

# Collective Individualism in Black Conservatism

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Transition School History

June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Questioning the Individualist Critique

In Season 1 Episode 23 of the ABC sitcom *Black-ish*, cleverly titled “Elephant in the Room,” parents Dre and Bow find that Junior has joined the Young Republicans Club at school to woo a girl, Hillary, who is in the club. Dre and Bow frantically attempt to convince Junior to drop out. The episode begins with a comedic monologue from Dre explicating the ‘facts of life’.

There are certain things in life that are just true. Fact – the earth revolves around the sun. Fact – 2 times 2 is four. And fact – black people *aren't* Republicans. We just aren't. We vote for Democrats. And it's not just an Obama thing. He could have drop-kicked this baby [shows image of Obama holding a baby] and I *still* would have voted for him. But black people also overwhelmingly backed this guy [shows image of Michael Dukakis], this guy [shows image of Al Gore kissing Hillary Clinton] ... hell, 91 percent of black people voted for this guy [shows image of Walter Mondale holding boxing gloves]. Fact – 91 percent of Walter Mondale's *family* didn't vote for Walter Mondale. Sure, the other side may trot out a token black face every now and again, but the fact of the matter is being a black Republican is something we just don't do.<sup>1</sup>

After Junior tells Dre he has joined the Young Republicans Club, Dre stares at the camera with an expression of shock and horror; a voiceover drops the punchline – “Junior may not be a donkey, but he's definitely an ass.”<sup>2</sup>

This humorous bit is an explicit exploration of the strong association between the black populous and the rough ideological amalgamation of leftism and the Democratic Party. According to the Pew Research Center, a consistently high proportion of black voters – upwards of 84 percent – have identified as Democrats since 1992.<sup>3</sup> When such a large percentage of the black population, by most indicators, seems to support this left-of-center ideological

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<sup>1</sup> *Black-ish*, “Elephant in the Room,” ABC video, 21:31, May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4143722>.

<sup>2</sup> *Black-ish*, “Elephant in the Room.”

<sup>3</sup> “The Parties on the Eve of the 2016 Election: Two Coalitions, Moving Further Apart / 2. Party affiliation among voters: 1992-2016,” Pew Research Center U.S. Politics and Policy, Pew Research Center, 13 September 2016, [www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/13/2-party-affiliation-among-voters-1992-2016/](http://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/13/2-party-affiliation-among-voters-1992-2016/).

amalgamation<sup>4</sup>, the existence of the remainder can seem puzzling – ergo, Dre’s immediate shock. The notion of black conservatism may seem even to be a contradiction when juxtaposed with the culturally engrained expectations Dre’s monologue illustrates. It is this logic of contradiction that fuels popular explanations for the existence of black conservatives, which have often focused on the notions of ‘abandonment’, ‘betrayal’, and ‘self-interest’. These arguments posit that per the perception that black support for the left-of-center ideological amalgamation is right and highly supported, black conservatives defect from what is just right for collective interests of black people broadly in favor of personal interests – the modern black conservative pursuing the metaphorical Hillary.

Black conservatives, it is argued, as the minority ideological position within the black population, cannot be acting in the interest of blacks as a collective race – such would be a conflict, or contradiction, of desires. Rather, they must be engaged in some sort of pursuit of individual interest. In popular vernacular, this manifests itself in the usage of derogatory terms to reference black conservatives, like ‘sellout’ and ‘Uncle Tom’. The hashtag #UncleTim, for instance, trended on Twitter after Senator Tim Scott, the lone black Republican senator, responded to Joe Biden’s address to Congress at the Republican National Convention in April of 2021, declaring: “Hear me clearly: America is not a racist country ... It’s backwards to fight discrimination with different types of discrimination.”<sup>5</sup> Another demonstration of this argument can be found in Malcolm X’s 1963 “Message to the Grassroots” speech, which popularized the concept of the ‘house Negro’ in relation to its current cultural context. The ‘house Negro’, in the

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<sup>4</sup> The term ‘ideological amalgamation’ is deliberately broad to encompass a vagueness and diversity even within black left-of-center thought. This idea will be further explicated upon with the usage of the term ‘leftist coalescence’.

<sup>5</sup> Cleve R. Wootson Jr. and Mike Debonis, “Black GOP senator’s response to Biden ignites fiery debate,” *The Washington Post*, 2021, [www.theday.com/national-politics/20210430/black-gop-senators-response-to-biden-ignites-fiery-debate](http://www.theday.com/national-politics/20210430/black-gop-senators-response-to-biden-ignites-fiery-debate).

time of slavery, lived in the house with and held an unbreakably strong faithfulness to the master, whereas the ‘field Negro’ worked hard labor in the fields, beaten viciously and given no sympathies. “The masses are the field Negroes,” Malcolm X declared.<sup>6</sup> The ‘house Negro’ thus loyally follows the master out of their individual interests of pride and favorable conditions, abandoning the cause of the ‘masses’ of the ‘field Negroes’. The deployment of the term and conceptual framework of ‘house Negro’ to modern black conservatives has retained the context in which Malcolm X framed it. Conceptions of abandonment and ‘selling out’, then, point towards criticism of self-interest.

The criticism of black conservatives as self-interested inevitably leads to understanding conceptions of individualism. Individualism, for the purposes of this essay, takes on two forms: economic individualism and ideological individualism. The former concerns an individual’s economic self-sufficiency and lack of dependence upon the government for financial support. The latter concerns an individual’s autonomy and agency in pursuing their thought without intrusion from an external institution. Their product broadly forms what can be understood to be ‘individualism’ – the belief in an individual’s lack of dependence on and attachment to broad economic and ideological societal institutions. It should be noted that economic and ideological individualism are not distinctly separate, and their frequent intersections and intertwining will be further explored in this essay; moreover, the scope and character of individualism will change as the essay progresses. Critique of black conservatism, as manifested in the terms ‘sellout’ and ‘Uncle Tom’ and theories of the ‘House Negro’, center upon an excess of individualism. This mode of black conservative criticism is convenient, as it aligns cleanly with culturally engrained

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<sup>6</sup> “(1963) Malcolm X, ‘Message to the Grassroots’”, Blackpast, 2010, [www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1963-malcolm-x-message-grassroots).

dichotomies of race concerning ideology. Amy E. Lerman and Meredith L. Sadin found, for instance, that both white and black liberal<sup>7</sup> respondents place a black candidate as more left-leaning than a white candidate only on the basis of the candidate's race.<sup>8</sup> It is this impressed logic that Dre's monologue in *Black-ish* demonstrates so blankly and explicitly. The black conservative, in adopting conservatism and hence embracing individualism, must by this logic abandon the pursuit of their collective racial group interests: the 'house Negro' leaving behind the cause of the 'field Negro'.

