In May 2016, Donald Trump won the Republican primary in Indiana. His last standing adversary, Senator Ted Cruz, suspended his campaign. Reince Priebus, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, moved to close ranks, tweeting that Trump “will be presumptive @GOP nominee, we all need to unite and focus on defeating @HillaryClinton.”

Paul Ryan, then the Republican speaker of the House, was not ready. Appearing on CNN, Ryan acknowledged the inevitability of Trump’s nomination but declined, at least for the moment, to offer an endorsement. Trump, Ryan said, bore responsibility for unifying the party by embracing its principles. “I don’t want to underplay what he accomplished,” Ryan explained, “[b]ut he also inherits something very special, that’s very special to a lot of us.” Trump was having none of it. “Paul Ryan said that I inherited something very special, the Republican Party,” he fired back. “Wrong, I didn’t inherit it, I won it with millions of voters!”

After a four-year bender culminating in a Trump-incited insurrection, that exchange—especially the verbs the two men chose—merits reflection. Ryan said Trump “inherit[ed]” the Republican Party, an entity that, by implication, existed across time and transcended personalities. Trump, who had not previously declared discernible political principles consistent with the Republican tradition, was describing a hostile takeover: The Republican Party was a vessel he could empty and fill with personal ambition—or, more charitably, a set of replacement principles.

The degree to which most Republican officeholders aligned with Trump at the expense of ideas they had previously espoused—and the

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extent and rigidity of Democrats’ opposition to the man at the same cost—has fueled the thesis that partisanship is a corrosive force in American politics. Neither the thesis nor the phenomenon is new. As with other issues, the Trump experience merely magnified them.

It is clichéd, but largely true, that partisan polarization has hobbled government. Yet the resulting gridlock is not intrinsically problematic. If Americans truly disagree intensely about the most fundamental political goods, the constitutional system requires them to persuade one another before prevailing.

In that sense, partisanship can serve a constructive—indeed, indispensable—purpose in resolving polarization, since parties are vehicles for persuasion and organization. They also serve an essential branding function. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that without “ready-made opinions,” none of us would be able to get through the day. Party labels can supply these, displacing the need for novel philosophical inquiry into every new controversy.

The question is whether parties are actually serving those purposes. More deeply, it is a question of whether the much-bemoaned partisan divide actually reflects disputes over basic governing ideas. Parties, which Edmund Burke saw as instruments for pursuing “leading general principles,” have become more like ethnic identities: calcified affiliations—often defined less by ideological affinity than by opposition to real or imagined enemies—that eventuate in lockstep inflexibility across a full range of otherwise loosely related issues.

The polarization thesis in American politics generally assumes that less partisanship is better. But parties are inextricably woven into America’s civic fabric, as the writings of early theorists of party like James Madison and Martin Van Buren indicate. The important distinction is not between partisanship and non-partisanship—or, as it is sometimes called, “post-partisanship”—but rather between honorable and destructive partisanship.

Honorable partisanship is based on amity—destructive partisanship, on enmity. Honorable partisanship, in recognizing the importance of friendship among groups of like-minded politicians over time, tends to adapt gradually. Destructive partisanship orbits around individual personalities, either endorsing or opposing them, and therefore lurches suddenly. Honorable partisanship unites around general principles but does not expect unanimity on every question subordinate to them. Destructive
partisanship imposes a straightjacket on all questions, condemning and ultimately ostracizing anyone who strays from the party line.

The end of partisanship has always been a fantasy. As an ideal, it is probably inadvisable as well. But the recovery of honorable partisanship is within reach.

**Burke’s Parties**

The contemporary hope for sunlit post-partisan uplands is more retro than its avant-garde adherents know. It is often imagined as the tax-free luxury of the victor, as when Thomas Jefferson, having vanquished the Federalist Party in 1800, declared in his first inaugural, “[w]e are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” But there is a philosophical case for post-partisanship as well. Its premises date at least to the 17th-century writings of Thomas Hobbes, and Henry St. John — better known as Lord Bolingbroke — arrived at its conclusions in the early 18th century.

