# What the Black Intellectual Tradition Can Teach Us About American Democracy

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**[00:00:03.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** Hello, friends. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center, and welcome to We The People, a weekly show of constitutional debate. The National Constitution center is a nonpartisan nonprofit chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the Constitution among the American people. February is Black History Month, and to celebrate, we're sharing a great program from the NCC's America's Town Hall series. It's a conversation with New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie and political scientist Melvin Rogers about how African American intellectuals and artists, from David Walker to James Baldwin, transformed American democracy. My colleague Tom Donnelly, chief scholar at the National Constitution Center moderates. The conversation was recorded on November 14, 2023. Enjoy the conversation and happy Black History Month.

**[00:00:56.0] Thomas Donnelly:** Thank you again for joining us. Jamelle Bouie and Melvin Rogers.

**[00:01:00.0] Melvin Rogers:** Thanks for having us.

**[00:01:01.0] Jamelle Bouie:** Yeah, thank you for having us.

**[00:01:02.3] Thomas Donnelly:** So, beginning with you, Professor Rogers, your new book again is the Darkened Light of Faith. It offers a powerful account of the Black intellectual tradition from Antebellum America all the way up to the 20th century. Just want to begin by asking you what inspired you to write this book now?

**[00:01:19.0] Melvin Rogers:** Right. So I've been working on the book, I would say, for about a decade. And what motivated the book was really my first book project, which was on the American philosopher John Dewey. And central to that project was the idea of uncertainty that John Dewey sort of emphasized as being central to democratic politics. And once I concluded that book, my thought was that Dewey had laid out philosophically the importance of uncertainty, but who has sort of lived it in an immediate way. And although there were a whole

host of figures I could turn to and traditions I could turn to, I turned to the tradition of African American political thought and the lessons that are derived from their confrontation with a kind of fundamental uncertainty and vulnerability in American life.

**[00:02:16.4] Thomas Donnelly:** Excellent. Now, Jamelle Bouie, you've written and spoken powerfully about the Black intellectual tradition in your own work. How has it influenced your work as a political journalist and also as a public intellectual?

**[00:02:28.8] Jamelle Bouie:** I think that and I'm going to borrow a phrase from an edited volume Professor Rogers worked on a couple years ago. I think in the introductory essay, you use this phrasing. To me, you know, the African American intellectual tradition, which is broad and encompasses a lot of different avenues in a lot of ways, acts as sort of a counter to the public, the kind of mainstream American thinking about this country, about what American democracy is. And so as someone whose work at the Times is very much interested both in sort of like the day to day of American democracy and American democratic life. But also, as much as I can, pulling back in thinking broadly about American democracy, I think the African American political tradition provides an incredibly useful perspective. Basically the perspective of insiders who are still yet outside as well, and can turn a more critical eye to things that I think many Americans take for granted.

**[00:03:37.0] Thomas Donnelly:** Insiders who are also political outsiders. It's excellent. Melvin Rogers, you know, one other thing. Near the beginning of your book, you introduced really two ways of looking at the struggle over race throughout American history. You contrast the vision of pessimism with what you describe as a romantic story of inevitable progress. And at the same time, throughout your book, you really also emphasize the important role that faith, aspiration and imagination play in the vision of so many of the thinkers that you cover. Just to sort of frame our discussion, before we drill down into the thoughts of some of those specific thinkers, can you talk about some of those key themes and the role that they play in your account?

**[00:04:16.2] Melvin Rogers:** Sure. So I think sort of in contemporary intellectual and even public discussions around racial justice responding to racial inequality, there are two sort of dominant forms, I think, that animate our discussion. I mean, on the one side, there is this sense that sort of anti Black racism is constitutive and foundational of the United States, and that White supremacy is really sort of the animating tradition of the United States. And thus we cycle sort of in and out of the primacy, the centrality of anti Black racism and white supremacy. But the reason why this is the case is precisely because it is taken to be constitutive. And so if it's taken to be constitutive, one argument is why invest in trying to transform the nation? Isn't this holding out a form of cruel hope that never satisfies? I mean, the problem with sort of this description of the issue is that the notion of freedom, the notion of agency, the possibility of transformation, just cannot get on the table. And the fact remains is that everyday ordinary Black people are still

trying to get on with their lives, right? And so you don't want to, and we must avoid at all costs opting out of politics.

**[00:05:50.1] Melvin Rogers:** But I think on the other side, in part because of the kind of mythos of the United States, our sense of exceptionalism, our sense that we're always on the march forward, I mean, that side of the story has a way of rendering the persistence of racial inequality as anomalous to the country, rather than seeing it as part of the tradition of American life that we're constantly fighting against. This side, this more romantic side, and in sort of rendering the problem of racial inequality as anomalous, doesn't take seriously the horror of our history and the way in which it keeps displaying itself in time. And so the book tries to open up this middle space. And in opening up this middle space, the book tries to sort of illuminate the philosophical resources that these figures from the 1830s to the 1960s are relying on and in order to manage the persistence of inequality.