A question, however, must be asked – how useful is the exclusive nature of this framework? The deterministic and binary logic of exclusion – what embraces individualism must reject the collective – in its application to black conservatives diminishes the role of race interests in the identity of the black conservative. Conceptions of individualism linked to conservative ideology, this stream of criticism asserts, weaken the attachment of black conservatives to the cause for collective racial interests, for what pushes in the direction of individualism must push against collectivism and racial group-thinking. It asserts that shifts in ideological affiliation trump attachment to collective racial interests. However, the dynamics of race, ideology, and their intersections in the complex ocean of society and history have proven to be less deterministic and exclusive than these convenient cultural and political signals would suggest. Perhaps belief in forms of individualism and collectivist racial group-thinking can exist simultaneously in the black conservative condition if all three entities are further complicated. This essay is an endeavor to argue for a more complex notion of individualism that is not exclusive in relation to collectivist racial group-thinking in the context of black conservatism and

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<sup>7</sup> “Black liberal” refers to blacks that identify as ‘liberal’, as in ‘leftist’. The term ‘liberal’ is used as it is used in the study. The survey was conducted with over 5,000 participants in total.

<sup>8</sup> Amy E. Lerman and Meredith L. Sadin, “Stereotyping or Projection? How White and Black Voters Estimate Black Candidates’ Ideology” (International Society of Political Psychology, 2016).

to explore corresponding implications for understanding how individualism functions in black conservative thought.

This essay will argue that, in the ‘architectural building’ of black conservatism, race is the foundation upon which the structure of ideology rests and is supported. Moreover, it will propose the notion of collective individualism – the principle of individualism, with its associated concepts of agency, freedom, and independence, formulated as dependent upon a collective form of identity. Black conservatism is upheld by black conservatives as a freeing, liberating structure in contrast to the ideological amalgamation of liberalism, leftism, and the Democratic Party as an agency-confiscating structure imposed upon blacks. Moreover, black conservatives draw upon cultural and political backlash directed towards them to argue for the notion of ‘modern lynching’, positing that the ideological amalgamation of liberalism, leftism, and the Democratic Party not only stifles blacks’ pursuit of individualism but also secures their grasp on this pursuit via more sinister domination and control of thought. The logic of ‘modern lynching’ suggests that such a structure’s limitation of individual black conservatives that deviate from the standard is in actuality a limitation of blacks broadly on the basis of race; this logic constitutes black conservatism as fundamentally a condition of being black, rather than of being conservative. Modern black conservatism, thus, establishes individualism as a principle under an impulsive expansion towards the underlying context of racial collectivism.

It should be noted that, generally, evidence for criticism on black conservatism seems to suffer from a paucity of black conservative voices.<sup>9</sup> This essay, as a premise, holds that black conservative understandings of the world – while making no assessments of the ‘truthfulness’ of

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<sup>9</sup> This judgement is premised on the texts of Hall and Orey, and is certainly not all-encompassing. Hall and Orey draw evidence from black conservatives, but it does not guide their framework of investigation.

these understandings, as such is not the focus of the paper – are important towards how society broadly understands black conservatism. This essay will begin in the following second section, “Examining Binary Individual-Collective Theories,” by better understanding criticism and thought on black conservatism that argues black conservatives favor personal interests and individualism over collective racial group interests, and the dichotomy between individualism and collectivism these theories construct. The next section, “The Black Utility Heuristic and Racialized Social Constraint”, introduce and explore two core theories that this essay will engage with in blurring individualism and collectivism via the complexities of race. The fourth section, “Building the Architectural House of Black Conservatism,” begins with a brief exploration of how black conservatism establishes itself as a set of principles and beliefs. However, it will contend that black conservatism, as a minority in multiple senses, is best understood by how its relative, rather than absolute, position. This entails understanding how black conservatism situates itself against its roughly opposite ideological position, which for this purpose will be referred to as the ‘leftist coalescence’ – consisting of broad and overlapping territories of leftism, liberalism, and the Democratic Party.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the bulk entity that black conservatives posit as the ‘alternative’ in a dichotomous mapping of American political thought will be termed the leftist coalescence. This section will explore ideas from the work of prominent black conservatives Candace Owens, Larry Elder, and Shelby Steele in relation to economic individualism and the argued confiscation of black agency by the policies of the leftist coalescence. Using the established association of the leftist coalescence and the confiscation of

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the notion of a ‘leftist coalescence’ itself is designedly vague and imprecise. There are purposeful separations between the Democratic Party, leftism, liberalism, and other related entities. Black conservative criticism of entities within the leftist coalescence is often purposefully specific, and this specificity will be considered if necessary. See Michael Ondaatje, “Black Conservative Intellectuals in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

agency, the section will utilize testimony and writings from Clarence Thomas and Candace Owens to understand “modern lynching” as an entity that demonstrates black conservative blurring between individualism and race-based collectivism to form race as the foundation of the ‘architectural house’ of black conservatism. The fifth section, “Implications,” explores possible reframings the developed notion of collective individualism can offer to binary individual-collective theories, shortcomings and generalizations the paper committed, and the role collective individualism may play into the black conservative argument for the distribution of responsibility. This last understanding of collective individualism’s implications for the distribution of responsibility allows for an understanding of black conservatism not only as a static entity of thought but also as an active agent in the political landscape campaigning for minds. Lastly, “Immutable Characteristics and Conditions of the Mind” explores how the notion of collective individualism can offer a pathway towards rethinking individualism as a principle outside the context of black conservatism, broadly in its applications to immutable characteristics in relation to conditions of the mind.

### Examining Binary Individual-Collective Theories

Prior, this paper introduced and questioned a body of criticism and discourse positing that black conservatives indulge in individualism, and by the deterministic logic of exclusion, forfeit their collective racial group interests. This body deserves more exploration, especially in understanding how individualism operates in this field of discourse. For this essay, this body of criticism will be referred to as “binary individual-collective” theories, arguing that black conservatives pursue individualism and hence relinquish collective racial group interests in an exclusive, binary dichotomy. Binary individual-collective theories of black conservatism do not



necessarily argue that black conservatives pursue individualism in the sense of possessing complete agency and control. Individualism, for this paper, takes on not only two forms, as discussed prior – the economic and the ideological – but also adopts a restricted scope: a black person’s distance or separation from the ‘common masses’ that embrace collectivism. Thus, a black conservative can both be argued to be ‘psychologically dominated’ by dominant institutions into abandoning their collective interests and demonstrate individualism in the scope of this paper if they are ‘distant’ from the aforementioned groups or institutions. This restriction of scope is designed to avoid discussing the merits of theories regarding the agency of black conservatives themselves, which is not the focus of the paper. Importantly, this conception of individualism is argued in binary individual-collective theories of black conservatism to be in direct and irreconcilable conflict with collective racial thinking.

