . What follows from this kind of knowledge that we have brought so much grief? Should we try to close this window of vulnerability? To do that would turn our country into a prison. . . . So we should say to the world: We will try to learn from this bitter lesson. There is no special status for the United States. We are, together with all peoples, guests on this planet, finite and mortal beings who are connected to each other, dependent on one another. . . . This implies the acknowledgment—and this may be the hardest task I ask of you today—that our vulnerability is also an expression of our failure to meet peoples in other parts of the world as the honest brokers for their needs. We need to accept our share in the injustices that are causing so much suffering. The evil is not simply out there; it is also with us and within us. For a long time we have held onto our sense of national innocence. But it now lies buried under the rubble of the Twin Towers in New York. (95–96)

Müller-Fahrenholz then observes that "people who want to be invulnerable must make themselves impenetrable. Their search for invincibility must be paid for with the lifeless shield of numbed emotions and intellectual inertia. While suppressing their own insecurities and needs, they are forced to concentrate all their powers on fending off real and imagined enemies. This leads to false conceptions of the stranger, the other, and to a distorted sense of one's own identity" (99). For what might be considered an extended commentary on such impenetrability and, in particular, on how we fear the stranger because we are strangers to ourselves, see Eric Santer's *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig*.

work of Roxanne Euben, Asad suggests that the jihadis—that is, those who carry out suicide bombings—reenact something paradoxically analogous to Hannah Arendt’s understanding of the profoundly this-worldly politics exemplified by the Greeks, in which men entered the public realm seeking something that they might have in common with others, in the hope of finding some permanence in life beyond their deaths. Arendt argued that this understanding of the world ended with the rise of Christianity and the fall of Rome, and that it cannot be resurrected. But according to Asad, Arendt rightly called our attention to the Greek understanding of political action that links human finitude, violent death, and political community, exactly because such linkages are so seldom acknowledged in liberal theory.⁹

According to Asad, the attempt to occlude the originating violence, an attempt that is at the heart of the founding of liberal states, hides from liberals the violence that founds the law. Even if liberals recognize the original violence that establishes the state, they assume such violence can be “redeemed by the progressive elimination of political exclusions.” But they fail to acknowledge that

violence is embedded in the very concept of liberty that lies at the heart of liberal doctrine. That concept presupposes that the morally independent individual’s natural right to violent self-defense is yielded to the state, and the state becomes the sole protector of individual liberties: abstracting the right to kill from domestic politics, denying to any agents other than states the right to kill at home and abroad. The right to kill is the right to behave in violent ways toward other people—especially toward citizens of foreign states at war, and toward the uncivilized, whose very existence is a threat to civilized order. In certain circumstances, killing others is necessary, so it seems, for the security it provides.¹⁰

Suicide bombers, terrorists, become therefore crucial descriptions to legitimate the regimes of death characteristic of the “civilized” cultures that we know as liberal democracies. Such regimes take as a given that the distinction between terrorism and war is obvious, thereby legitimating the defense of civilizations that “value life” against barbarians who do not “value life.”¹¹ Barbarians who do not value life are clearly “uncivilized,”

9. Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 57–58.

10. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

11. Asad provides a devastating critique of Walzer’s attempt to distinguish terror-

which means they must be defeated by those states that embody the advances in human subjectivity that stand against the darkness of death. Such a stance, according to Asad, means that the violence at the heart of liberal political doctrine (namely, the right to self-defense) cannot help but identify the liberal project as one committed to universal redemption. That is to say, “some humans have to be treated violently in order that humanity can be redeemed.”¹²

Calling attention to Asad’s understanding of the role suicide bombers play in the legitimating discourses of nationalistic fervor may seem “off subject” in a book committed to redirecting our attention to “small politics.” We hope, however, that readers will find our attempt to reclaim the significance of the radical ordinary to be directly relevant if we are to find a way to challenge the politics of death shaping the American fear of the unknown. We are without hope if there are no examples of an alternative politics to the politics of death. This book is an attempt to hold up the kind of examples we think we so desperately need if we are to escape death-driven political necessities.