**[00:06:56.2] Melvin Rogers:** And it also insists in the final analysis that, given the fact that there's often a great deal of evidence pointing against the possibility that America can transform in a deep and permanent way, there is a question about, well, ultimately, what sort of fuel in these figures? And I suggest that faith is at work. And faith, not necessarily in a religious sense, faith in this sense, that faith is about a kind of running ahead of the evidence that you often need to justify the stance that you take. And yet that running ahead is central. It is part of the process of bringing transformation into existence in the first place.

**[00:07:44.1] Thomas Donnelly:** Excellent. So we have a few big themes on the table. Pessimism, a certain form of optimism about the inevitability of progress, faith. Jamel Bouie, are there any other big themes from the African American political tradition that you'd like to place on the table before we turn to some of our thinkers?

**[00:08:02.2] Jamelle Bouie:** I think what I want to do is just sort of bolster a point Professor Rogers made with a historical example. And that is, you know, we tend to think of antebellum American politics as being first, like an entirely white American affair, that Black Americans aren't really involved in it in any meaningful way. And we tend to imagine Black Americans, to the extent that we're thinking of even free Blacks, right, as like, not, you know, they're sort of on the margins, but one of the great revelations. Revelation, one of the great things that she explores in a recent book, the historian Kate Masur in her book Till Justice Be Done, is the extent to which free Black communities in Ohio and Massachusetts, in New York and Pennsylvania, were like very active participants in ordinary politics. Not only activism, as we would recognize or understand it, not only kind of moral suasion, but actively making appeals to legislatures, actively organizing once, political parties begin emerging that are opposing slavery, actively organizing within those political parties, actively working to repeal anti-Black laws in the states in which they reside.

**[00:09:18.8] Jamelle Bouie:** And I think to Professor Rogers' sort of points and observations, all that raises a question, right? Sort of what is animating this? These are people who are living under conditions that we would, that are like we would call tyranny, right? They are living under quite dire political conditions and yet they're still engaged in ordinary politics. The day to day, somewhat unremarkable task of trying to persuade other people. And I think taking that seriously is a thing that's really important to do.

**[00:09:58.7] Thomas Donnelly:** Absolutely.

**[00:10:00.3] Melvin Rogers:** Can I say a word about that wonderful historical example?

**[00:10:02.4] Thomas Donnelly:** Yes, absolutely.

**[00:10:03.7] Melvin Rogers:** First of all, Jamel, this is just, you know, this is what you always do in your columns, and I love it, where he sort of extracts from what folks are doing in the academy and then translating. It's absolutely brilliant and I so appreciate you. So when he says, you know, what's motivating these folks, you know, how must, another way to think about this is like, how must, how must they understand the political landscape such that, such that they're engaged in these practices? And one of the things that it reveals is that from their perspective, what American democracy is, is not a settled product. And that they see themselves as participating in and attempting to lay claim to a tradition that they themselves claim as also theirs. And this is something that we sort of should never obscure or miss, because if you think that anti-Black racism is constitutive of the United States and that it wholly defines a tradition, then it raises a critical question, what do we make of these people? How do we make sense of them? Because of that description, they will have no space. So we need another way to tell the story of American democracy and the fight over it that brings these folks clearly into view not as outsiders of the tradition, but as warriors within it, battling for it.

**[00:11:43.5] Thomas Donnelly:** Such a great transition to our first thinker here, who really embodies a lot of what you're saying, which is David Walker. So in your account, Professor Rogers spent a good amount of time exploring David Walker, his 1829 appeal. As you note, Frederick Douglass later described the pamphlet as "startling the land like a trump of coming judgment." So Walker is a figure that's familiar to many scholars, but I think isn't quite as familiar to the American public. Somehow, he's been lost in a lot of ways to public memory. So can you just tell us a bit about David Walker himself, his appeal, and then also some of the reaction to the appeal in his own time.

**[00:12:22.4] Melvin Rogers:** Right. So David Walker was born in 1796, Wilmington, North Carolina. His mother is free, so his freedom follows her line. And then he makes his way up

north and lands In Boston about 1825, this small Boston community there. He's a secondhand clothing Dealer, but as he is sort of making his way north, he's being politicized. And he wrote this pamphlet in 1829. This is his attempt to strike a blow at slavery, both the sort of formal practices of enslavement in the south and the informal practices of domination that Black people are experiencing in the North. And he writes this, what was at the time considered this incendiary pamphlet. I mean, Walker's appeal makes its way, it makes its way back south, and it antagonizes politicians in Georgia and North Carolina. Their anti literacy laws that are being passed, laws banning incendiary, documents are being passed. And they're being passed because at the heart of the text is precisely the kind of revolutionary impulse that you see in 1776, but now Walker calling on Black people to judge the circumstances in which they find themselves and to deem them at odds with their natural freedom and to resist in the face of these practices of domination.

**[00:14:04.1] Melvin Rogers:** So it was a text that was meant to stimulate action on the part of Black Americans in the face of practices of domination and to stimulate action as the sort of entailment or the requirement of what it means to be a human being who takes themselves to be worthy of freedom by virtue of being a human being.