Ronald Hall, in his essay “Rooming in the Master’s House: Psychological Domination and the Black Conservative,” draws upon Malcolm X’s prior-introduced usage of the ‘house Negro’ and the ‘field Negro’ in arguing that black conservatives are psychologically dominated by white elite institutions into supporting policies that harm black people.

Politics contemporaneously may be the most potent extension of domination characteristic of slaves during the American antebellum. As slaves, ‘house negroes’ were psychologically dominated, mixed-race offspring of the antebellum master class. The political descendants of antebellum house negroes are today’s Black Conservatives ... Black Conservatives must become cognizant of their unique role – that of advocating for the interests of Black people, their class, their community, as well as their country.<sup>11</sup>

Hall’s framing posits that black conservatives are dominated into harming their race, acting as uniquely powerful aids in “sustaining the pathologies of antebellum politics”.<sup>12</sup> Although Hall’s

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<sup>11</sup> Ronald Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House: Psychological Domination and the Black Conservative”, *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 38 No. 4 (2008); 565.

<sup>12</sup> Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House”, 566.

argument engages in understanding a complex relationship between agency and domination – ‘house Negroes’ “enjoyed social, occupational, economic, and universal privilege”<sup>13</sup> in a system of domination nevertheless constructed and maintained by the master class – this essay is primarily concerned with his articulations of ‘self-interest’ and ‘separation’. “Their [house Negroes’] struggles are dramatically illustrated,” Hall writes, “in the willingness of today’s well-educated, intellectually gifted Black Conservatives who work solely for the benefit of self at the expense of the less fortunate Black masses.”<sup>14</sup> Hall asserts at a fundamental level that modern black conservatives have some high level of freedom and agency in allocating their intellect and education towards certain causes, and that these are directed towards pursuing interests of self over the interests of the ‘masses’, or the ‘field Negroes’. For black conservatives to move away from serving as affirmations for anti-black institutions, Hall writes, black conservatives must “celebrate their Blackness”<sup>15</sup> and “transcend selfish interests, personal gain, and the master’s house to make a significant contribution to civil evolution.”<sup>16</sup> Hall draws a clear dichotomy between pursuing self-interested individualism and of attachment to the racial body and collective interests. Black conservatives, Hall argues, indulge in too much of the former, but can progress the causes of black people broadly by adopting the latter.

Byron D. Orey adopts a similar stark dichotomy between embracing individualism and collectivism through the model of racial resentment. In “The New Black Conservative: Rhetoric or Reality?”, Orey argues that black conservatism can be understood as an embodiment of racial resentment between educated, wealthier blacks – this references the same group as Hall’s conception of the ‘house Negro’ does – and less educated, poorer blacks – the ‘field Negro’. “An

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<sup>13</sup> Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House”, 568.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House”, 570.

<sup>15</sup> Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House”, 575.

<sup>16</sup> Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House”, 576.

increase in resentful attitudes towards African Americans,” Orey writes, “will increase the probability of African Americans identifying as conservatives.”<sup>17</sup> Identification with and subscription to conservative ideology, in the model of racial resentment, acts as a tool for societally ‘successful’ blacks to distinguish themselves from societally ‘unsuccessful’ blacks. Orey draws upon the work of Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders to formulate three key belief components of racial resentment: the belief that blacks should work harder, the denial of continuing racial discrimination, and the belief that in modern times, blacks receive an undeserved advantage.<sup>18</sup> Advocating for economically conservative policies, then, is a method for black conservatives to distinguish their purported achievement and success from lower-class blacks that would fare worse under such policies. Orey cites Amiri Bakara, a leader of the Black Power movement, in illustrating separation as a core component of racial resentment.

[Shelby] Steele<sup>19</sup> ... tells us, like David Rockefeller, that “the only way we will see advancement of black people... is for us to focus on developing ourselves as individuals and embracing opportunity.” ... Of course it has long been the whine of house Negroes that they are individuals, not to be confused with common field niggers. It is the cry of the most reactionary sector of the bourgeoisie, that they, indeed, ain’t with the rest of us woogies. All black and poor and stinking like that!<sup>20</sup>

Like Hall’s theory of the ‘house Negro’, Orey’s model of racial resentment is embedded with a separation between ‘separation’ and ‘unity’. Because the model of racial resentment suggests that black conservatism is a tool of separation and distinguishment from racial collective identity, it reinforces binary conceptions of the relationship between individualism and collectivism. It is

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<sup>17</sup> Byron D. Orey, “The New Black Conservative: Rhetoric or Reality?”, *Faculty Publications: Political Science*, Vol. 16 (2003); 43.

Ronald Hall, “Rooming in the Master’s House: Psychological Domination and the Black Conservative”, *Journal of Black Studies* Vol. 38 No. 4 (2008); 565.

<sup>18</sup> Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, “Divided by Color: Racial politics and democratic ideals” (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Shelby Steele is a prominent black conservative. This essay will explore some of Steele’s writing.

<sup>20</sup> Orey, “The New Black Conservative”, 39.

the deterministic logic of exclusion: what pursues individual interests must abandon collective racial interests.

### The Black Utility Heuristic and Racialized Social Constraint

A theoretical bridge is required to understand Hall and Orey's models of binary individual-collective theories on the dynamics of black conservatism in relationship to black conservative thought. Ismail White and Chryl Laird provide this bridge, illustrating the dynamics of individualism and collectivism in the context of black decision-making to better understand what 'collective individualism' might entail. The first chapter on "Black Political Decision Making" of their book, "Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior" explores two primary theories useful to this essay in relation to one another: Michael Dawson's theory of the black utility heuristic, and White and Laird's theory of racialized social constraint. Together, these two theories will frame how this essay will understand the notion of collective individualism in black conservatism.

Michael Dawson's 1994 book *Behind the Mule* formulated the concept of the black utility heuristic, in which individual blacks utilize collective group interests as a heuristic, or proxy, for their individual self-interest. "It is more efficient for them [blacks] to use the status of a group, both relative and absolute," Dawson writes, "as a proxy for individual utility."<sup>21</sup> The convenience of group consciousness and the black utility heuristic, Dawson argues, is the result of American oppression and discrimination against blacks, forming a relatively well-defined

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<sup>21</sup> Michael C. Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10.

group identity with a shared history and experience.<sup>22</sup> The black utility heuristic suggests that, on a rational basis, two black people can be expected to have similar interests on questions of race, on the basis of the shared experience.<sup>23</sup> The rationality of individualism thus becomes augmented and reoriented with a certain collectivism by the black utility heuristic. Importantly, Dawson's argument of the black utility heuristic is not centered upon some natural psychological solidarity or an increased tendency to exhibit self-sacrificing behavior; rather, it is an argument that an individual can rationally pursue their self-interest via the heuristic of collective group interests. The black utility heuristic, while not explicitly challenging binary individualism-collectivism theories introduced prior, intellectually begins to blur the lines between the two.

