

Introduction

Gratitude's Keywords

Once the answer was love. Today it is gratitude.

Over the past two decades, scholars and writers and pundits, from academia to morning talk shows to self-help books, have touted gratitude as the single most important emotion for living happier, healthier, more fulfilling lives.¹ Gratitude's proponents make very big claims. They say gratitude will fix our personal problems. They say it will fix our health. They say it will fix our world. Gratitude is pitched as a "magic key," an antidote to the violence, division, hatred, and resentment that characterize our broken political culture.² Few today would argue against gratitude. Before we jump on the gratitude bandwagon, however, we should take a moment to consider what we are being sold. Anytime something is framed as a panacea, we must look extra closely to make sure it is not snake oil. It is when words become automatic that we must be at our most vigilant, because it is in such moments that it is easiest to abandon critical thought and be lulled to sleep. It is high time we took a closer look at the gratitude that is so popular today.

Why this explosion of interest in gratitude right now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century? I believe it has to do with our current personal, political, and economic situation. We live in a time of rampant egotism and self-centeredness. It is hard for us to see beyond our narrow interests and worldviews, and so we are often shockingly blind to the suffering of others. Politically, Americans are fractured and divided. We are not *e pluribus unum* but *e unibus duo*, two countries made out of one, Red States and Blue States, The United States of Canada and Jesusland,

Makers and Takers, engaged in a culture war at the ballot box and on the streets.³ Though Americans pledge allegiance to the same flag, we are united as a people in name only. We have forgotten how to put aside our differences and work together toward the common good. Economically, we are on our own. Forty years of privatization has destroyed the social safety net that my grandparents took for granted. We are guaranteed almost nothing, other than the chance to compete in the free market. For far too many Americans, the world looks like Thomas Hobbes's nightmarish "state of nature" in which life is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."⁴ Left to fend for ourselves, we have lost a sense of what it means to work together to make the world a better, more just, more democratic place. Enter gratitude. Proponents tout gratitude's personal health benefits—it will lower blood pressure, reduce stress, and improve psychological health.⁵ They also champion gratitude's political benefits. They say that gratitude will encourage us to be kinder, gentler, and more loving toward our fellow citizens. Looking through grateful eyes, maybe, just maybe, we will stop being such jerks to each other.

I am trained as a rhetorical scholar, and I have studied some of the nastiest, darkest forms of rhetorical violence in American politics. So I'm not going to lie: I began this book about gratitude with genuine excitement and a belief that gratitude might indeed be the answer to our problems. Dutifully, I sat down to read everything that I could on the subject—and the literature on gratitude is quite voluminous, with hundreds of books and scores of articles written on the subject in the last two decades. However, over the period of a few weeks, I found that reading one self-help book about gratitude after another had the opposite effect on me.

The more I read, the less grateful I felt, and in fact the more resentment I felt toward what people were calling "gratitude." The problem, I quickly realized, is how gratitude tends to be defined in the contemporary literature: as a feeling of obligation and indebtedness toward those who give us a gift or help us out in some way. The gratitude literature tells us to count our many blessings, to focus on what is good in our lives, and to acknowledge our debts. One of the most striking things about the contemporary gratitude literature is how consistently gratitude is described as a feeling of indebtedness to another person, an economic system, a divine being, or a political state. For most contemporary writers, gratitude means indebtedness. The contemporary gratitude literature reminds us of

our duties toward others by demanding that we account for our many debts. In the most influential and popular contemporary self-help book on gratitude, Robert Emmons's 2007 *New York Times* bestselling *Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, to be grateful "is to feel indebted."⁶ Emmons is one of the leaders of the positive psychology movement, and it is hard to overestimate his influence on contemporary conversations about gratitude. His work is everywhere, and gratitude is, he writes with his co-author Michael E. McCullough in *The Psychology of Gratitude*, "an acknowledgement of debt."⁷ In the contemporary literature, gratitude is most often a synonym for debt—and debt, of course, is one of the primary means by which we are governed, managed, and controlled today.⁸ Debt is one of the principal reasons we suffer, and also why we lash out at our fellow citizens with hateful words. And so the question becomes, does this gratitude as indebtedness help or harm us?