**[00:14:32.4] Thomas Donnelly:** And Jamal Bowie, part of David Walker's appeal is his appeal to foundational values like Christianity, like America's founding principles, including especially the Declaration of Independence. Can you talk a little bit about the importance of those foundational values to Walker's arguments in this powerful document? And then more broadly, how much, those sort of foundational principles of America's founding, also Christianity itself shaped the battle that other reformers during the era had against slavery and in favor of equal citizenship rights for African Americans.

**[00:15:09.9] Jamelle Bouie:** Well, I think Walker is using the founding documents, using the language of revolutionary America in a way that would be familiar, right? To anyone who had at least read MLK's March on Washington speech, right. Sort of, this is part of the language of civic life in the United States. This is something that can make the claim legible to readers, to observers, to people who might be encountering the appeal. It's also sort of situating, right. This is one of the, one of the threads in this period in American history and African American history is not simply making a claim for rights, but making a claim on citizenship, making a claim on national belonging, stating that we are not aliens to this country, that this country is in fact ours as well, and thus we have a right to make claims on it. We have a right to make Demands on it. So using the language of revolutionary America is like very much part and parcel of that. With regards to your second question, obviously the Christian theological tradition has been part, was was a part of anti slavery movements from the very beginning, some of the earliest, like Britain, British and Anglo American opponents of the slave trade were Quakers.

**[00:16:43.4] Jamelle Bouie:** The Great Awakenings also produced a sort of anti slavery fervor in the Americas and in Great Britain. All of this is sort of part of what sort of makes the late 18th century, this somewhat explosive period for the anti slavery movement a period of religious revival and ideological transformation that is poaching a lot of people on both sides of the Atlantic to reconsider their commitment to slavery. Not necessarily, sometimes commitment to notions of racial difference and racial inequality still, you know, not, people go both ways on that.

**[00:17:26.1] Jeffrey Rosen:** But at least with slavery, there's a real sense, a real emerging sense in a way that there hadn't quite been before, of the fundamental incompatible incompatibility of the slave trade and slavery with the project that's emerging. It's of course, like worth saying though, it's like, this is the comment you always have to make that those things were the case. But then also the practical consequence of the separation of the North American colonies from Great Britain was like an empowered set of North American slave owners with its own set of consequences. It's just like, you know, that's what happened.

**[00:18:04.9] Thomas Donnelly:** Professor Rogers, you know, despite Walker's reliance on the Declaration of Independence, he also takes on the legacy of Thomas Jefferson in his appeal, in particular, Jefferson's account of African Americans in the Notes on the State of Virginia. So Walker concludes here what he says is Mr. Jefferson has in truth injured us more and has been as great a barrier to our emancipation as anything that has ever been advanced against us. Can you talk a bit about the importance of Jefferson's notes and also Walker's reasons for casting so much blame on Thomas Jefferson?

**[00:18:38.0] Melvin Rogers:** Yeah, so, you know, Walker is not unfamiliar with sort of what is required and what is demanded in order to move your audience. So he's rhetorically sophisticated. And part of what's required to move your audience from one side to another, part of what's required is meeting them where they stand with their bundle of commitments and beliefs and ideas, ideas about their own tradition. And when Walker goes after Jefferson in several portions of the appeal, he's particularly interested in what Jefferson has to say about Black people in The Notes on the State of Virginia. And in The Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson engages in a kind of pseudo scientific inquiry into the humanity of Black people and their fitness for participation in the American republic. And he deems Black people to be inadequate in relation to their white counterparts. Jefferson has, of course, a separate argument about freeing African Americans and sending them elsewhere so that they can sort of chart their own course. But as he sees it, they're deficient for participating in the American Republican. And Walker, knowing the status of Jefferson in the imaginary of White Americans and in the imaginary of the United States, goes directly after him.

**[00:20:16.1] Melvin Rogers:** And there are two things that are going on there. One, David Walker is trying to sort of undermine Jefferson's arguments, but it should not be striking that the appeal itself is broken up into what he calls four articles. There's a way in which it's reminiscent in that regard of the Constitution, and it simultaneously situates and focuses on the logic of the Declaration as part of the animating force that is fueling Walker's argument. So, Walker, in some ways, is trying to displace Jefferson as an American founder and install something else, because the claim is that to follow Jefferson is not leading you down the road in which you can fully embody the demand of the Declaration, which is why he asked at the end of Article 4, look, do you understand the words of your Declaration? And so in this regard, Walker is very subtly working on a founder that is quite central to the American imaginary in order to move his readers and his listeners to a position that they never thought that they never imagined, which is that we should put Jefferson to the side and install what I'm offering up in its place.

**[00:21:41.2] Thomas Donnelly:** And Jamelle Bowie, you know, David Walker's appeal, it's situated in a broader battle by free African Americans to secure equal citizenship rights in antebellum America. You discussed this a bit in one of your opening answers where you leverage the scholarship of Kate Maser, I think also of Martha Jones's classic work, Birthright Citizens, in this regard. Can you just talk a little bit about the pre-Civil War context for African Americans to place just some historical context around David Walker's work here, and then also the work of some of the thinkers we're going to transition to in a little bit?