Hobbes was not a theorist of party so much as he was a theorist of disagreement and its consequences. Because his overriding concern lay with preventing civil war, he advised empowering the sovereign to suppress potentially explosive disputes, such as those pertaining to religion. But his methodology shows that his deeper concern was not simply controlling the detrimental consequences of disagreement, but also eliminating the causes of disputes themselves. To Hobbes, disagreement arose from uncertainty, especially as to fundamental principles.

Hobbes, under Francis Bacon’s sway, sought a “civil science” that rendered politics as certain as physics. Significantly, the opening chapters of Hobbes’s *Leviathan* are devoted not to politics, but to epistemology and method. Philosophers, he stated, reach absurd conclusions because their methods are imprecise, “[f]or there is not one of them that begins his ratiocination from the Definitions, or Explications of the names they are to use; which is a method that hath been used onely in Geometry; whose Conclusions have thereby been made indisputable.”

A science capable of settling political questions on some objective basis would obviate the need for parties. Bolingbroke made this case in a series of essays during the first half of the 18th century. In that sense (though certainly not with respect to *Leviathan*’s absolutist conclusions), Bolingbroke was Hobbes’s heir.

In his classic *Statesmanship and Party Government*, Harvey Mansfield paraphrases Bolingbroke thusly:
Erroneous opinions are ephemeral. Thus, nobody has a truly partisan interest, derived from his opinion. There are never any real differences between parties; there are only false apprehensions, which can produce actions that are actual enough, but which need not exist and “tend to dissolution from their birth.” Because it is possible to have society based on truth… it is possible to have society without parties.

In short, for Bolingbroke, parties are based on disagreement, and disagreement is transient. In a government based on abstract truth, mistakes concerning public policy cannot withstand the light of either theoretical examination or practical experience. Consequently, an idea should be evaluated not based on its association with a political party, but on its own merit.

This argument reflects a belief, common to Bolingbroke’s day, that parties tear at the civic fabric. But the more illuminating fact is not that he thought parties destructive; it is that he thought them unnecessary. In Bolingbroke’s telling, parties are merely artifacts of a bygone era of opacity — or, worse, superstition — now illuminable by reason.

If, on the other hand, reason is not capable of grasping the limitless complexity of human beings interacting in society over time, the case for parties would endure. This notion reflects Burke’s defense of parties, which must be understood in light of his epistemological modesty — the “moral rather than… complexional timidity” that lies at the heart of prudence. That he and Bolingbroke reach different conclusions about partisanship is a byproduct of an underlying dispute about the confidence each is willing to repose in human reason.

Burke first took up the subject of parties in a 1757 essay only recently attributed to him by his biographer Richard Bourke. That essay, “On Parties,” contains the seeds of the argument that blossomed 13 years later in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*.

In unmixed regimes, Burke wrote in 1757, political parties did not exist because the only political good up for grabs was personal interest. In such a regime, “[f]actions there may be & are undoubtedly,” but not parties. And indeed, the Whigs and Tories of 1757 had descended into exactly that kind of factious contention. “We have at the present no Party properly so called among us,” Burke observed, “but have we no Divisions? We have, but they are mere factions: without any Design,
with out any principle, but only a junction of People intreaguing for their own Interest.” The proof, he said, was that the opposition leadership could die or switch sides and the party, lacking principles beyond the leader’s personal interest, would have no reason to continue on.

The 1757 essay makes Burke’s ideal model clear: one in which political parties are animated by principles transcending personal interest. Later, in *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, he counterposed such a system to the “system of Favouritism” by which a court faction was attempting to disable or co-opt checks on the crown by dispensing power on the basis of personal loyalty and interest. The section of the pamphlet pertaining to parties criticizes the slogan “[n]ot men but measures.” One of his purposes was to show that those who espoused the maxim actually cared little for measures; their primary concern was with the men who possessed power and its emoluments.

Burke described the court faction’s emphasis on personality much the way Aristotle (and later, Tocqueville) elucidated the conditions for tyranny. Favoritism at the expense of party, he declared, was an attempt “to destroy the connexions of men and their trust in one another, [and] to throw the dependence of publick counsels upon private will and favour.” The tyrant, in other words, sows distrust among party members and cultivates their dependence on his favor.