Today we are taught to consider gratitude as a kind of transaction, and thus being grateful means keeping score—I give so that you give back to me, or, in the words of the theme song to the popular television show "Friends," "I'll be there for you, because you're there for me too." This is *the debt of gratitude*. The gratitude literature defines people as debtors and the givers of debt. The contemporary gratitude literature teaches us to see gifts and kindnesses as economic gestures that must be repaid with reciprocal gifts. Furthermore, we are taught to judge the value of others by what they can offer us, and the cost of such gifts to the giver.⁹ Gifts that cost nothing are said to be less valuable than a gift that results in real, genuine loss to the giver. Consequently, our interpersonal relationships are judged by economic criteria of gain and loss, and the popular gratitude journals become little more than a place for recording our debts. One prominent author goes so far as to compare the gratitude journal to a checkbook registry in which debts of gratitude are recorded and categorized so that they might be more efficiently repaid.¹⁰ Gratitude as indebtedness is at the heart of how many of us think about our personal relationships, our ethical responsibilities, and our duties as citizens today.¹¹

The debt of gratitude encourages us to see life in economic terms, as a transaction, and to see our relationships as economic contracts that can always be renegotiated if a better deal comes along. As it teaches us the debt of gratitude, the contemporary gratitude literature also affirms key aspects of *neoliberalism*, the dominant economic paradigm of the

present, and the source of so many of our political, social, and economic problems.¹² Neoliberalism applies the logic of the market to every facet of our lives, even those that have nothing to do with economics (like friendship, love, and citizenship). Neoliberalism says that Americans are *consumers*, not *citizens*. Neoliberalism denies that there is a common good above the market. Its proponents take aim at the social safety net, privatizing public goods because, they claim, the market, not government or “the people,” is the best custodian of public health. Neoliberalism has been called “the debt economy” because one of its effects, as my college students know all too well, is rising personal debt.¹³ To put citizens in debt is also to promote obedience to a political and economic regime that is unhealthy and harmful to us, our families, our community, and the world. Debt ensnares us, drawing us into a very dangerous, unstable, and violent neoliberal world.¹⁴

While there have been a number of helpful studies of neoliberalism, no one has yet studied the emotions that tend to be associated with neoliberal rule—emotions including gratitude (I will talk more about what *emotion* is, and how it may or may not be distinct from *affect*, in chapter 1). It is not easy to live a life in debt, especially when life itself becomes a debt. Enter the contemporary gratitude literature. By teaching the debt of gratitude, this literature inadvertently acts as neoliberalism’s staunch ally. The contemporary gratitude literature normalizes indebtedness. Reading one self-help book after another, I’ve come to believe that a central purpose of gratitude literature is to make Americans more comfortable living lives in debt. Intentionally or not, the work of contemporary gratitude authors serves to mollify the American citizenry, so that as we count our blessings and take stock of our many interpersonal, social, and political debts we are less likely to speak out about social and economic injustice.

Barbara Ehrenreich, the progressive, muckraking journalist author of *Nicked & Dimed* and *Bright Sided*, raises some serious concerns about the type of gratitude being preached by Professor Emmons and many of his peers in the self-help business.¹⁵ The trouble with their gratitude, she contends, is that it often little more than a call to accommodate ourselves to privation, scarcity, inequality, and injustice. The gratitude industry tells us to be content with what we have, however little it is and how much less than it should be, rather than to act in concert with others to change the world and make it a better, more just place for all.

Not incidentally, she observes that Emmons's research on gratitude at the University of California–Davis was supported by a \$5.6 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation, which also funded the creation of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California–Berkeley (to the tune of a \$3 million grant). Ehrenreich contends that one of the core purposes of the Templeton Foundation is to “promote free-market capitalism,” and this philosophical goal shows up in the type of gratitude work it supports with big checks. About Greater Good, she writes, “the foundation does not fund projects to directly improve the lives of poor individuals, but it has spent a great deal, through efforts like these, to improve their attitudes.” This is the ultimate problem with the contemporary gratitude literature for Ehrenreich: it calls for an attitude adjustment on the part of the individual, a reorientation of our mental state so that we are content with fewer opportunities than previous generations. The current prophets of gratitude do not aim to alleviate poverty. Instead, they aim to teach us how to be content with poverty. Gratitude, Ehrenreich concludes, is a draught we drink to remain calm and carry on. Calling for acquiescence, not action, “the current hoopla around gratitude is a celebration of onanism.”