**[00:22:16.0] Jamelle Bouie:** All right, sure. So the thing to, I think, remember, or to know if you don't know, is that there are large free populations of Black Americans throughout what is the United States. They're present in certainly in pretty much every state of the north and the old Northwest, like current Ohio, those regions, but also in parts of Virginia. Like, there are free blacks in slaveholding places of the country as well. And those people, like any other people, are trying to live their lives. But the issue for them is that key rights that white Americans take for granted, for example, the ability to move between state borders, the ability to settle in new places places, the ability to earn a living, the ability to, you know, disembark on a port down south and not have your freedom taken from you. All these things are up in the air, they're highly contested. You have states like Ohio, for example, that pass laws attempting to restrict the migration of Black Americans. Charleston, just seven years before Walker's appeal, South Carolina passes a law that essentially mandates that all Black Americans who are disembarked from ports in the state have to be jailed to prevent them from, like, mixing with the Black population in Charleston in particular.

**[00:23:47.8] Jamelle Bouie:** So you have these restrictions on Black freedom. You have the fact that although you, these free Black populations are not directly touched by slavery because blackness has become this sort of like, the badge of slavery in the country also is a limit on their ability to operate as equals in society. In states like New York, you have this Jacksonian

America. And so the expansion of the franchise among White men is happening alongside a restriction of the franchise from other groups, Black Americans, Black men in particular, also women in some places. So the political context here is one in which the ability of Black Americans to simply, like, live in this society is, like, highly contested. Their place in this society is highly contested. The idea that they belong to it is very much contested. And so it's in all of this, right, that Walker is making his appeal. And there are others, there's a lot else happening throughout the country as well with regards to the political activism of Black Americans.

**[00:25:03.8] Thomas Donnelly:** And so, Melvin Rogers, we have a question from Juliana in the audience. She asked if, just as clarification, was David Walker against the Declaration, or was his pamphlet more against Jefferson's notes and its vision against African Americans?

**[00:25:18.4] Melvin Rogers:** Oh, so the pamphlet is against, a portion of the pamphlet is against Jefferson, but is very much in favor of the Declaration. And in fact, one might say that Walker doesn't take the logic of the Declaration to its conclusion, because if he did that, he would, from beginning to end of his pamphlet, argue for revolution, argue for separation. But in fact, he stopped short of that because part of what he's trying to sort of stimulate in his White roots, readers and listeners, is he wants them to think in terms of an if-them proposition. If it is the case that you continue down this road with respect to your treatment of African Americans, then they have every right to revolt and to revolt violently. And that revolt will not be an entailment of ideas that they got from nowhere. It would be an entailment of America's very defense of freedom and freedom and equality. The other thing I would say, which goes back I think, to some of the points that Jamel was making, is that this context in which Walker is writing is one in which questions around citizenship are in the air. But it's also a context in which Walker and other African American intellectuals are trying to get their White readers to see that having appropriate laws on the books is very important, very central to affirming the rights of Black people.

**[00:27:09.9] Melvin Rogers:** But they would be meaningless if you don't simultaneously have a culture in which the humanity of African Americans is in circulation, rather than the existing culture to which Jefferson contributed, in which African Americans are barely seen, if they're seen at all, as humans.

**[00:27:31.7] Thomas Donnelly:** Well, thank you for that great question, Juliana. Jamel, one question to you is what do you think our audience can learn more broadly about America and American political development by studying primary sources, by studying history, by studying key figures like David Walker and his appeal.

**[00:27:50.7] Jamelle Bouie:** Before I get that, I want to actually add to Professor Rogers' answer there. And this is drawing from the book, which is that you situate Walker and others of this

period within the tradition of republicanism, republican ideology, and in particular in republican ideology as being articulated in that moment, there is this strong belief that institutions and mechanisms meant to encourage non domination and liberty hinge on like the existence of civic virtue in the people. And the Founding Fathers are constantly going on about virtue, about this as being a necessary part of this experiment. And the argument you make, Professor Rogers, which I find very interesting, is that part of what Walker and this community of thinkers is trying to do is sort of put republicanism in dialogue with the question of racism and race hierarchy. Like what does republicanism, what does civic virtue demand require in conditions when a portion of the people are subject not simply to unjust laws, but also a set of attitudes and perceptions and beliefs that are an obstacle to their ability to live freely and flourish in this society? And that I think is worth it.

**[00:29:27.7] Jamelle Bouie:** And then sort of gets to the question you asked Tom as well. Kind of the value of studying primary sources and studying history and such. For me, one of the things is getting a sense of how people in the past perceive the world and perceive the kinds of questions and dilemmas that faced them. And to the extent that that's useful for us, it's not because you can draw a one to one analogy or anything like that. But because simply examining how people of the past confronted their own time, their patterns of thought, the resources they relied on, these sorts of things can help us think through the kinds of problems and issues and dilemmas and questions we ourselves face. That's sort of the, that's like the operative thing there, the past not as a map, but the past as sort of like a set of helpful anecdotes.