We are impressed with the speech Müller-Faherholz (in footnote 6 above) conjures for an imaginary leader far wiser than most of those currently in power. And we think that in important ways, such leaders would be less likely to perpetuate the worst violence of U.S. imperialism. Moreover, we have lent, and likely will again lend, our support to elect such statespersons to office. Yet for several reasons we do not find—nor do we place—our primary hopes in such efforts, leaders, and locations of state power. First, even if leaders such as those Müller-Faherholz imagines ushered forth with such speeches, we wonder: Would there be many people who could really hear them? Indeed, there have been voices saying similar things, and they have been most often too little and too poorly heard. Second, we think that holding positions of great power in the economic polity is a lot like wearing Tolkien’s ring. The systemic forces of corruption dig deep into the soul and are enough to overwhelm most who—with good intentions—assume positions within the systems of power. This is not to deny that some good people are called to place their efforts there and should perhaps respond to such calls. Nor is it to deny

ism and war. See Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 31–32. I argued a case similar to Asad’s in a chapter entitled “The Non-Violent Terrorist: In Defense of Christian Fanaticism,” in *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*, 177–90.

12. Asad, *On Suicide Bombing*, 62–63.

that important policy shifts for the better can be generated by people in such positions. Yet we think hope (even in terms of narrower instrumental goals, let alone in terms of deeper relational transformation) lies in the emergence of a multitude of peoples enacting myriad forms of the politics of the radical ordinary in ways that, first, displace and relocate our human efforts to tend to each other in our commonalities and differences away from the megastate and corporate power; and, second, struggle (with intransigent suspicion) to radically transform these powers—where we cannot entirely displace them—so as to make them increasingly responsive to the pressures of people cultivating knowledge, power, and hope through relationships of everyday attentive reciprocity. We think that it is most vitally in and through concrete practices of tending to one another that people find the sources of renewal and sustenance for a life-affirming politics—one that provides the most hopeful wellspring for defeating the politics of death. The politics of death is a dense, dynamic, and finely woven mesh of destruction and fear. An alternative politics that cares for the commonalities, differences, and emergent irregularities of life must also be dense, molecular, supple, mobile, and trickster-like in its modes. It must maintain its “heavy foot” in the complexities of the radical ordinary—in the memories and specificities of what is found there—if it is to avoid the fantasies of “seeing like a state” and of “being like a Wal-Mart,” fantasies that not only threaten us but that are already plunging us into the new dark ages.

Memories. It is by collecting and retelling stories of radical ordinary political initiatives that have “done a new thing” and have resisted the politics of death that we inspire, nourish, and inform a dense and wild imagination, and an intransigent hope. Peacemaking, light-bringing, and joy are always already springing forth everywhere—in spite of the disasters. We must retrain ourselves to witness and give ourselves to these more hopeful modes of coexistence to which we are indebted beyond our wildest imaginations.

Accordingly, we trust that this is an imaginative and hopeful book. There is as strong a relation, we believe, between hope and imagination, as there is between imagination and the encounter with and memory of those who have lived with receptive generosity toward the radical ordinary. We could not imagine—*ex nihilo*—a Jean Vanier, an Ella Baker, or the IAF. Yet they exist, making possible a reality otherwise unimaginable. That they exist, moreover, means that we can be people of hope

in a world too often devoid of it. Such hope is the resource necessary to help us see what otherwise might go unnoticed—that other worlds are indeed possible. Just as each of these exemplars has lived imaginatively and hopefully into the future, borne by their memories of past efforts and their mindfulness of “evidence of things not said” in the present, so might we. When resources like Vanier, Baker, and the IAF go unnoticed, we are condemned to cynicism and despair.

That this is a book about life and death we hope will counter the reaction some readers might have: that is, to think that because the book deals with small politics, it is not about the politics that really matters. The politics that really matters is typically assumed to be state politics associated with Washington DC. Again, we confess that the politics associated with Washington DC is not a prominent character in this book, but we certainly have no intention to ignore that politics. We have wearied, however, of what seems to be the endless attempts to provide ever-new accounts of “democracy” in order to ensure us that state politics remains or does not remain democratic.¹³ Such projects now seem exhausted. Thus rather than offer another theory of the state, we attempt in this book to provide examples, drawn from actual democratic practices, that might enkindle imaginations dulled by the attractions of the state.

Kristen Deede Johnson quite rightly suggests that

political theory is nothing if not an exercise of imagination, offering new or different pictures of collective life in the hopes of remolding, refashioning, or altogether altering contemporary arrangements. Indeed, the success or popularity of a political theory could be said to depend upon the extent to which it offers a picture of political society and life that is more attractive and persuasive than that of the status quo.¹⁴

13. In *Democracy: A History*, John Dunn puts the matter starkly: “When any modern state claims to be a democracy, it necessarily misdescribes itself” (18). He observes that what we should mean by democracy is not that we govern ourselves, but rather that “our own state, and the government that does so much to organize our lives, draws its legitimacy from us, and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to compel each of them to continue to do so” (19). We still consider C. B. Macpherson’s work to be one of the best analyses of these matters. If Macpherson is right, it is not that democratic theory is exhausted, but that the attempt to subvert democratic practice by liberal theory is coming to an end. For a concise account of Macpherson’s position see Macpherson, *Real World of Democracy*.

14. Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism*, 22.

This is certainly not a book without theory. Indeed, in many ways the book turns on Coles's account of Wolin in "Democracy and the Radical Ordinary." The stories we tell of Will Campbell, Ella Baker, Jean Vanier, SNCC, and the IAF are shaped by what we have learned from Wolin. So we do not pretend that "theory" has not determined the shape of this book. However, as Coles, makes clear, without Ella Baker and SNCC, Wolin would not have been able to develop the theory we think so important for what this book is about.

What is the shape of this book? It is first and foremost a conversation originally initiated by students. Hauerwas's graduate students took Coles's courses in political theory and then tried to educate Hauerwas by teaching him what they had learned from Coles. Just as important as the content they learned from Coles was what they learned from him about reading texts. They learned to imitate Coles's reading, which, Hauerwas's students argued, was an exemplification of the politics they were also learning from Coles. Coles's reading of Rowan Williams in this book wonderfully exemplifies what Hauerwas's students meant.

From the other side, paradoxically, Coles found that year after year a couple of the most interesting students in his seminars on democratic theory, continental philosophy, critical theory, genealogy, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction were deeply and tenaciously Christian PhD students from the department of religion, who had been sent his way by a "fideistic, sectarian tribalist" also known as Hauerwas.¹⁵ These students were at once sympathetically swept up in many of the themes of the courses, yet also persistently raised difficult questions of practice, liturgy, church, tradition, and Christ in ways that simultaneously put pressure on these themes and increasingly pulled Coles into dialogue with the likes of John Howard Yoder, Alasdair MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and (more recently) Rowan Williams and Jean Vanier. Yet, interesting as these substantive themes and questions were, the dialogical performance of many of Hauerwas's students provided a very powerful exemplification of the vulnerable receptivity they saw in Jesus—and it was witnessing this, first and foremost, that drew Coles into a deepening engagement with them. And this engagement complicated Coles's thinking about the

15. Hauerwas was described as a "fideistic, sectarian tribalist" by one of his Yale teachers, James Gustafson. See Gustafson, "Sectarian Temptation."

possible relationships between radical allegiance and radical receptivity to differences.

Coles and Hauerwas therefore got to know one another through students. It is now the case, moreover, that many students doing graduate work in political theory also do work in theology. Instruction from all of these students finally led us to teach a course together on Christianity and radical democracy. This book is the result of that course, and we hope it maintains the dialogical character of our interactions made possible by students.

It needs to be said, however (or at least Hauerwas thinks it needs to be said), that this book is clearly more Coles than Hauerwas. This is not only the case in terms of material; just as important is the agenda Coles developed that has shaped what we have tried to do. Coles imagined “radical democracy.” Moreover, Coles thinks that Christianity might matter for how radical democracy is understood and, more importantly, practiced. Hauerwas is less clear that he has a stake in “radical democracy,” but given Coles’s reading of Christian theologians, Hauerwas cannot and does not want to avoid being drawn into the lives of radical democrats.

“Coles imagined ‘radical democracy,’” is a line written by Hauerwas, and it makes Coles squirm—not simply because it would be far better to say that Coles inherited streams of imagining radical democracy (as Hauerwas knows, for he too inherited these streams¹⁶). More importantly, Coles’s imagination of radical democracy has been profoundly inspired by the last two decades he has spent in Durham, North Carolina, for which even the novels of Flannery O’Connor could not prepare him. During most of this time, Coles has been engaged in a variety of radical democratic movements, organizing initiatives, and community-building efforts. And so he has found himself working beside prophetic people who understand their efforts as bringing the good news of the gospel to our city. He has found himself working within churches and listening to pastors and lay people proclaiming the glory of a God that Nietzsche had proclaimed was dead. Many of the most profound efforts to speak to questions of race in Durham have come from the mouths of black (and white) pastors channeling Christ and Moses, as have many of the most profound conjurings of Dionysian beloved community. Coles has

16. For some of Hauerwas’s debts here, see his engagements with Wolin, Connolly, and others in *Vision and Virtue*.

written in passing elsewhere about the centrality of these experiences in the ongoing formation of his life and imagination, and he has no desire to construct a more systematic account here.¹⁷ Yet it is important to note that more than anything else, in Coles's view, it has been the experience of working side by side with Christians in Durham that has nurtured this conversation with Hauerwas, nurtured Coles's capacity and interest in listening, and given it much of the depth it has. He repeatedly encounters difficulties translating what he has found here to those more comfortably lodged within the literal and discursive walls of secular university life. Translation is a slow, difficult, and uncertain process. Finally, if some of Coles's readings of, say, Yoder, Vanier, and Williams push on elements in Hauerwas, Coles suspects that he learned such things in no small part from engagements with Christians at work in Durham.