The black utility heuristic is a profound insight as measurement and explanation of black thinking on individualism and collectivism on race, but it is generally limited to the realm of the thought of an individual; it is primarily concerned with the relationship between a black individual's individual self-interests and their group interests. It does not offer in its design a general theory of the ideological, political, and social activity of blacks as a network of individuals, in which the dimension of time allows individuals to act as dynamic, moving entities. Building upon Dawson's theory of the black utility heuristic, White and Laird propose the theory of racialized social constraint to explore not only the relationship between personal and group interests for an individual as a decision-maker and a thinker but also the social

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<sup>22</sup> To be technical, Dawson introduced two, rather than one, theory, in *Behind the Mule*: the theory of linked fate, and the theory of the black utility heuristic. Linked fate asserts that a shared history and experience contribute to the existence of a rational similarity in interests. The black utility heuristic relies upon linked fate in acting as a phenomena in which a black individual can rationally utilize collective racial interests as individual interests. Because linked fate as articulated by Dawson is a premise, not a key idea, in this essay, it will subsume as the premise of the black utility heuristic.

<sup>23</sup> It should be noted here that 'interests' and 'objectives' are not equivalent. For instance, two black people in the 1950s and 60s would be expected under Dawson's theory of linked fate (see footnote 22) to share the same interests of liberating black people from discrimination and racism, but they may disagree on the objective of how to accomplish, or materialize, the interests. Linked fate, when applied to objectives, generalizes diversity of thought within the black community.

dynamics of thought across individuals. Like Dawson, White and Laird contend that the American history of oppressing and discriminating against black people has heightened group consciousness and the importance of solidarity in overcoming obstacles. Thus, within black communities membership in social institutions and networks is highly valued. Racialized social constraint is the process of enforcing solidarity via social sanction, such that black individuals that support institutions like the Democratic Party are rewarded and black individuals that deviate from norms of behavior are sanctioned to achieve a unity and cohesiveness that has proven historically and contemporarily to be valuable. Social sanctions for ‘defection’ can manifest themselves in the form of rhetorical epithets like ‘Uncle Tom’ and ‘sellout’, in which the subjects of the sanctions are believed to be endangering the solidarity and hence the cause of black people broadly. This thinking stems from the logic of the black utility heuristic – that black individuals can form a unity that advocates for collective interests, to the benefit of black individuals’ individual interests.

The enduring power of reputational sanctions to constrain the political behavior of African Americans rests on widely held and historically entrenched expectations within the black community about how blacks are to behave politically and socially ... there has been a long-standing common perception among blacks that unity in political efforts is essential to having black political demands recognized.<sup>24</sup>

Both Dawson’s black utility heuristic and White and Laird’s racialized social constraint complicate conceptions of individualism and collectivism within the black population. The conception of the black utility heuristic suggests that black individuals pursue personal interests rationally, but that the demarcation between individual and collective interests is blurred by the processes of American racial history in forming a collective proxy, augmenting individualism

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<sup>24</sup> White and Laird, *Steadfast Democrats*, 40.

with collectivism. Moreover, racialized social constraint provides a meaningful and powerful framework premised upon ideas of the black utility heuristic to put the voices of Hall and Orey in conversation with that of black conservatives.

This paper will understand collective individualism as a product of both these frameworks of the black utility heuristic and racialized social constraint. Black conservatives characterize the model of ‘modern lynching’ as introduced before to be a form of racialized social constraint. Racialized social constraint is understood to be a threat to the individualism of all blacks via the logic of the ‘inverted black utility heuristic’ – a threat to an individual on the basis of collective identity is a threat to all members of that collective identity.<sup>25</sup> Thus, black conservatives argue that racialized social constraint is not enforced by blacks to enforce unity, as White and Laird posit, but instead that forces external to blacks impose racialized social constraint as a severe impediment to blacks’ agency broadly. The inverted black utility heuristic, it will be asserted, functions as a necessary complement to the black utility heuristic, and each implicitly assumes the other. Thus, the logic of black conservatism in constituting itself from racialized social constraint – the societal process that questions and challenges black conservatism’s existence – relies upon the workings of the black utility heuristic. The black utility heuristic, as noted prior, by design is a transgression of clear demarcations between individualism and collectivism. Thus, black conservatism constitutes itself on the basis of a deep permeation of collectivism into individualism.

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<sup>25</sup> What the ‘inverted black utility heuristic’ entails in its detail will be further explored later. Here, the ‘inversion’ stems from the directionality of causality being from individual interests to collective interests, rather than from collective to individual (collective interests become a proxy for individual interests) as in the black utility heuristic introduced by Dawson.

## Building the Architectural House of Black Conservatism

Building the architectural house of black conservatism – to understand the dynamics of individualism in relation to race and ideology – begins here in the form of a brief survey of how black conservatism constitutes itself: as a set of principles offering greater individualism, agency, and control to blacks. Shelby Steele, a notable black conservative author, columnist, and filmmaker, articulates in his book, *Shame* – which investigates the role of America’s history of oppressing blacks in relation to modern policy and ideology – an argument for conservatism premised upon self-reliance and freedom. “Liberalism is beautiful, but conservatism is freedom,”<sup>26</sup> Steele writes. “I believe today’s political Right has the best roadmap to the future – free markets, free individuals in a free society, and the time-tested apparatus of principles and values that make freedom possible.”<sup>27</sup> Steele’s conception of freedom is concerned with individual freedom rather than collective freedom, arguing that black individuals in modern American society can and should act as free agents not tied to the tragedies and evils of the past. Indeed, black conservatives have espoused principles of individualism that lend themselves as evidence in binary individual-collective theories arguing that black conservatives are concerned with pursuing self-interest. Individualism is a core tenet of black conservatism, but – as will be explored later – augmented by collectivism.

Understanding black conservatism merely as the set of principles that constitute it is not conducive to an analysis of deeper and meaningful distinctions between black conservatism and conservatism more broadly. Black conservative characterization of the ‘dominant’ alternative – the ‘other’ ideological landmark on the political landscape, being a coalescence of the

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<sup>26</sup> Shelby Steele, *Shame: How America’s Past Sins Have Polarized Our Country* (Basic Books, 2015), 101.