**[00:30:32.2] Thomas Donnelly:** Absolutely helpful anecdotes, I like that. And Professor Rogers, please feel free to weigh in or respond to anything Jamel had to say about reflections on republicanism, civic virtue, racism, and from there, I'd love to transition from David Walker, although I feel like we could talk about him for basically the entire hour, to some of the other thinkers in your book, maybe beginning with a good contrast, which is Martin Delany and his vision of racial separation and how he deals with many of the same problems that David Walker's dealing with, but reaches sort of different conclusions about what the future of the African American community should look like. So anything on republicanism, civic virtue, and then maybe place on the table also, begin to place on the table the thinking of Martin Delany as well.

**[00:31:18.7] Melvin Rogers:** Right. So I would say a couple of things about the sort of republicanism, a point. I'm glad you brought that out. So republicanism here, what we're talking about is the political philosophy known as republicanism that has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome not republican, the Republican party. But this sort of philosophical idea is sort of held together by sort of two ideas. The first is the importance of civic virtue to a healthy political society. You want people to be civically active and involved, and thus they need the requisite habits and sensibilities to be involved, right? But the reason why that matters is because it keeps

them alert and on guard against those practices that would endanger their freedom, those practices that would leave you at the arbitrary mercy of another, whether it's internally or whether it's by another polity, another political society, and thus render you in a position of domination. So basically what you want to do then is to have institutions structured in such a way that sort of reflects your freedom, that properly situates you in the political process so that those institutions can track your interests and concerns, and you want to constantly be alive and awake to the potential dangers.

**[00:33:00.8] Melvin Rogers:** One of the things that these figures, these African American thinkers sort of bring to the table is the idea that that, look, my willingness and my interest in respecting your freedom partly depends on me regarding you as a member of the community and being taken by the community as being a member of it. And that partly depends on the ideas that are in circulation about you. And in the case of African Americans, they were not viewed as being members of the community. And so when they engage in a sort of critical evaluation of the United States, of the practices of slavery, they are both challenging the laws and institutional structures on the books, but they are also simultaneously challenging the ideas and beliefs and habits that are in circulation that habituate white Americans to disregard them as human beings. And the thought was that you have to challenge both of these in order to sort of render stable a racially just society. And one of the things that comes out of this and sort of studying these figures of the past is that what it helps cultivate in us is a kind of sort of intellectual agility, right? An intellectual agility in the sense that we become aware, as Jamel said, to the ways in which those in the past understood their world and tried to grapple with it.

**[00:34:35.1] Melvin Rogers:** And sometimes that casts into relief things about us that have developed in a positive direction. And sometimes it casts into relief things that have fallen away or that we have lost and the necessity to try to figure out how to re-enliven them, but in the face of our concerns, in the face of our problems. Now, this idea of re-living things in the face of our concerns and our problems partly depends on whether or not you think your fellows are up to the task of being transformed. And Martin Delany, who is typically identified with the tradition of Black nationalism, is writing, in the 1850s, he got into Harvard Medical School, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. Admitted him, and then he was subsequently kicked out because students and faculty were simply beside themselves that a Black man was permitted to attend Harvard Medical School lectures. And in 1850, we got the Fugitive Slave Law. And so in 1852, Martin Delany wrote his very important treatise, The Condition, Elevation Immigration and Destiny of the Colored People. And this is a document, a treatise, in which he argues that, because the condition, the first word in that title, because the condition of African Americans is one in which they are not recognized as political equals.

**[00:36:06.6] Melvin Rogers:** It means that they cannot participate in the political system and thus provide for their own elevation. Thus, that's the second word in the title. And thus they need

to leave. They need to immigrate, which is the third word, and if they do that, and go elsewhere, they then can provide for their own political destiny, which is the final word in that title. And so Delany did not see the United States as susceptible to transformation. But that's because, quite pessimistically, Delany thought that anti-Black racism, or what we would call anti-Black racism, was constitutive of the American polity and the political identity of the United States.

**[00:36:52.4] Thomas Donnelly:** Yeah, please, Jamel.

**[00:36:52.9] Jamelle Bouie:** In some context here that's worth knowing for the audience is that around the time of the Fugitive Slave act, sort of the decade before, you see kind of a revitalization of the colonization movement. There's the American Colonization Society, which have, which sort of, I guess, technically, you know, it's technically an anti slavery group, like, opposed to slavery, but its solution is to colonize Backs back in Africa. And there's a real debate within Black communities across the country about what ought to be our relationship to the question of colonization, what ought to be our relationship to this question of leaving the country. And so Delaney is saying is taking this pessimistic view, right, that this country is not open to meaningful change.