Yet along with our overlapping interests, questions, passions, and concerns, readers will discover that we make no attempt to conceal the tensions and conflicts that must be present if we are to be honest with one another. Hauerwas worries that Coles's generous willingness to take Christianity seriously could tempt Christians to ignore his unbelief.¹⁸ Coles worries, moreover, as his letters make clear, that Hauerwas is never quite willing to expose his account of the church to the vulnerabilities that Coles thinks are the heart of radical democracy. Coles wants Hauerwas to live more on the edge, whereas Hauerwas is not even sure, given the character of the contemporary church, where the edge is. Yet Hauerwas believes that the center of the church's life requires that it live on the edge.

We do think there is a rationale to the way we have ordered the chapters. The book begins with an essay by Hauerwas that tries to establish the possibility of, as well as the problems involved in, trying to think through the relation of Christianity and radical democracy. Coles

17. See, for example, the introduction and chapter 7 in *Beyond Gated Politics*.

18. In *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice*, Ted Smith provides an account of how Christian practices can migrate in the service of democratic forms that might still Hauerwas's worries. Smith observes, "If practices retain intentions, roles, rules, moods, and motives as they migrate across spheres, even when the conscious intentions of the users change, then reforms in one sphere can migrate to others. A Christian cultural critic might therefore treat the migration of practices between churches and other social spheres not as a rash of impurities that must be washed or wished away, but as a series of opportunities for critical engagement that do not require a church to abandon its first explicitly theological language" (30). Maybe, says Hauerwas.

responds with a letter in which the very notion of “haunting” is enriched by his directing attention to the remembrance of the dead. Particularly in this letter, as well as in the chapter that follows on West and Baker, Coles asks unavoidable questions about the way one views a past that was so wrong that nothing can be done to make it right. Race is, for us (and, we believe, for America), the fundamental challenge. Coles’s appreciative critique of Cornel West through comparing West with Ella Baker sets the challenge before us. Hauerwas’s celebration of Will Campbell at least raises the issue for Coles of whether he can have Baker without the theological language that makes Campbell’s account of racism so compelling: racism is sin.

Many of these essays, both Hauerwas’s and Coles’s, were written for other occasions but with this book in mind. For example, the chapter on Campbell was written to inaugurate the Will D. Campbell Lecture at the University of Mississippi. The chapter on West and Baker was written in the context of a panel at the American Academy of Religion on Cornel West’s *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*. We think it useful to keep the forms of the lecture and panel presentation for no other reason—in a book about the importance of locality—than that these forms do not try to hide from where they came. Moreover, that many of the chapters are followed by letters we hope helps to make the dialogical character of our work unavoidable.

The last part of the book is dominated by the work of Jean Vanier and the L’Arche movement. Some may well wonder what L’Arche has to do with politics. We hope the essays on Vanier and L’Arche will silence that wonder, as we explore the liturgical character of timeful friendship, peacemaking, and corporeal practices of receptivity. There is, however, a more pressing question raised by our calling attention to the significance of Vanier’s work. It can be asked how a movement like the IAF or SNCC can be compatible with the work of L’Arche. Where the IAF and the SNCC were and are concerned with “results,” even as they take the cultivation of relationships to be their primary work, nothing happens at L’Arche homes. Yet we believe this difference is exaggerated if politics is not about “doing something” for the poor and the marginalized, but about learning to be with the poor and marginalized. Central to our understanding of both efforts is learning to understand and live our situation—by which we mean our own poverty and richer political possibilities—in and through such relationships.