Ehrenreich worries that the contemporary gratitude literature, with its talk of warm feelings and positive thinking, encourages political complacency. I worry that the cold, hard talk of debt has a similar, icy effect. As talk of indebtedness crowds out appreciation, I think we can safely say that all is not well with gratitude. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that “words sometimes get sick and we have to heal them.”¹⁶ Gratitude is sick; it is sick with debt. To experience the social and political benefits of grateful living, gratitude must be cured. The purpose of my book is therefore twofold: first, to get to the root of the contemporary experience of gratitude, which is, I argue, deeply colored by the rhetoric of debt; and second, to develop an alternative rhetoric of gratitude that heals this emotion—and our democratic culture, which is based on rituals of gratitude-as-indebtedness—by setting it free from debt. My goal, in short, is to help my readers relearn the art of gratitude.

Of course, there have been hundreds of books published on gratitude and other positive emotions over the past decade. Why should you read this book, when there are so many others available? My work makes a unique contribution to contemporary conversations about gratitude in two ways: (1) I understand gratitude not just as a private experience but also

as a political and rhetorical emotion common to contemporary American politics; and (2) I greatly expand the art of gratitude by drawing on Eastern philosophies that counteract the dominant Western conception of the debt of gratitude.

I recognize from the outset that “rhetoric” is one of those difficult words. When I meet someone for the first time and tell them I teach classes in ethics and deliberation, they understand. But when I mention that I am also a professor of rhetoric, I tend to receive a slightly quizzical, slightly skeptical, slightly bemused look at once curious and disbelieving in response. Anytime I mention rhetoric, it leads immediately to what one of my favorite professors in graduate school called “the cocktail party problem”—how to explain a discipline so ancient and complex to someone in a few short sentences. This challenge is especially vexing given that the word has such a negative connotation in our culture. Most people tend to think “rhetoric” means either fluff or deception (or worse). But really, rhetoric is the skillful use of language and other symbols to get things done. Anytime we build a relationship or a community or a team, anytime we pump up the troops for war or persuade them to put down their arms for peace, anytime we inspire people to rally for justice, we use rhetoric. Anytime we speak the truth, we use rhetoric. We use rhetoric to express ourselves. We use rhetoric to change minds. We use rhetoric to alter behaviors. We use rhetoric all the time. Rhetoric is the basic building block of social life. It is folk wisdom in our culture to say that *if you can dream it, you can do it*, but that’s not quite true—you also have to be able to *express it*, and it is here that so many people fail, for they have not yet learned to harness the power of rhetoric.

Like any art, rhetoric can be used for good or ill. There are plenty of examples of it being used badly (look around you, and you will see rhetoric being used badly). When used well, rhetoric allows people to live together in harmony and to work together toward a common good and a better future.¹⁷ For Aristotle, rhetoric is the art of leadership. To study rhetoric is to learn common strategies for motivating people to change how they are thinking, feeling, and acting. Aristotle claimed that there are three ways to motivate people: with character (*ethos*), reason (*logos*), and emotion (*pathos*).¹⁸ When we employ rhetoric to get things done, we necessarily make use of all three types of proof—it is not as though we can choose to speak rationally and ignore emotion. Rhetoric is always emotional. I would wager that our emotions are also always

rhetorical—our culture and our language profoundly influence our emotional realities. Emotions are premised on our shared beliefs about the world.¹⁹ Emotions cannot be located in a particular region of the brain or reduced solely to biology because emotions are social.²⁰

Today, many psychologists understand emotion primarily as an evolutionary adaptation that facilitates the navigation of a dangerous environment so that humans can defend themselves from their enemies, find a mate, reproduce, and stamp their genes on eternity. Rhetorical scholars from Aristotle and Cicero to those of the present day understand emotions to be much broader than this—emotions are how we relate to the world in all its facets. Emotions disclose the world to us. Aristotle was perhaps the first biologist in Western history; he originated the scientific study of animals. Yet his most substantive discussion of emotion is not found in his biological works, including the *Posterior Analytics* or the *History of Animals*, but instead in his *Rhetoric*. Emotions for Aristotle are social because they are based on shared judgments of good and bad, right and wrong, guilty and innocent.²¹ Emotions are rhetorical because they are shaped by our social reality and, oftentimes, can be altered by the words we say to ourselves and the words others say to us.²² Emotions matter because they orient us toward the world. We see the world through the lens of our emotions, which means that we see the world differently depending upon our emotional state. The world does not look the same to someone who is resentful and someone who is grateful.

Rhetoric is concerned with motivating people to change how they think, how they feel, and how they act. In ancient Greece, rhetoric was the first of the liberal arts.²³ Today, rhetoric remains one of the foundational social and political arts. There is no democracy without rhetoric. Rhetoric makes democracy possible. At the same time rhetoric enables all manner of violence, coercion, deception, and emotional manipulation. According to David Zarefsky, there are “two faces” of democratic rhetoric—rhetoric aimed at helping communities come together to hash out solutions to shared problems, and rhetoric aimed at manufacturing consent through propaganda and the manipulation of emotion. These two faces, which he calls the “open hand” and the “closed fist,” are ever-present possibilities in democratic culture.²⁴ Because we cannot have democracy without rhetoric, we had better get our rhetoric right.