**[00:37:45.5] Jamelle Bouie:** And so our freedom, we found elsewhere. But there are real opponents to this view, saying this is sort of the only country that we have, basically. And so we can't, for kind of broader reasons, we cannot leave. For tactical reasons, we cannot leave. There's a sense amongst many African Americans that the colonization movement, which counts among its members, like slave owners, is sort of this stalking force for the power of slaveholders in the federal government. So we can't give an inch. But I feel like this is sort of like an important piece of context that there's like this live debate happening over whether Black Americans should stay. And there's, by the 1840s, Liberia already in existence. There is the British colony in Sierra Leone, Haiti is independent. And so there are options, it's not as if this is a theoretical thing. It's like there are specific places we could go if we no longer want to be here.

**[00:38:51.7] Thomas Donnelly:** Absolutely. And I mean, one of the key figures that's contrasting with Martin Delany is Frederick Douglass and his vision for the future of America. Maybe, Jamel, if you want to place on the table a little bit about his vision and how it contrasts with what we've been talking about with Martin Delaney.

**[00:39:09.5] Jamelle Bouie:** Well, Douglas and Professor Rogers can speak to this as well. Douglas very much believes in the malleability of what the United States is, does not believe it is a set thing, does not believe its people are a set thing and sees in a lot of ways, the kind of genius of the United States is precisely that it can be changed and is always sort of changing. It's always in this process of becoming something else. That's a process that can be acted upon. Later after the Civil War, he gives this speech which I've written about before, called the Composite Nation,

where he sort of adopting a kind of, the sort of ideological nationalism you might say is articulating a vision of the United States as a beacon for a freedom for all different kinds of people, all different stripes of people. He includes white Americans, Black Americans as well, but he also includes, you know, people we would identify as Asian American. There's a very expansive view, view of what the country is, and for Douglas, part of political struggle is acting to push the country in this direction and to use both the power of rhetoric, of practical politics, of all the tools in the toolbox to affect this kind of change.

**[00:40:43.8] Jamelle Bouie:** And this is a, I mean, what's interesting to me about Douglass, is that he lives this relatively long life, and by the end of it, he is witnessing, he's observing the rise of Jim Crow. He's seeing these institutions being constructed. He's both experienced the end of slavery as an institution and is also experiencing this renewed and new kind of racial domination and still maintains this belief in the ability of the United States to be something quite different than what it appeared to be at the end of his life.

**[00:41:26.7] Thomas Donnelly:** Absolutely. And that's a great transition, Professor Rogers. I mean, you really, you contrast sort of the pessimism with Delany with what you describe as the faith of Frederick Douglass. And then later, Anna Julia Cooper in her 1892 work of voice from the South. Can you talk a little bit about those contrasting visions? And especially with Cooper bringing us up now all the way to 1892 into the gilded Age and to the rise of Jim Crow.

**[00:41:51.4] Melvin Rogers:** Right, so we're on the move now. We're about to get into the 20th century. So, I mean, the thing I would say about Martin Delaney, I just want to be very clear about this with respect to the book. Delaney's argument about immigration wasn't his final stance. When the Civil War erupts and just follow the argument here. When the Civil War erupts, it now appears to Martin Delany that there is a crisis taking place at the very heart of the nation, that the nation is now trying to really decide what its civic identity be. And so he's now in the Union Army, he is a general who is trying to enlist people. When reconstruction collapses, Delany falls back, not as aggressively, but he falls back to this earlier position. Delaney himself was very suspicious of the American Colonization Society. He and Walker both agreed that that society was really only interested in removing free Blacks so that White Americans could be left to continue their practices of domination of those Blacks who were enslaved in the South. But Jamel is right that there was this lively debate around colonization and where Black people should go.

**[00:43:20.8] Melvin Rogers:** And that debate was premised on whether or not one thought that the United States politically, that the United States morally was capable of being something otherwise. Someone like Douglas, part of what Douglas, and this is sort of a crude example, but I think it captures it. So when we think about the legitimacy of American politics, which it basically means here, what makes it worthy of obedience and commitment. The elections are a

perfect place to capture this. You lose, but the thought is that it's not a final loss. You can come back and do it again. The notion behind that is that the reason why you can come back and do it again is because every election, every law, never fully exhausts and fully defines what the American people are. And Douglass picks up on that idea as the engine that drives the American system. And he invests a great deal of energy in that as the basis for his own argument that this nation can become otherwise. But the thing that he, you know, Anna Julia Cooper is writing at the tail end of the 19th century, and she is sort of reflecting also on the status of Black people in the United States.

**[00:44:51.5] Melvin Rogers:** And in a voice from the south, she's trying to make sense of how we understand one's commitment to a belief that is undermined by all of the evidence that you have around you? And one of the things that she discloses is that one of the conditions of making a belief true is first your commitment and investment in it. And she thinks that this is especially the case of political struggles and political beliefs in one's society. Douglass thought this as well. And so they both thought that one condition to transforming the nation is believing that it can be transformed and allowing that belief, acting in the light of that belief in a way that can condition your activity and the activity of your fellows. But if that's the way they're sort of thinking about political engagement, if that's the way they're thinking about faith, and I said this at the outset, then essentially they're kind of, they're running ahead of the evidence that they need to justify the stance that they're taking. But one of the things I think is quite powerful about it is that as we look around at the variety of political struggles, particularly political struggles for justice and freedom and equality, often the evidence is pointing in the opposite direction, right?