We think, moreover, that these issues are vital for thinking through the work that the university ought to be about. Universities are elite institutions that serve the relatively well off. If the work of radical democrats is to be sustained, the character of universities will need to take note. We do not pretend that we have any grand schemes for the transformation of the university, but we at least try to develop a few hints about where we might begin.¹⁹

The book ends with a dialogue that we hope makes evident the exchange that the chapters of the book have exemplified. And this returns us to questions of the edge between us, the topography of this encounter, and possibly the topography of the different modes that both inform and might be informed by it. Coles began an earlier book with the notion of “ecotone”: “special meeting grounds” between two different ecological communities (for example, a forest and a meadow) that ecologists tell us are characterized by a particularly fertile “edge effect.” Ecotone stems from the Greek *oikos* or “habitation,” and *tonos* or “tension.” “‘Ecotone’ and ‘edge effect’ call our attention to the life-engendering character of the ambiguous tension-laden dwelling . . . the pregnancy of edges.”²⁰ The work of Rowan Williams allows us to deepen this metaphor significantly, such that it might evoke not simply an edge between different ecological or social communities or topographies, but the very transformation of our understanding of topography as such. Williams (as Coles discusses at greater length below) makes much of the idea that Jesus did not come here to be “a competitor for space in this world.”²¹ He does seek a kingdom, but not one that would be recognizable in terms of human territoriality, or even human territory. Rather, in his life “the human map is being redrawn, the world turned upside down” (52). Jesus’ good news is that he “interrupts and reorganizes the landscape in ways that are not predictable” (40). He does so not as a simple reversal, but rather he “threatens because he does not compete . . . and because it is that whole world of rivalry and defense which is in question” (69). In this sense, the “unworldliness” of Christ’s kingdom is “a way of saying ‘yes’ to the world by refusing the world’s own skewed and destructive account of itself” (88).

19. For Hauerwas’s extended reflections on the university, see *State of the University*.

20. Coles, *Self/Power/Other*, 1.

21. Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 6. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

In other words, we might say that Jesus lets the world truly be the world by refiguring our very sense of topography, such that the edge-effect, or ecotone, becomes the metaphor not just for the possible meeting ground between different communities, but, more importantly, for the character of generative life-giving places and modes of dwelling as such. In this sense, vulnerable edges are seen to run throughout different communities and landscapes in ways that—insofar as we live them vulnerably, which is at once our only possibility for living well and often a genuine danger—“are not predictable.” It is the vulnerably undulating unpredictable landscape that is a constitutive dimension of the world into which Jesus (and radical democracy) would call us to recognize and work. This is to say, Hauerwas’s not knowing “where the edge is” is something Coles (with Hauerwas) thinks is constitutive of generative places and modes of becoming in time—and therefore not a lack. We cannot know precisely where the edges are, because they are part of what and how we are called into being, and they run throughout our lives and works in ways that precede us and are multidimensional. We hope that this book might, at its best, offer encounters that are on their way toward exemplifying modes of being that are at once distinct and yet “not competitors for space in this world.” Or distinct, precisely insofar as they are not competitors for space in this world—or, again, distinct insofar as we seek, through these engagements of our differences, to understand what it might mean to become noncompetitors for the world’s space.

“Not competitors for space in this world” is a difficult aspiration for human beings, not simply because we are fallible or fallen but also because an ineliminable aspect of what we think it means to live well in this world is to have enemies, to name and struggle against the bad and sometimes the evil. This does not mean “demonizing,” nor should “enemy” be ascribed as an immutable label. Nevertheless, insofar as a person or group struggles against particular practices or persons, there is a profound sense in which we are always competitors against particular patterns of territoriality. Yet does it follow from this that competitors against must be competitors for new modes of dominating space in this world? With Williams we would aspire toward new modes of becoming communities that at once oppose territoriality and aim toward more receptive and generous practices of coexistence. This is a never-perfectly-achieved and thus never-ending task, which will frequently err and will

always be in need of rethinking, of reorganizing, and of new beginnings informed by histories of such efforts in the past.

It is a fine line—a fine edge—this distinction between competing against and struggling for something that is beyond the logic of competition. We frequently (and, to some extent, likely always) confuse one side of the line with the other, and often we even become invested in and systematize such confusions to the benefit of new conquests. The only possible remedy is “to turn the world upside down” and make ourselves unpredictable by deepening the strange and vulnerable dialogues that would confuse the confusions that keep us fixed within what Foucault called the blackmail of either “yes” or “no.” Our dialogues are nourished by stories of, and shared visceral connections with, those who have devoted their lives to such efforts, including people such as Jean Vanier, from whom we paradoxically learn most about dialogue through the exemplary manner in which he explores wordless relationships. This is perhaps the deepest point of alliance between the radical-democratic trickster and the fool for Christ who converse in this book. We hope it inspires others toward hopeful folly. “Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’” (1 Cor 3:18–19 NRSV). Even the “unbeliever” among us hopes to become ever-more foolish in response to echoes of this call, and there is joy as well as haunting difficulty in responding to alien echoes.

We have enjoyed working on this book, and we hope readers will find enjoyment in reading it. We need all the help we can get, and we know that, without joy, such help will not be forthcoming.