My previous work has focused largely on the rhetoric of the closed fist. My first two books—*Enemyslip: Democracy and Counter-Revolution*

in the Early Republic (2010) and *The Politics of Resentment: A Genealogy* (2015)—mapped two popular forms of rhetoric commonly used by politicians in the United States to manufacture consent, to render citizens acquiescent and weak, and to justify forms of political and economic organization harmful to the public. Enemyship leverages the political emotions of fear and anger to demand that Americans unite in opposition to a shared national enemy. Though such unity is rarely achieved, enemyship creates the perfect rhetorical situation to silence protestors and smear dissenters as traitors who are in league with the enemy.²⁵ The mantra of enemyship is *you're either with us or against us*. Enemyship demands unity, but in the end it is a strategy of division, for it transforms the political landscape into one of loyal citizens versus traitorous protestors. In the process, enemyship dampens down the possibility for democratic deliberation by denying that there can be a loyal opposition and legitimate dissent. Moreover, enemyship is a rhetoric that constantly ratchets up the pressure and the tension, forcing us to make quick decisions concerning our safety. Enemyship says there is no time to talk, no time to deliberate, there is only time to fight, and so we had better heed the words of the rhetorical generals directing the fight. Looking at the world through the lens of fear, Americans are more likely to obey and less likely to dissent, even when this assent proves harmful.

For much of Western history, the wealthy elite feared resentment more than any other democratic emotion, for when the masses were resentful, they tended to rise up in revolution against the powers that be. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American elites did all that they could to calm and redirect democratic resentment, often by counteracting it with enemyship. During the twentieth century, however, politicians realized that if they could capture civic resentment with their rhetoric, they could transform this resentment into electoral gains. The contemporary politics of resentment seeks to capitalize on the ever-escalating civic resentment unleashed by neoliberalism's war on democracy and the common good. It does this by splitting Americans into two camps—the Silent Majority and its vocal oppressors; Red States and Blue States; Makers and Takers; “Real” America and its opposite (whatever that may be); the hard workers and the 47 percent; those who want to “Make America Great Again” and those who do not—and then framing one camp as victims, the other as oppressors. Politicians who practice the politics of resentment seek to position themselves as the leaders of

victimized Americans by voicing the unvoiced outrage of the outraged masses. This strategy channels civic resentment, engendered by economic exploitation, political alienation, and a legitimate sense of victimhood, into a hatred of our neighbors and fellow citizens.²⁶ The mantra of the politics of resentment is *blame the other side*. By doing this, politicians avoid discussing the genuine causes of our suffering—neoliberalism’s destruction of the common good—and instead encourage open political warfare between citizens. Fractured and at each others’ throats, and looking at the world through resentful eyes, Americans find it difficult to come together to do the difficult work of democracy.

Many contemporary authors pitch gratitude as the answer to our broken political culture. I do not believe that the debt of gratitude solves anything. The debt of gratitude calls on us to acquiesce to the current state of things, to be okay with things as they are, to push all thoughts of change out of our heads and instead focus our attention on accounting for our many interpersonal debts so that they can be more efficiently repaid. I am the first to admit, alongside many contemporary writers, that there is a gratitude deficit in contemporary America. The debt of gratitude is not the answer to this deficit.

Moving forward, Ehrenreich believes that we must articulate “a more vigorous and inclusive sort of gratitude than what is being urged on us now.” I agree, and it is my goal in this book to move beyond the debt of gratitude and to describe a different rhetoric of gratitude that lives up to the highest standards of social justice and the democratic common good. In fact, it is the democratic side of gratitude that interests me most in this book. *The Art of Gratitude* is my attempt to theorize a democratic politics that will result in better forms of civic engagement that counteract the hateful talk that is all too prevalent in contemporary politics. By reconceptualizing gratitude, it becomes possible to counteract powerful political emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment that dominate our political landscape. The art of gratitude represents a new politics that is not based on malicious rhetorical strategies such as enemyship and the politics of resentment that fracture the polis and turn citizens against one another. The art of gratitude represents the possibility for a democratic politics oriented toward the common good.