**[00:46:25.0] Jeffrey Rosen:** And so, you name me, I say that with care, so you name me a political struggle that is not dependent or fueled by this notion of faith, this idea of running ahead of the evidence as a condition to bring that vision of society that you have in mind that you imagine into existence.

**[00:46:48.4] Thomas Donnelly:** Absolutely. And I mean, just think about your own role as a commentator. I mean, Jamel, how do you wrestle with the type of questions that we see Douglas and Delaney and Cooper wrestling with here, really? Sort of how to balance skepticism and sometimes empiricism, empirical reality, against the value of faith aspiration, political imagination as an engine of political and constitutional change.

**[00:47:13.6] Jamelle Bouie:** This is why there are a variety of reasons why I've made sort of history a major focus of my column. One of them is precisely this, that in the present or just in sort of day to day life, it is difficult to sort of think expansively and think broadly about the political conditions under which you live, and it's very easy. And I see this especially, I'll say, spending a lot of time, you know, around younger people. I see this especially among younger people, a real pessimism of, with regards to the ability of change to happen in any kind of way.

And so I find myself drawn really to 19th century American politics at this stage where, as Professor Rogers says, notes that the evidence for the claim that things could get better is like, no, it's not really abundant, it's hard to find. And yet, as I said at the beginning of our conversation, you have through every period, Americans struggling for justice, devoting their lives to the struggle for justice, not knowing how the story is going to end, not knowing if they'll ever, not knowing if they'll do anything other than pass the baton to the next generation of people.

**[00:48:47.9] Jamelle Bouie:** And I think that in those examples and those stories, there is quite a bit for us to learn. And also it's something that can help us cultivate our own imaginations about what we're doing in the present. I often feel that there is a lack of political imagination, that we're so stuck in a set of recurring problems that it's hard to see beyond that. And looking at the past, looking at this particular period, really, I think is a useful way to try to help break out of that.

**[00:49:32.7] Thomas Donnelly:** What a beautiful reflection on the value of history in current discourse. And here's A question from the audience here from Maurice Goodman. Either of you wants to jump in? Could the speakers talk about James Forten and his role in fighting slavery and where he counts, where we should put him in sort of the pantheon of key African American figures?

**[00:49:56.3] Melvin Rogers:** Right, sure. I mean, James Forten is also this 19th century figure. He's part of these wider debates and an attempt to sort of deal a blow to the institution of slavery. He is very much involved in the sort of wider discourse of abolitionism. I mean, I don't, you know, there are a number of figures around this time that are engaged in this. You know, in the book, I don't discuss them all. You know, James Forten appears quite briefly, as does Henry Highland Garnett, another important figure, as does Alexander Crummell, another important figure. And so many of the figures that I tend to, even in the 19th century, are taken really as kind of representative figures. But is that world one, interested in telling a wider story with a wider cast of characters, the thought is that they should be able to fit within, in this sort of conceptual, this kind of philosophical, historical framework that I've put in place, and they should also fit within the sort of analytic terms that I've sort of put in place as a way to describe what it is they take themselves to be doing as they engage in attacking both the institution of slavery and importantly, the ideas and practices that are in circulation that make slavery possible.

**[00:51:38.1] Thomas Donnelly:** And Professor Rogers, you know, two figures that straddle the 19th and 20th centuries are Ida B. Wells and WEB Du Bois. Can you talk a little bit about their work and sort of the effect that they were looking to have on political discourse, I'd say, especially on their white audiences as well. And sort of you talk about the powerfully of the role of how their vision, sort of the forces of sympathy and shame they hoped might play in political

transformation. Can you offer some reflections both on Wells and Du Bois and sort of the audiences they had in mind and the visions of change they were trying to bring?

**[00:52:16.3] Melvin Rogers:** Right. So, great question. I mean, one of the things that I try to argue in the book is that as these figures are trying to imagine a new configuration of the United States, the people, there's a question about how do you move your audience to embrace these new and expanded views of the United States? But that question is parasitic on a prior one, which is, well, how are you thinking about your audience and their capacities? And one of the things that you discover is that figures from the 19th century into the 20th century sort of have a very robust, intricate view about human nature. They think that human nature is malleable, and they think that the ways in which you begin to shape it have something to do with touching the emotions or the sentiments of your audience. But emotions for these figures are not these sort of eruptive things. They think that emotions themselves are. Are judgments of value about the world, right? So I'll give you a crude example here. You know, if you're at a funeral for a loved one and you're crying, you're experiencing grief, were I too depressed about why you're crying, why you're experiencing grief, obviously it'd be inappropriate at the funeral.