In making this observation, Burke spotted the real agenda behind the conflation of party with faction, and its insistence that power should be dispensed according to isolated cases of ability:

> Whilst men are linked together, they easily and speedily communicate the alarm of any evil design. They are enabled to fathom it with common counsel, and to oppose it with united strength. Whereas, when they lie dispersed, without concert, order, or discipline, communication is uncertain, counsel difficult, and resistance impracticable.

The foregrounding for Burke’s endorsement of parties was an emphasis on “connexion.” “Party,” he declared, “is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.” The “cant,” as he put it, of “[n]ot men but measures” overlooks the essential point of parties, which is not simply the principles they pursue but also the connections
between statesmen that make them possible. Both the court faction and the Whigs understood the importance of men; the difference was whether the basis of the bond between them was shared principles or personal advantage.

In one sense, Burke saw connection as a barrier to abuse—hence his famous formulation that “when bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.” But to see connection as simply a means of opposing one power to another is to miss his deeper point.

In *Discontents*, Burke was primarily concerned with the means by which the best policies were most likely to be ascertained. He recognized that, given the limits on human knowledge and rationality, the individual statesman attempting to reason his way through a problem on his own was likely to err. But if that same statesman were a member of a party, in which connections among like-minded statesmen were developed and nurtured, he might be more willing to consider the sage advice of friends, or to compromise with them if they disagreed. Thus to Burke, connection—especially the overtones of friendship formed in the trenches of political combat—was fundamentally a guardrail against the errors to which individual reason was prone.

Yet Burke did not consider honorable partisans to be intellectual slaves. While partisans in Burke’s telling should associate with one another because they share greater principles, they should also be able to dissent on subordinate issues. Even in these cases, though, Burke insisted friendship would be a more reliable guide than personal reason: “When the question is in its nature doubtful, or not very material, the modesty which becomes an individual, and…that partiality which becomes a well-chosen friendship, will frequently bring on an acquiescence in the general sentiment.”

For a party to act with effect, its members had to accommodate themselves to one another, which entailed flexibility with one’s friends. But it also required rigor with one’s opponents—or, as Burke put it, “[t]o cultivate friendships, and to incur enmities. To have both strong, but both selected: in the one, to be placable; in the other, immoveable.”

Burke’s partisanship, then, is rooted not in abstract principles evaluated on their own philosophical merits, but rather in political friendships—or connections—formed in the uniquely concrete activity of applying general ideas to specific circumstances. These friendships are
based on the pursuit of overarching principles, and they guard against error in the statesman’s all-important prudential task of identifying the specific policies likeliest to attain them. Deferring to a partisan view is thus not politically craven; it is intellectually modest.

For Burke, recognizing reason’s limits — and thus the benefits of parties — was supremely reasonable. But parties are also inevitable, and inevitably necessary, for the simple reason that politics is decidedly not a science in any discernibly Hobbesian sense. Most political questions do not have definitive objectively “correct” answers. That is true because no individual is capable of grasping the infinite complexity of human society. It is also true because some matters simply exceed human comprehension by their nature. And it is true because politics pertains to competing values, not simply to competing facts.

Burke’s view of parties paralleled his view of regimes, which he believed were animated by principles toward which reform and adaptation should be oriented. Parties could evolve over time, he allowed, but once they abandoned their principles, they had undergone the partisan equivalent of revolution rather than reformation. That was the message of Burke’s 1791 Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs: The Whigs who indulged the French Revolution were not the same Whigs responsible for the Glorious Revolution. Burke himself felt compelled to leave the party when it had been so hollowed out that its contemporary instantiation shared no more than a label with the party itself.

A political party, Burke emphasized, was obligated to its past. That, too, offers a guardrail against error. As he explained in a 1782 parliamentary debate, “man is a most unwise and a most wise being. The individual is foolish; the multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise, and, when time is given to it, as a species, it almost always acts right.”

Just as a group of statesmen is less prone to error than an individual, a party pursuing shared principles across generations is less prone to error than a group at a discrete moment in time. This was Ryan’s message to Trump: A statesman does not lay claim to a party in one moment; the party, over time, transcends its standard-bearers.

American Parties

James Madison was not a Burkean, and his analysis in Federalist 10 — which illuminates his view of parties — pertained less to political parties than to
what we would today call interest groups. Still, it contains a Burkean premise, as did his general defense of partisanship in the American context.