In this book I reconsider the art of gratitude. My goal in the opening chapters is to explore how the emotional experience of gratitude has been coopted and enlisted in neoliberal governance through the rhetoric

of debt. We can understand how the debt of gratitude has become a tool of power and social control only by studying its history—and this history is much older than we generally assume.²⁷ To better understand the contemporary debt of gratitude, I offer a genealogy of how Westerners have conceptualized gratitude beginning with Aristotle and Cicero, continuing through medieval Christianity and Enlightenment philosophy, and ending with the contemporary self-help and positive psychology literature.

I call this a *genealogy*, as opposed to a simply a *history*, to emphasize one key point. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault explains that his genealogical method for reading the past stands contrary to the anachronistic reading practices of most contemporary philosophers and psychologists. He is not motivated “par un pur anachronisme,” “by a pure anachronism.”²⁸ Most scholars “write the history of the past in the terms of the present.”²⁹ Most scholars, in short, project the conceptual categories of the present onto the past, as though ideas and the meaning of words remain constant. The contemporary gratitude literature is guilty of this presentist fallacy. The trouble is that such scholarship creates the appearance that our present reality is beyond contestation, that this is how things have always been and therefore how they will always be. But that is untrue. Foucault wants to demonstrate the fractures and fault lines in our social world, because once we recognize these fissures, we see that change is possible.³⁰ Foucault’s goal is “writing the history of the present,” and this is also my goal in *The Art of Gratitude*: to write the history of the grateful present.³¹ Genealogists study the past in order to demonstrate how things came to be what they are today. The goal is to illuminate the history of conflict and political warfare behind what we today accept as a given. The genealogist hopes that revealing the present as a rhetorical construction will loosen the hold of conventional norms over us and create space for alternative futures.

To illuminate the history of gratitude’s present, I focus, specifically, on the three classical words that form the rhetorical heritage of our contemporary English word “gratitude”: the Greek word “χάρις” (*charis*), and the Latin words “*gratia*” and “*gratitudo*.” By studying these keywords of gratitude in their original philosophical contexts, I confront a whole history, and a whole literature, that teaches us to experience gratitude as a feeling of indebtedness. By studying these words, I am able to draw out the political, rhetorical, and psychological implications of the central keyword of the contemporary gratitude literature: “indebted.” When we

practice gratitude today, we feel the full weight of this history bearing down upon us in the form of the norms and rules and definitions long associated with this emotion. My goal is to narrate how gratitude became a political emotion designed to promote obedience through the adoption of economic language, especially the rhetoric of debt.

In chapter 1, I navigate a middle ground between those who draw a sharp distinction between affect and emotion by describing what it means to take a rhetorical approach to the study of emotion. Inspired by the rhetorical tradition and the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, especially Heidegger's early lectures on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, I view emotion as foundational to persuasion—and also to human being. The world is disclosed to us through our emotions. We see the world through the lens of our emotions. This means that if we are going to understand contemporary democracy and all its myriad problems, we must study the emotions that are most conducive to democracy and those that can be used to frustrate the democratic impulse. In this chapter, I side with those contemporary psychologists who take a social constructivist position on the mind and who argue that our emotions are influenced by the words we say to ourselves and that others say to us. Words shape our emotions, and with our emotions, our worldview—which makes rhetoric a practice at the heart of politics and also human being. I argue in this chapter that training for democratic citizenship requires something that is not typically provided to citizens: an education in the awesome, world-shaping, soul-shaking power of rhetoric. Only when we understand how to control our rhetoric can we develop some control over our emotions and hence how we see and interact with the world.

Building on my understanding of the rhetoric of emotion, in chapter 2 I consider the divergent judgments of Aristotle and Cicero about gratitude. Aristotle trashed gratitude (*charis*) in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, but Cicero, who generally concurred with Aristotle on most matters related to rhetoric, disagreed. He pronounced gratitude (*gratia*) foundational to morality and justice in *On Obligations (De Officiis)*, which has been called the single most influential work of political philosophy in Western history.³² Most accounts of gratitude in the West begin with Cicero and assume that his vision of gratitude is both right and true. Here I demonstrate how Cicero transformed *gratia* into a rhetoric of social control. I then outline how Seneca made the shackles of gratitude even tighter in *On Benefits (De Beneficiis)* by theorizing a perpetual debt that can never

be repaid. Continuing my genealogy, in chapter 3 I describe how the words of St. Paul and Jesus in the New Testament elevated the stakes of grateful living by making the debt of gratitude a matter of heaven and hell, and then how the Medieval Scholastics invented a new word, *gratitudo*, to signify both the heavenly and the worldly debts owed by humans. Our English word “gratitude” is most immediately derived from the late Latin “*gratitudo*,” and its early French equivalent “*gratitude*,” words that retain this ancient sense of indebtedness. Finally, in chapter 4 I demonstrate how deeply the debt of gratitude continues to shape the current gratitude literature through the keyword “indebted.” Here I illuminate some of the most shocking political lessons pronounced by the contemporary prophets of gratitude, and I critique how this literature encourages us to see the world from an economic perspective in which indebtedness is a marker of moral virtue.