<sup>27</sup> Steele, *Shame*, 103.



Democratic Party, leftism, and liberalism<sup>28</sup>, is important in understanding how individualism functions within black conservatism. Black conservatism's portrayal of this coalescence is the essential basis for defining the unique dynamics of black conservative conceptions of individualism. The argument for black conservatism, as the 'minority' and hence the Other within the black population, is inextricably tied to an argument against the 'majority' ideological coalescence. Hence, black conservatism's presentation as empowering greater self-sufficiency and agency is put in necessary juxtaposition with the leftist coalescence, put forth as imposed upon blacks as a threat to their agency.

Candace Owens, a black conservative figure that has quickly risen towards the fore of the recent social spotlight,<sup>29</sup> argues that the Democratic Party is motivated fundamentally by power. The Democratic Party and leftist ideology are characterized as championing certain sets of policy not on an ideologically and morally consistent basis, but on one of political struggle in which political positions are cobbled together to 'steal away' group identities for the purposes of amassing power. Owens asserts the presence of a conscious and sinister desire for power drives the imposition of government-intervention policies onto black communities, fostering an economic and hence political dependency on the Democratic Party. This argument is laid out in Candace Owens's 2020 book *Blackout*, whose provocative subtitle, *How Black America Can Make Its Second Escape from the Democrat Plantation*, hints at its thesis: black Americans can and should 'exit' the Democratic Party, which has acted as an enslaving 'plantation'. "[The]

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that there are many meanings for what 'liberalism' entails and how it is used. Although liberalism formally is "a political and social philosophy that promotes individual rights, civil liberties, democracy, and free enterprise" (Oxford), in modern rhetoric 'liberalism' has become synonymous for leftism or moderate leftism. Because some black conservatives target the entity of 'liberalism', it will be included – as a dynamic entity whose meaning resides within its current context – as an element of the 'leftist coalescence'.

<sup>29</sup> Brandy Zadrozny, "YouTube tested, Trump approved: How Candace Owens suddenly became the loudest voice on the far right" (NBC News, 2018), [www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/youtube-tested-trump-approved-how-candace-owens-suddenly-became-loudest-n885166](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/youtube-tested-trump-approved-how-candace-owens-suddenly-became-loudest-n885166).

Democrats first lured blacks away from the Republican Party via the same routine [as is being pursued in modern times],” Owens writes, “the promise that government intervention would significantly improve our likelihood.”<sup>30</sup> Owens depicts Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal as a historical example of a dishonest disparity between promise and outcome, in which black workers were allured by Roosevelt’s promises for economic uplift but suffered negative disproportionately effects of the National Recovery Administration, particularly in agriculture.<sup>31</sup> Owens utilizes a history of disparities between the Democratic Party’s promises and outcomes for the black population and of American oppression of blacks to bolster her argument of power-accumulation as the fundamental justification for modern state-interventionist policies. Solidified ideological frameworks like socialism and ‘quasi-socialist’<sup>32</sup> models are upheld as morally depraved and concerned with amassing state power. These frameworks function both as an ‘ideology’ in the form of a collection of ideas to be targeted and an ‘inconsistency’ or ‘negligence’ of morality in which a mindless drive for the pursuit of power leads to the imposition of individualism-decaying structures. “Like all socialists who came before her,” Owens writes in a discussion of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s policies, “Ocasio-Cortez appears to rely on class warfare ... to justify the need for her existence and the power of the Left. Helplessness, then, becomes a necessary ingredient to maintain power.”<sup>33</sup>

Larry Elder, another prominent black conservative known for his radio talk show *The Larry Elder Show*, is less sinister in his characterization of the leftist coalescence’s intent.

Arguing that the policies of the leftist coalescence are negligent of their argued failure to help

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<sup>30</sup> Candace Owens, “On Socialism and Government Intervention” in *Blackout: How Black America Can Make Its Second Escape from the Democrat Plantation* (Threshold Editions, 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Owens, “On Socialism and Government Intervention” in *Blackout*.

<sup>32</sup> In this essay’s spirit of using terminology as sources present it while adjusting for changing meanings of such terminology, the qualifier of ‘quasi’ here refers to systems some conservative figures would refer to as socialist that may not truly be socialist.

blacks. Ultimately, however, Elder formulates the same root assertion as Owens – leftist coalescence policies fail to empower blacks, rather entrenching them in systems of dependency that do not serve their intended outcomes. On the privatization of social security, for instance, Elder argues that “Social Security is an especially bad deal for blacks”<sup>33</sup> because African Americans have shorter life spans, hence accruing fewer returns from Social Security. Elder cites a study by the RAND Corporation, which found that African Americans received about one percent lower a rate of return than whites. Privatized Social Security accounts, Elder asserts, allow Social Security contributions to be left to family. Quoting Geraldine Ferraro, the Democratic Party’s 1984 vice presidential nominee, Elder questions the role of the government in deciding ‘for’ people how to allocate funds.

She [Ferraro] said if one lacked ‘the knowledge and the wherewithal to manage your own private funds ... you’re going to be out of luck.’ Out of luck? ... For the long term, prices [of the market] reflect actual value, and investors who prudently and patiently ‘invest’ in the stock market have a much greater net worth and therefore realize the resources to enhance their comfort in their retirement years.<sup>34</sup>

The leftist coalescence’s systems of welfare and management, Elder argues, diminishes blacks’ agency to manage their funds when they have the capacity to do so. The government, in this depiction, is a seemingly benevolent institution whose excessive handling of actions strips individuals of their agency to pursue individual action that would lead to their greater success.

Shelby Steele, like Elder, is less aggressive than Owens in attributing the leftist coalescence’s policies towards the pursuit of power. Instead, the leftist coalescence is framed as generating dependency and deteriorating individual agency through the model of victimhood.

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<sup>33</sup> Larry Elder, “Dow at 17,000 – But You’re Not Invited” in *Clear and Present Dangers in America, Volume II* (Creators Publishing, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Elder, “Dow at 17,000” in *Clear and Present Dangers in America*.

“... There comes a time when he must stop thinking of himself as a victim by acknowledging that – existentially – his fate is always in his own hand,” Steele writes in *Shame*. “One of the more pernicious corruptions of post-1960s liberalism is that it undermined the spirit of self-help and individual responsibility in precisely the people it sought to uplift.”<sup>35</sup> The social policies of the leftist coalescence, Steele argues, incentivizes blacks to tie themselves to “trade more on our past victimization” than to overcome such the injury from such victimization.