Madison was more confident in reason, and less deferential to custom, than Burke was. Yet in explaining why the problem of faction could not be solved by imposing unanimity of opinion, Madison noted that men will continue to hold differing opinions “[as] long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it.” He also hinted at a bias in favor of custom, speaking in Federalist 49 of the need for “veneration” of the Constitution over time so that it was not destabilized by constant philosophical inquiry. That epistemological premise places him, as it did Burke, at odds with the idea that the need for parties could be obviated by applying rationality to political problems.

Generally speaking, the Constitution of 1787 does not assume parties—or, at least, it does not give them primacy of place. Indeed, Madison’s argument for how the separation of powers could be maintained assumes that institutional loyalty will trump partisan commitments. As he asserted in Federalist 51, members of Congress will defend congressional prerogatives to preserve their own power, regardless of the policy outcomes in play.

But Madison always took parties, to some extent, for granted. The real question for him was not whether they would exist, but what they would be based on. In his 1742 essay “Of Parties in General,” David Hume had suggested that parties grounded in self-interest were comparatively safe—interest could be negotiated, differences split, accommodations reached. There was no comparable way to cut deals between parties based on “abstract speculative principle.” Madison reversed this dichotomy: Factions based on pure self-interest, he claimed, were dangerous because interest was durable, while those based on impassioned attachments to political personalities or religious views were likelier to be transient, since passion is inherently short-lived.

When Madison finally began to see the need for a party system, it was due to a sort of political role reversal. Before the Constitution was ratified, he had expected the people to be swayed by passion that would need to be controlled by the reason of those in power. Yet in what he considered the intrigues of Alexander Hamilton and other high Federalists, Madison began to see the people as a necessary check on the passions of their governors. For that to work, they would have to be organized around reasoned principles.
In September 1792, Madison published “A Candid State of Parties” in the *National Gazette*. The essay was itself a partisan tract that caricatured the Hamiltonians as “the antirepublican party.” Still, Madison’s framing of the issue here is helpful. The opening of the essay announces the purpose of his inquiry: to “understand the actual state” of parties to ensure they are grounded on principle rather than serving as instruments for the ambition of “designing men” who do not actually disagree with one another. This statement of purpose parallels Federalist 10’s distinction between reasonable and unreasonable foundations for parties.

Placing Madison’s writings on parties in relief with his teaching on faction reveals another important point: Federalist 10’s taxonomy of factions—creditors, debtors, landholders, merchants, manufacturers, financiers, and “many lesser interests”—strongly suggests there would be overlapping memberships such that alliances would shift from issue to issue. The value of this multiplicity of interests, according to Madison, was that there would be no permanent majorities and minorities in American politics; winners on one issue might lose on the next, and vice versa.

That was the particular danger of geographical alliances, such as the North-South division of which Madison warned at the Philadelphia Convention: They would enable majorities to align and calcify not just on single issues, but across a range of them. George Washington shared that concern. His 1796 Farewell Address is remembered for its warning against “the spirit of party,” but it bears emphasizing that the address first raised the issue in exactly Madison’s context. Washington, too, was concerned about parties based on “geographical discriminations, Northern and Southern, Atlantic and Western.” In these cases, “designing men”—Madison’s phrase from four years earlier—might exploit party as a vehicle for personal ambition, claiming differences of interest where none actually existed. That had been Madison’s argument.

Washington feared party in much the same way he feared the “self-created societies” that he denounced, to Madison’s chagrin, in a 1794 message to Congress. These societies, according to Washington, agitated the people and undermined the regime. But more fundamentally, both men agreed that parties could be unhealthy if they were mere instruments for ambition or if they prevented the re-alignment of coalitions on different issues. In the latter sense, Washington condemned parties in the same sense in which, in his Farewell Address, he condemned...
“permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations.” The problem was their inflexibility.

Madison had come to envision parties as a vehicle for organizing popular opinion as a check on the regime. But he and Jefferson so succeeded in founding their party that meaningful opposition rapidly disappeared. The man who would emerge as the true theorist of the need for a genuine two-party system was Martin Van Buren, who set out to build that system in the wake of the divisive presidential election of 1824.