Emotions are polyvalent, which is one reason why rhetoric matters so much. Rhetoric does more than simply leverage emotions that already exist in the audience. More fundamentally, rhetoric is constitutive of how an audience experiences certain emotions. We experience gratitude as indebtedness because we are taught by the contemporary literature to associate gratitude closely with debt. I maintain that it is possible to break this association, severing gratitude from the keywords *charis*, *gratia*, *gratitudo*, and *indebted*. The debt of gratitude is not the only experience of gratitude available to citizens today.

In chapter 5, I pivot away from the debt of gratitude to describe a very different rhetoric of gratitude that I’ll call *gratefulness*. This gratitude is an overwhelming feeling of *thankfulness* for life and a recognition of the support that makes life possible. It is to gratefulness that Walt Whitman alludes in *Leaves of Grass*:

It seems to me that everything in the light and air ought
to be happy;
Whoever is not in his coffin and the dark grave, let him
know he has enough.³³

Whitman’s poetry is not a demand for accommodation to present injustice. Whitman calls, instead, on his readers to feel gratitude for life and to walk around and notice the ground on which we stand. Whitman’s rhetoric in *Leaves of Grass* represents a very different way of reaffirming

our human nature as social creatures whose individual fates are tied to the fates of others than the debt of gratitude.³⁴ Whitman encourages his readers to celebrate life, because, he reminds us, life itself is good, even if our lives are not. Whitman challenges us to focus on what we have—lungs to breathe, feet to walk, a mouth to laugh and talk and sing and argue—and then to look on the world with gratefulness for how it supports our lives. Whitman reminds us that no one does it alone. We are all supported, because we are alive.³⁵

Whitman's gratefulness reminds us of our embeddedness within community life by focusing our thanksgiving on the people, places, public goods, and things that support our ability to live and thrive and flourish—remember that Whitman expressed his thankfulness in “Song of Myself” with a long catalogue of all the motley characters who were, he affirmed, as much a part of himself as his eyes or hands or bones (“For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you”). This gratitude reveals that the good life can only emerge from our shared commitment to the common good, because there are goods on which all of our lives depend that we as human beings share in common. This gratitude reminds us that the common good is not a threat to our individuality but is in fact a prerequisite for joy and success. William James believed Whitman to be the paragon of American optimism—he recognizes no evil, and “he is aware enough of sin for a swagger to be present in his indifference towards it.”³⁶ James was right about many things, but he was wrong about this. Read the early editions of *Leaves of Grass*, and it is clear that Whitman recognizes the reality of sin and evil and privation. Gratefulness reveals to us that it is good to be alive, however, at times life is full of pain and we do not have all that we need to live well. Rhetorically, Whitman reframes privation not as something to be feared, but instead as something to be collectively confronted and defeated by a grateful demos committed to equality and working together to ensure that everyone, not just the privileged, can live and live well.

By noticing the personal, social, and material support that makes life possible, Whitman expands our democratic vistas and encourages us to see democracy anew—democracy is not just about people gathering to vote in common; democracy is about defining and defending “the common” itself.³⁷ It is this Whitman-esque vision of democracy that I defend in *The Art of Gratitude*. Deliberation is not always about the future; at times we must deliberate about what is happening right now,

in this present moment. Citizens deliberate to determine what is necessary for individuals and communities to flourish and what goods must be held in common, above the market. Deliberation is foundational to democracy because it is through talking with our fellow citizens that we understand what goods we hold in common and how these goods support us and those who are dear to us. I will argue in chapter 5 and in the conclusion that gratefulness is the proper emotional state in which to conduct democratic deliberation. Some democratic theorists—especially those scarred by the social justice movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, after which they began to believe that the cure for democracy is actually *less* democracy—view deliberation as a replacement for, and an antidote to, activism. I do not. Deliberation and activism are the systole and diastole of democracy. Having talked and argued and laughed and cried and prayed and chanted and jammed with our fellows, then we organize and take to the streets to ensure that everyone has the goods necessary to live and to flourish. Americans practice democracy whenever they band together to defend the common good, because to attack the common good is to attack life itself.³⁸