The theme of the confiscation of black agency is vital towards black conservative arguments against the leftist coalescence and thus in constituting itself. Through the various lens of power, negligence, and victimhood, it is argued that a cycle of black dependency is reinforced by policies of the leftist coalescence. Complications with traditional understandings of individualism begin to emerge. What does it mean for the individualism of blacks to be collectively threatened? Likewise, what does it mean for black conservatism to offer individualism and freedom for blacks if the presupposition for such individualism is that blacks must ‘leave’ the leftist coalescence and subscribe to black conservatism? The argument for the systematic confiscation of black agency elevates the concept of individualism from that of what would seem to be merely the individual to that of race, a collective and shared identity. Utilizing this established association between the leftist coalescence and the theme of the confiscation or deprivation of black agency and individualism as essential to the structure of black conservatism allows for further inquiry into these emerging complications towards traditional understandings of individualism.

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<sup>35</sup> Steele, *Shame*, 15.

Analyzing the model of ‘modern lynching’ aids in an exploration of complications to individualism. The concept of ‘modern lynching’ is drawn upon black conservatives explicitly and implicitly to argue that criticism and social sanction against black conservatives is analogous to the lynching of runaway slaves, yearning for freedom but pursued and constrained by the repressive enslaving institutions they attempted to flee from. Modern lynching is a useful model in many respects. It is an explicitly racial image, drawing upon the horrors of Civil War era lynching of blacks in arguing for the relationship between black conservatives and institutions of the leftist coalescence; its usage demonstrates the complexities of race and racial history in the context of black conservatism.<sup>36</sup> It also articulates a phenomenon that strikes deeply at an individualism residing within black conservatism itself, and thus enables an analysis of individualism within black conservatism that frames and furthers the richness of the prior analysis of black conservative articulations of phenomena argued to inhibit the individualism of blacks broadly. Moreover, it is the attachment point from which the bridge of theory can be connected and utilized; modern lynching refers to the process of racialized social constraint, as articulated by White and Laird. As will be shown, modern lynching also engages with the black utility heuristic. Ultimately, black conservative arguments of modern lynching allow for the building of the two-part structure of black conservatism as an architectural building.

In Clarence Thomas’s 1991 Senate hearing for his nomination to the Supreme Court, Anita Hill, an American lawyer and academic, alleged that Thomas had sexually harassed her. In testimony, Thomas drew upon the model of modern lynching to argue that the allegations and the

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<sup>36</sup> This note is intended to be brought in conversation with the writings of Hall and Orey. Hall’s writing especially seems to doubt black conservative full acceptance of American history and black heritage.

consequent hearings were a manifestation of racialized social constraint developed to limit blacks' free thought by means of censure, ridicule, and destruction.

And from my standpoint, as a black American, as far as I am concerned, it is a high-tech lynching for uppity-blacks who in any way deign to think for themselves, to do for themselves, to have different ideas, and it is a message that, unless you kow-tow to an old order, this is what will happen to you, you will be lynched, destroyed, caricatured by the committee of the U.S. Senate, rather than hung from a tree.<sup>37</sup>

When Senator Howard Heflin soon afterward raised questions of Thomas' judicial temperament, Thomas responded, "Senator, there is a difference between approaching a case objectively and watching yourself being lynched. There is no comparison whatsoever."<sup>38</sup> Thomas extrapolates what he holds to be slanderous repercussions for his thought imposed onto him as a structure of racialized social constraint systematic in its execution of modern lynching. This modern lynching is argued not to be imposed merely on black conservatives, but instead on all black Americans that "have different ideas". As a literal matter, the two may be identical; yet, on a semantic level, the two are meaningfully different, in that the latter reframes belief in conservatism as thinking independently and freely. Moreover, the notion of lynching becomes a justification for a certain defiance characterizing Thomas' testimony. Race, then, becomes the base, primary condition upon which thought ebbs and flows, where 'different ideas' rest. The primary basis for modern lynching is argued to be race, rather than ideology – thus, modern lynching is asserted as an oppressive structure not merely to black conservatives, but to black people broadly. Racialized social constraint is argued not to be enforced at root or source by the broader black community to

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<sup>37</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate One Hundred Second Congress First Session on the Nomination of Judge Clarence Thomas to be Associated Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States*. J-102-40, Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993. Online, [www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CHRG-THOMAS/pdf/GPO-CHRG-THOMAS-4.pdf](http://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-CHRG-THOMAS/pdf/GPO-CHRG-THOMAS-4.pdf). 157-158.

<sup>38</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 161.

maintain unity, as White and Laird articulate it, but that it is applied by broader institutions via more sinister methods to restrict black people.

The following day of the hearings, Thomas elaborated upon his characterization of racialized social constraint<sup>39</sup> as a ‘high-tech lynching’ – a designed obstacle or targeting of black people from thinking freely broadly on the basis of race. Hill’s allegations of sexual harassment, Thomas asserts, “plays into the most bigoted, racist stereotypes that any black man will face.”<sup>40</sup> Thomas argues that the sexual nature of the allegations feeds upon the spirit of lynchings of black men for allegations of rape.

... if you want to track through this country, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the lynchings of black men, you will see that there is invariably or in many instances a relationship with sex – an accusation a person cannot shake off. That is the point I am trying to make. And that is the point that I was making last night that this is a high-tech lynching. I cannot shake off these accusations because they play to the worst stereotypes we have about black men in this country.<sup>41</sup>

Lynching is a method of violent intimidation and control. White and Laird’s formulation frames racialized social constraint as between the majority of blacks restraining a few deviant individuals for the purpose of unity. By using the model of ‘modern lynching’, however, racialized social constraint is augmented into a process that borrows from and supports threats to blacks broadly. That the allegations of sexual assault were made by a black woman did not faze this assertion of a threat to blacks by outside forces. Phyllis Berry-Meyers, a special assistant for the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission who worked with Thomas, spoke in

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<sup>39</sup> It should be noted here that this paper is not an investigation into the veracity of Hill’s allegations, and thus does not comment at all if Thomas’ assertion that Hill’s allegations are a form of racialized social constraint hold or not. However, for the purposes of exploring individualism and black conservative thought via racialized social constraint and the notion of modern lynching, it will be used as such with the presupposition that it is being analyzed through Thomas’ lens.

<sup>40</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 202.