At root, that election had been a contest of personalities. Partisan differences had blurred so completely by then that John Calhoun attempted to launch a candidacy on the platform of “principles not men.” Van Buren, a Jeffersonian at heart, did not trust John Quincy Adams, who had won just enough votes in the House of Representatives to defeat Andrew Jackson. Van Buren went on to lead much of the opposition to Adams’s agenda in the U.S. Senate and, in 1828, supported Jackson’s bid for revenge—but not without reservations.

In the absence of credible opposition, the Democratic-Republican Party had become what Burke feared: a vehicle for personal power struggles. A strong two-party system was needed, Van Buren concluded, to ensure that competitions in American politics occurred on the basis of ideas rather than personalities. In 1827, writing to the Virginia newspaper editor Thomas Ritchie, Van Buren suggested that a strong party system would substitute “party principle for personal preference.” It would serve a moderating influence by showing the utility of cross-sectional coalitions. Perhaps most revealingly, it would moderate a giant personality who might, if elected solely on a personal basis, be difficult to control:

Lastly, the effect of such a nomination [by party convention] on General Jackson could not fail to be considerable. His election, as the result of his military services without reference to party & so far as he alone is concerned, scarcely to principle, would be one thing. His election as the result of a combined and concerted efforts of a political party, holding in the man, to certain tenets & opposed to certain prevailing principles, might be another and a far different thing.

Van Buren’s theory of parties as grounding forces for candidates largely prevailed. The theory, but not practice, of American parties later took a
parliamentary turn, mostly notably in the thought of Woodrow Wilson, whose 1885 *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* saw parties less as a moderating influence than as a means of giving coherent force to the public will. This view may have reached its acme in the 1950 report of the American Political Science Association’s committee on strengthening political parties: Its fundamental concern was less with deliberation than with action.

But this is neither Madison’s nor Van Buren’s party system. For them, parties ultimately served not only a moderating, but also a defensive purpose. In contrast to the parliamentary approach championed by Wilson and other progressives, these earlier approaches orient party members toward Burke’s “leading general principles” but still allow the formation of shifting coalitions on subordinate issues.

**Contemporary Parties**

For all the concerns about partisan paralysis today, the evidence on the issue is surprisingly mixed. The indications of polarization are extensive in two senses: Conservatives are more conservative and liberals are more liberal; and conservatives are overwhelmingly Republican while liberals are almost all Democrats. Yet the evidence for a straightjacket effect, by which members of a party stand with one another across a wide range of issues at the expense of shifting coalitions, is preliminary at best.

In 2019, the parties appeared to cohere in both the House and the Senate: Senate Republicans largely hung together on judicial confirmations, while House Democrats were unified on legislation that hectored Trump but had little chance of passage. A longer perspective is more heartening. In its *Vital Statistics on Congress*, the Brookings Institution charts the percentage of party unity votes in the House and Senate from 1953 to 2016. In both bodies, the figure was around 52% in 1953. By 2015, it had climbed to 75.1% in the House and 69.3% in the Senate. Yet the Senate figure dropped off sharply, to 46%, the following year, and the patterns in between those years fluctuate considerably. They do not appear to demonstrate that parties, at least in Congress, are consistently hardening over time.

The Democratic and Republican parties today differ over fundamental issues like the size of government and strategies for national defense. But subsidiary issues are aligning along partisan divides, too. The Pew Research Center, for example, has found partisan divisions not just on
how to deal with environmental problems — something one would expect to provoke differences based on governing philosophy — but also on whether those problems exist.

Other measures are more obscure. With the presidency becoming the sun around which all other political planets orbit, two dynamics have resulted. One is that national politics, and the White House in particular, consumes ever-increasing amounts of space in our political discourse. The other is that party identities — even at levels of politics often immune to them, such as municipal governance — have hardened and attached themselves to attitudes toward the president. It’s difficult to say whether the latter is a phenomenon particular to the Trump years. After all, some aspects of Trumpism are *sui generis*; others simply amplify trends that had not attracted attention before he took office.