No rhetoric can cure all. Gratefulness will certainly have limits, and we must therefore think critically and deliberate openly about what it means to practice thankfulness in the face of power inequities, active subjection, and hatred. So long as it does not fall prey to the “hyperbole of hostility” and the politics of resentment, strategic ingratitude might well have its place in democracy.³⁹ That said, I believe that gratefulness is the best emotional frame through which to practice democracy. As Whitman well knew, gratefulness is a vital element of a progressive, democratic politics committed to upholding the inherent dignity of all beings and defending the common good from those who would sell it off to the highest bidder. This political value of such gratitude is that it enlarges our perspective on the world so that we can recognize the true nature of both the individual and of individual agency as inherently democratic.

We conceptualize agency too narrowly in the United States when we fantasize about going it alone.⁴⁰ A foundational assumption of rhetorical studies is that agency is interdependent, both impersonally and ecologically. As Karlyn Kohrs Campbell writes, agency is “communal and participatory, hence both constituted and constrained by externals that are material and symbolic.”⁴¹ Rhetorical agency, in turn, “refers to the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a

way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community."⁴² Agency is a capacity derived from our being-with-others and the supporting world around us. Following Laurie Gries, we might say that agency is an "act of intervention" made possible by the world into which we intervene. "Agency," she writes, "is a doing, an enactment generated by a variety of components intra-acting within a particular phenomenon."⁴³

Though we tend to laugh off the common saying that "there's no I in team," it is true. Alone we are weak and feeble. Alone our words are meaningless. But, of course, we are never really alone. We exist together, collectively, in, on, and through the world. It is only by joining with others that we gain the capacity to effect change in the world. When we act, we act with multitudes. Gratefulness is the recognition of our inherent possibilities and limitations as individuals and an acknowledgment of all that we are capable of, when we act together, democratically. Moreover, the practice of gratefulness fundamentally alters the meaning of democracy, for it changes the types of action and speech that can be recognized and heeded as appropriate, moral, and praiseworthy.

It has become common in contemporary critical theory to attack the concept of "the individual." It is said that the individual is a fiction—a cruel delusion of a bygone era of shattered hopes and failed promises—and so we must turn our attention, and our hope for social reform, to the group, to the demos, to the multitude. I refuse this argument. The reason the concept of the individual has received so much criticism is that it is understood primarily through the language of political economy, as the maker and bearer of debt, and not as a site of ethical responsibility, moral imagination, and communal commitment. Despite the obvious problems with how it is often conceptualized today, the individual is not a dispensable category. Today, we desperately need a revitalized conception of individuality that is not selfish or econocentric but instead is deeply communal and committed to the common good. I believe that the individual is a lived art. Each of us has the capacity to reimagine and refashion and remake ourselves, but such recreation requires a solid emotional and ethical foundation. I will argue that gratefulness provides a foundation for a democratic ethics of the common good.

It has become fashionable in academia to use the methods of critique and deconstruction to rip into our commonplace assumptions about the world, leaving our reality in shambles. This book does not fall into the trap of critical nihilism. Instead of endless critique, I offer an alternative

rhetoric of gratitude that, I believe, can help us to overcome the debt of gratitude. Inspired by Whitman's meditations on gratitude and politics, my goal, in chapter 5, is to add a new keyword to the contemporary conversation about gratitude: the Sanskrit word "santoshā." Having first mapped the Western rhetoric of the debt of gratitude, in this chapter I describe a different rhetoric of gratitude as santoshā inspired by the language of Eastern philosophy and spirituality including, especially, the yoga philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*.

The fact that yoga is so popular today—thirty-two million Americans practice yoga each year, spending \$27 billion on workshops, retreats, equipment, and fancy clothes⁴⁴—is a triumph of marketing, consumerism, and capitalism. The wild popularity of yoga in America is important precisely because the yoga most Americans practice is divorced from its philosophical, religious, and ethical foundations.⁴⁵ In chapter 5, I discuss santoshā, one of the ten ethical practices of self-discipline mandatory for the yogi. Building from the keyword of santoshā, I describe *gratefulness* as an emotional experience of overwhelming thankfulness for being alive. Gratefulness is not about debt. The power of gratefulness, I will argue, is that it discloses the preciousness of life to us and returns our focus to how we are living right now. Some emotions lead us to devalue life. Gratefulness brings us back to life, and to the world. Gratefulness brings us face to face with the thatness and forwhatness of our existence. Moreover, it directs our focus toward those goods we all hold in common that are required for freedom and joy. The virtue of gratefulness, I argue, is that it reveals the common good. Gratefulness leads us to see our being with others differently than as a debt of gratitude—we become collaborators in the common good, rather than the givers and receivers of debt.