<sup>41</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 202.

response to a senator's later observation of Hill's race in relation to Thomas' assertion of the racial nature of the accusation: "That's an old tactic in this country ... That's the thing, I guess, that embarrasses me most about this situation is that a black woman would allow herself to be a pawn to destroy a black man. Have we reached the point in our civilization where people can't legitimately have points of disagreement without trying to destroy the person because you don't agree with what the person stands for?"<sup>42</sup> There is, thus, a continued insistence that perceived forms of racialized social constraint are not, as White and Larid assert, a product of the black population compelling unity. Rather, external forces – similar in spirit to the forces that led to historical lynchings – are responsible for utilizing racialized social constraint to artificially constrain blacks. Black opposition to black conservatism, as Berry-Meyers and Thomas portrayed Anita Hill's allegations, is the product of a larger, dominating system that constitutes blacks that subscribe to the leftist coalescence as 'pawns'. This notion aligns with the arguments of Owens in asserting the lack of agency for blacks under the leftist coalescence.

The characterization of racialized social constraint in Thomas' and Berry Meyers' testimony, moreover, relies upon an inverted black utility heuristic. In the black utility heuristic, individual blacks use the collective interests of blacks as an efficient and rational proxy for their own interests. The inverted black utility heuristic, thus, is when the collective interests of blacks are constituted by the individual interests of its constituents. The black utility heuristic and its inverted form are not distinct notions nor interchangeable; rather, they engage each other in a circular relationship. The inverted black utility heuristic is an implicit assumption of the black utility heuristic. The basis for the collective interests of blacks being an efficient and rational proxy for individual interests is that historical and present forces have shaped blacks as a group

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<sup>42</sup> Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearings Before the Committee on the Judiciary*, 424.



with a common history and experience. Thus, the collective interests of blacks are constituted by the interests of individual blacks, and these interests are expected to be – as a product of these forces – similar and overlapping enough such that any one individual black person shares a similar interest as another black person on issues of race. Each black individual’s interests are thus an amalgamation of other black individuals’ interests. The logic of the ‘modern lynching’ argument asserts that threats to individual blacks on the basis of race threatens blacks collectively. This employment of the inverted black utility heuristic thus also engages with its reciprocal complement, the black utility heuristic.

Candace Owens also uses the notion of modern lynching to extrapolate perceived modes of opposition to black conservatism from the leftist coalescence as threats to black agency broadly. This paper’s usage of the term ‘modern lynching’ is borrowed from the title of a section in the final chapter of *Blackout*, on the subject of slavery. “Freedom can exist only in the absence of punishment for our choices,” Owens writes in *Blackout*. “If blacks voting for Democrats today is simply an act of freedom ..., then there would be no evidence of punishment for blacks who choose to vote otherwise.”<sup>43</sup> Owens continues:

Instead, when a black American gathers the agency to walk away from the Democrats and publicly announces the reasons as to why, the punishment that awaits is severe and is inflicted by the hands of our mainstream media. Of course, it would be unconscionable for the Democrats to chain and whip their runaways publicly. Today they use the less detectable tools of slander and libel ...<sup>44</sup>

Owens’s conceptions of freedom and agency articulated here coincide with that of Thomas in his Senate hearing testimony. Owens argues not that black conservatives specifically are unfairly outcast, but instead that black people are punished for demonstrating agency and freedom of

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<sup>43</sup> Owens, “On Slavery” in *Blackout*.

<sup>44</sup> Owens, “On Slavery” in *Blackout*.

thought. As with Thomas's conception of the "high-tech lynching" and racialized social constraint, these two arguments may be semantically identical but differ in their scope of reference. The former argument concerns the jeopardy of the agency for black conservatives, whereas the latter concerns the agency of black people broadly. Candace Owens uses the inverted black utility heuristic in portraying racialized social constraint as a threat to black individualism and agency, using the perceived repercussions of 'a black American' – a singular entity – to make a statement on the agency of blacks broadly. The logic of black conservatism thus borrows from and relies heavily upon the rationality of the black utility heuristic. Race is the base, material condition upon which ideology rests; ideology is not so much trivialized as it is positioned as more dynamic and less rooted in this articulation, with respect to the role of race. This is not to say that ideology is not a crucial element of black conservative thought itself, but instead that it rests upon the foundation of race as the shared and fundamental element of black conservatism.

Black conservatism is thus the two-part "building" – race the necessary foundation, floor, and premise, ideology the building built conditionally on the foundation. The model of modern lynching relies upon the logic of the inverted black utility heuristic in arguing that black conservatism is fundamentally a condition of being black, and thus the operation of racialized social constraint in targeting black conservatism in actuality is a forceful restraining of blacks' agency of thought and movement. In making this argumentative step, black conservatives assert that the process of racialized social constraint is not perpetuated by the majority of blacks to maintain a historically and contemporaneously fruitful unity, but instead by sinister external forces. Collective individualism in the context of black conservatism can thus be understood via the inverted black utility heuristic and the black utility heuristic. Through the medium of race,

black conservatism, in constituting itself, utilizes individualism to augment collectivism, and vice versa.

### Implications

The notion of collective individualism offers a reframing of the academic discourse surrounding black conservatism. Collective individualism, a contradictory term at first appearance, exists as a tool to transgress one-dimensional dichotomies between what constitutes individualism and collectivism in favor of blurred boundaries spanning multiple dimensions of ideology and race. Hall and Orey premise their binary individual-collective models of black conservatives as the ‘house Negro’ and racial resentment on dichotomies of ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ to a group. However, the traditional association of individualism with conservatism has shown not to imply necessarily individualism with respect to collective racial-group interests. This is not to imply that the theses of Hall and Orey are necessarily ‘faulty’ – the premise need not be infallible for the argument to be meaningful, but the theses should be reframed with a greater complexity that allows for the existence of collective individualism.

There is much that this paper has been restricted by, these shortcomings primarily manifesting themselves in the form of nuance that is waived or generalized for the sake of brevity. Black conservatism, even with its long historical roots,<sup>45</sup> is always ‘new’ in the sense that it is continually rapidly evolving. Black conservative figures that this paper has cited – Candace Owens, Larry Elder, Shelby Steele, and Clarence Thomas – span several decades of

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<sup>45</sup> See Angela Lewis, “Black Conservatism in America.” *Journal of African American Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005): 3-13. and Seth N. Asumah and Valencia C. Perkins, “Black Conservatism and the Social Problems in Black America: Ideological Cul-de-Sacs”. *Journal of Black Studies* 31 no. 1 (2000): 51-73.

transformation, and thus there is significant meaning in exploring how differences in the background and thought of each of these figures contribute to their differing approaches to collective individualism. The assertion that collective individualism channels through and is a defining characteristic of black conservatism is one that must be made with generalizations. The concept of the 'leftist coalescence', too, was introduced as shorthand for the ideological amalgamation of leftism, liberalism, and the Democratic Party, collapsing meaningfully different entities into one for the purpose of establishing and referencing the ideological and institutional 'pillar' or 'gravitational center' opposite that of black conservatism. Like with the grouping of diverse black conservative figures under the reference of 'black conservatism', there is much value to be found from deconstructing the notion of the 'leftist coalescence' into unique aspects or facets that black conservatives interact with in meaningfully different ways. Given these generalizations and others, this paper is more so a proposal for reframing and complicating binaries of individualism and collectivism in relation to ideology and race based upon observations from a diverse sampling of black conservative thought than a definitive statement on the nature of black conservatism.