What is most troubling about the Trump phenomenon is the failure of the Republican Party to prevent exactly what Van Buren maneuvered to avoid in 1828 (when Trump’s beau ideal, Andrew Jackson, was on the ballot) by leveraging a party label for an outsized personality who could not be clearly tethered to principles. Democrats, too, nearly suffered such a hostile takeover themselves in 2016, when Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a socialist who had made a deliberate show of refusing to join the Democratic Party, launched a credible bid for its presidential nomination that year. He did so again in 2020.

This trend of obsession with personalities at the expense of principles threatens several consequences, the foremost among them being instability. If parties are simply vessels that can be acquired and filled to suit individual ambitions, then Burke’s model of gradually evolving political change — “preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state” — has little chance of survival. An emphasis on charismatic personalities is almost certain to simultaneously attract those willing to supply the demand and to aggravate the already swollen place of the presidency in political life.

It bears emphasis that cults of personality are not the only problematic result of this state of affairs; the obsessive antipathies that coalesce in opposition are just as dangerous. Barack Obama’s election was greeted in messianic terms by Democrats, while Republicans became intensely preoccupied with his defeat. These positions surely reinforced each other. And the Trump phenomenon repeated the pattern — bigly.
Promising institutional reforms for strengthening parties have been suggested. The most auspicious, if least likely to succeed, may be restoring exactly what Van Buren proposed in 1827: nominating conventions whose delegates, committed to principles and not to candidates, have real power. But a recovery of honorable partisanship as an ideal must come first.

Its contours might be most clearly illustrated in contrast to what might be called unhealthy post-partisanship. This concept is captured in the kind of voter over whom we tend to fawn—the one who purports to vote for the candidate and not the party. Deeper dives into polling on party affiliation show that to be mostly talk: A substantial portion of Americans may decline to identify with either party, but when pressed, most lean toward one or the other. Pew research identifies only around 7% who do not.

Yet it is unclear that voting for the person without reference to the party is entirely admirable. Post-partisan idealists today are descended from Hobbes and Bolingbroke, whose beliefs that parties are unnecessary was grounded in what Michael Oakeshott later called “rationalism”—the treatment of political questions like engineering problems to be solved with formulas and slide rules. Burke saw the danger in such notions: Isolated reason could—and likely would—run off the rails.

By contrast, the honorable partisan is willing to accommodate himself to the imperfection of compromise at the expense of a glittering ideal that is as unattainable as it is dangerous. The honorable partisan’s favorite candidate may not emerge from a nominating process; his preferred bill may not make it through a committee markup in pristine condition. But a series of considerations will induce co-partisans to accommodate him.

One such consideration stems from the honorable partisan having sufficient self-knowledge and humility to admit that, however certain he may feel about a given position, he may also be wrong. In doing so, he should consider that, if the compatriots with whom he has traveled many political miles in pursuit of worthy ideals believe him to be wrong, perhaps they deserve the deference of friends. A judicious benefit of the doubt goes a long way toward oiling the skids of political
life—as does the willingness to trade subordinate issues for the sake of unity on larger matters.

At the same time, honorable partisan leaders will not see their job as doctrinal enforcement on every question. They will instead be willing to lose some battles or free some partisans in the process of pursuing larger goals. Leaders and members alike will be open to bipartisanship, but not for its own sake; they will enter into alliances that contribute to more important ends.

Honorable partisans will not avoid cross-party alliances lest the other side get a “win.” They will regard their opponents as opponents, but they will do so not out of enmity; rather, they will do so because they see their fellow partisans as friends. As Burke noted, political connections imply the inevitability of political enmities, but the connections are their overarching point.

Because honorable partisanship arises from Burke’s notion of connection, it resists thralldom to personalities. As Ryan said of Trump, standard-bearers are so called because they have a standard to bear. In a party, as in a regime, that standard transcends the appetites and interests of the moment. Above all, the honorable partisan must be willing to walk away from a party that—like the New Whigs—shares nothing in common with its animating principles but the label that once described them.

The eternal now was the dominant fact in American political life during the Trump years. It is, one supposes, an alternative to the eternal tomorrow of progressivism. Each is equally elusive, generating endless demand for its own product. An honorable partisanship offers the possibility of bringing the past, present, and future into conversation. It is still within reach.