In the end, I hope that *The Art of Gratitude* can model the type of humanistic education we must engage in if we are to reinvigorate democracy in the United States. This education is less interested in transmitting information and more interested in assisting students in the age-old quest to care for themselves. In the late 1930s, with democracy under siege by ideological enemies including fascism, and the United States on the cusp of world war, John Dewey wrote that "powerful present enemies of democracy can be successfully met only by the creation of personal attitudes in individual human beings." Defending democracy does not mean building military arsenals—such weapons are democratically useless. Defending democracy requires the education of civic character. Dewey

concluded, “we must get over our tendency to think that its defense can be found in any external means whatever, whether military or civil, if they are separated from individual attitudes deep-seated as to constitute personal character.” Democracy is “a way of life” grounded on the ability to see beyond our narrow, individual interests to the common good. It is based on “the democratic faith in human equality,” on the “belief that every human being, independent of the quantity or range of his personal endowment, has the right to equal opportunity with every other person for development of whatever gifts he has.”⁴⁶ Democracy is “the idea of community life itself” because it recognizes that individuals are empowered in and through their shared lives with others.⁴⁷ Democracy is lived in common; it is a life of common goodness.

In the absence of a deep-seated belief in equality, a deeply rooted democratic faith in the capacities of individuals, and healthy practices of civic deliberation, Dewey believed that democracy was doomed and its enemies would triumph certainly.⁴⁸ Dewey’s warning has lost none of its bite in the early twenty-first century, as old enemies of democracy, such as fascism and totalitarianism, and new enemies, such as neoliberalism, again mass at the gates, chipping away at our democratic inheritance, making true democracy seem like an impossible dream. To fight back, we must cultivate new attitudes and better ways of engaging the world. We must transform how we feel. To live in fear, anger, and resentment is to pave the way for totalitarianism. The debt of gratitude does not defend democracy. Debt has no political allegiance; it serves the agents of empire as easily as the custodians of freedom. To me, any hope for contemporary democracy rests squarely on the rhetoric of emotion. We must ask, what emotions are conducive of democracy? And then we must work assiduously to cultivate such emotions. I believe that gratitude is one such emotion and, to continue Dewey’s project of developing “personal character,” we must do a better job of teaching citizens what it means to live gratefully.

Teaching citizens to care for their emotional lives is a political act because emotions are political. This is precisely the point of Martha Nussbaum’s wonderful recent book *Political Emotions*—the central values of a decent, democratic society (such as equality and freedom) must be supported by political emotions that win citizens’ allegiance to these principles.⁴⁹ In the end, I will argue that gratitude is one such political emotion, and so I see my project in this book as complementary to Nuss-

baum's. However, whereas she puts the norms of a good society first, and then discusses emotions that can help to uphold popular commitment to these norms, I try to do the opposite—I put the emotion up front, and then see what political and rhetorical commitments are illuminated by that emotional experience. Gratefulness encourages us to see ourselves as part of a broader ecosystem (what Advaita Vedanta philosophy calls “the All” or “the whole,” *tat ekam*). The virtue of gratefulness, I will argue, is that it reveals the good, and it discloses this good to be a *common* good. If democracy has a future, it will be in collectively fighting to secure those common goods we collectively share so that all of us can flourish. The future of democracy rests on gratefulness.

The contemporary gratitude literature instructs us how to think, how to act, and how to live a life in debt. This literature invites us to see debt as inherently praiseworthy—as a marker of moral virtue—thus acting as a subtle justification for “the debt economy” and a pernicious neoliberal rationality that undermines democracy and diminishes the value of life.⁵⁰ *The Art of Gratitude* challenges the assumption that debt must reside at the heart of our relationships and our politics. This book therefore involves a fundamental reconceptualization of the nature of the individual, and of democratic politics, by describing an alternative art of gratitude that is not premised on debt. I contend that it is possible to build communities based on the common goods that we as citizens share—that is, if we first relearn the art of gratitude. To rethink gratitude is to rethink how we relate to each another and how we act together. To rethink gratitude is to rethink individualism and democracy. To rethink gratitude is necessary for our future on this earth.