Collective individualism poses many possible implications for aspects of black conservative thought that deserve to be further investigated. One phenomenon that seems to occur as the result of collective individualism is a peculiar black conservative portrayal of the distribution of responsibility across the political landscape with respect to the distribution of agency. The black conservative illustration of the distribution of agency, as established prior, is that the black population as a whole is threatened by a systemic deprivation of agency and control. The relationship between agency and responsibility is a profound one; an individual with full agency and control over their actions, by general societal agreement, possesses responsibility

for that action. One could reasonably argue that it follows that an individual without agency and control of their actions possesses little or no responsibility for their actions. Given that black conservatives argue that black people broadly are deprived of agency by the policies and cultural changes of the leftist coalescence, it may be that black conservatives discount the responsibility of black figures that engage in actions that support the leftist coalescence and, black conservatives would argue, hence aids in diminishing black agency. Black conservatives that criticize the actions of other black people, it seems, often qualify such criticism with an exposition on the systems that are argued to enable, empower, and force such actions. Candace Owens, for instance, writes in *Blackout* of what she argues is a deteriorating black culture dominated by “the slow decay of morality: less clothing, more profanity, less education.”<sup>46</sup> Owens begins with a brief reprimand of the black community – “We are fundamentally anti-establishment, and anti-conformity. An artist would be hard-pressed to land a number one track singing about family and love. Those days of black America are long gone.”<sup>47</sup> This hasty ‘tut-tut’ is followed by several pages dedicated to arguing that the Democratic Party exploits and perpetuates such a culture to sustain its electoral power. “I believe they [Democrat politicians] look at our [black] culture of disrespect which was fostered not by a natural black identity but by the long-term success of Democrat policies; policies that debased our men, our women, and thus our families,” Owens writes.<sup>48</sup> This notion of a ‘natural’ or ‘base’ state of black ideological thought, moreover, draws directly upon notions of collective individualism, of advocating individualism as a departure from argued systems of domination towards a unified and ‘natural’ collective residing under conservatism. This distribution of responsibility, moreover, may act as

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<sup>46</sup> Owens, “On Culture” in *Blackout*.

<sup>47</sup> Owens, “On Culture” in *Blackout*.

<sup>48</sup> Owens, “On Culture” in *Blackout*.

a method for black conservatism to assert itself as a more viable or welcoming alternative to the leftist coalescence – a sanctuary to regain one’s agency, rather than an institution that operates as a manifestation of Orey’s model of racial resentment. Thus, an analysis of the implications of collective individualism can yield insights into how black conservatism acts not only as an entity in a static political landscape, but as a dynamic entity attempting to effectuate political, ideological, and cultural change in response to environmental signals.

### Immutable Characteristics and Conditions of the Mind

This paper has argued for a complication of traditional understandings of black conservatism as a defection or relinquishing of collective racial group interests in favor of individual self-interest through the notion of collective individualism. As a premise, black conservatives assert that the leftist coalescence’s policies and strategy of growth threaten the agency of black people. Through the model of modern lynching, black conservatives engage with racialized social constraint in arguing that punishment is not directed at black conservatives, but at blacks broadly. This logic relies upon the rationality of the inverted black utility heuristic, which is by necessity complementary with the black utility heuristic itself. Black conservatives, thus, are not wholly separate from the black utility heuristic and racial-collective group thinking; although individualism is indeed a principle in conservatism, within black conservatism it is augmented by the black utility heuristic and the weightier precedence of race. The architectural building of black conservatism, thus, is structured with race at its foundation and ideology the perhaps firm but nevertheless mutable structure resting upon it.

The notion of collective individualism, as has been discussed prior, complicates a binary logic of individualism in relation to black conservatism, in which adopting individualism associated with conservatism is thought to imply the relinquishing of racial group interests. Moreover, collective individualism as a theory-based pattern of thought can manifest itself in implications that allow for understandings of black conservatism as a dynamic entity in the physical world, campaigning for minds and change in the political, ideological, and cultural landscape of the black population. Beyond the context of black conservatism, the system encompassing the conception of collective individualism offers a potential path towards an understanding of the relationship between individuals' immutable characteristics and conditions of the mind. Here, the usage of the terms 'immutable' and 'mutable' are not to be taken too literally, referring to the general sense of the characteristic rather than the literal possibility of change. For instance, an individual's race would be considered under this framing to be 'immutable' in that it is an ingrained part of one's being, although works have shown that over time categories of race shift to capture political and social changes.<sup>49</sup> An individual's class would also be considered 'immutable' in the sense of the significant effort and time needed to meaningfully change an individual's economic position, despite the possibility of change. 'Immutable' characteristics define broad aspects and forces that shape an individual's experience in and interaction with their environment. Conditions of the mind define an individual's belief structures and subscription to certain sets of principles and ideology. The relationship between immutable characteristics and conditions of mind is an often-studied one. The model of black conservatism as an architectural building with shared immutable characteristic at its foundation and shared condition of mind resting upon it may suggest broadly that in the formation of human

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<sup>49</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Becoming Caucasian: Vicissitudes of Whiteness in American Politics and Culture" (*Identities*, 2001).

behavior immutable characteristic is base and precedes conditions of the mind. This is not to suggest that immutable characteristic is primary or dominant to conditions of mind in directing human behavior, but instead that in the directionality and causality of factors, immutable characteristics frame and envelop conditions of mind. Thus, it is unreasonable to articulate individualism merely as the independence of conditions of mind from certain immutable characteristics; the desire or pursuit to establish such an independence is futile. Notions of individualism in conditions of mind are made meaningful because it rests upon immutable characteristics. Without the static nature of immutable characteristics, the motion and deviation so core to traditional understandings of individualism ceases to exist, just as a car driving alongside a train at the same speed cannot be said by an observer on the train to be meaningfully visually 'moving' or 'deviating'. The leap from individualism in the context of a small but pressing and important group – black conservatives – to individualism in the context of broad sets of immutable characteristics and conditions of mind is a large and precarious one, but it hints at a unique opportunity to rethink and reframe our understandings of what individualism entails in the contemporary ocean of identity and ideology.



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