**[00:53:36.8] Melvin Rogers:** But were I depressed you on it, you would be able to give me an account of the place of that person in your life. And that's because your grief is a judgment of value. And so these figures thought that. And Ida B. Wells and Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, writing, the bit of her that I sort of focus on is the tail end of the 19th century, and she's dealing with lynching, and she is trying to figure out how to move her readers, how to move the American consciousness to a position of moral rectitude, a kind of uprightness. And one of the things that she attempts to do is to use the horror of lynching as a means to generate revulsion in her audience. She wants them to recoil, to pull back from this. And she has no problem attempting to sort of shame the audience and the United States at the very time, at the very moment in which the United States is claiming for itself this sense of being developed as a civilization. And Du Bois, too, in his text of 1903, The Souls of Black Folk, now in the 20th century. Du Bois, in that text, is also relying on both sympathetic identification with African Americans who, he argues, are trying to make a way for themselves which ought to be the entailment of freedom.

**[00:55:19.9] Melvin Rogers:** And he's sort of using that identification in a way that can sort of shame his readers. Shame his readers? Why? Because the question emerges, well, why are Black Americans not flourishing? Well, it has everything to do with Jim Crow and the sort of new expression of white supremacy through Jim Crow. And the thought was that you can, You know, the idea was that these emotions could work to move their audience, that's not the only thing, right? These figures, both of these figures are on the ground working, engaged in activism, but they're always, again, keeping these two modes in view, this kind of activism and mobilization, on the one hand, institutional development on the other. And the sense that you want to try to reach the interior life of those to whom you're appealing as the basis for transformation.

**[00:56:15.0] Thomas Donnelly:** Jamelle Bouie, the response there on Wells and Du Bois gets us thinking about the relationship of law and culture in enforcing racial hierarchy. And I mean, you write quite a bit on both institutional reform and American political culture in your own work. You know, when you think about the battle for freedom and equality both yesterday and today, what do you think is the relative importance of formal structures like the Constitution, law, things we often cover here at the National Constitution Center, you know, versus non institutional factors we've discussed today like civic virtue, social mores and public opinion? What's sort of the dynamic relationship there?

**[00:56:54.0] Jamelle Bouie:** Institutions, law forms the ground on which much political contestation actually happens, right? Sort of the opening up of the American political system in the wake of the Civil War during the Reconstruction period is not just, it's, obviously, it was a good fitting, but it also enables sort of an entirely new form of political activism and political activity amongst African Americans. And so one of the interesting things is that when you're tracing kind of the long history of the Black freedom struggle, you very clearly see the kinds of institutions and relationships and opportunities built and taken during this brief period of Reconstruction enabled by these changes in constitutional law, these changes in actual sort of federal law. You see how those become the foundation for later movements, for later efforts that you can't reduce this struggle to simply the struggle for changing laws and for changing this, the foundation on which these struggles happen. But generations of activists have recognized very clearly that this is part of the battle, both in a major way, but also in things we might call relatively minor. So the example I like is Philip Randolph's efforts to win, to end the segregation of war industries at the start of World War II, really sort of American involvement in World War II.

**[00:58:47.2] Jamelle Bouie:** In one sense, it's sort of like this isn't like a big expansive battle. But in another, Randolph recognized that sort of this was not just a battle for connecting Black workers to well paying jobs, but also a battle for establishing the equal regard of Black Americans by the government and also by the public at large. The public at large sees Black Americans, Americans as participating in this effort in a full way. And that is that, that sort of institutional struggle was also part of the larger ideological struggle, larger cultural struggle. They all kind of act together. And so I see, you know, I very much see as someone who writes quite a bit about the Constitution, who writes for quite a bit about law, I think those are not things to be disregarded, those are things to be taken very seriously as part of the, taken very seriously in the sense that changing them is part of the project of building a more free and equal society.

**[00:59:54.8] Thomas Donnelly:** And Melvin Rogers, the last question to you, I'll end our discussion where you end with James Baldwin and you describe his vision as one of faith

without redemption. Just say a little bit, what do you mean by that? And also, why did you choose to end your account with James Baldwin and his vision?

**[01:00:14.5] Melvin Rogers:** So I decided to end the book with James Baldwin because throughout the book I'm tracing this kind of aspirational politics of these African American thinkers. And aspirational politics fits very nicely with it articulates well with our national preoccupation with our exceptionalism. And it can easily be sort of co-opted in this way. And so I wanted to turn at the end of the book to what has been developing up until that point, but that's crystallized in Baldwin and which is part of which sort of, sort of illuminates the title, The Darkened Light of Faith. I wanted to sort of turn to this kind of chastened aspirational politics in which Baldwin sort of sees slavery and white supremacy as those factors that in some sense have, it's just sort of scarred the soul of the nation, and has scarred all of us. And there is no way to think about, for Baldwin, our affirmative gestures in response to racial inequality, independent of the reminder of that scar, of that trauma. And so what Baldwin is trying to resist, I sort of contrast him to another form of aspirational politics that's far more optimistic, that fits with the romantic side of the story that you see in Gunnar Miller's work The American dilemma in 1944, as he's reflecting on the Negro problem, as he calls it.

**[01:01:47.2] Melvin Rogers:** And what you see in Baldwin is someone that is trying to get his American counterparts to take seriously that look, our racial history matters, but our racial history has scarred us. And we don't deal with the persistence of white supremacy by trying to ignore it. The way we deal with it is to sort of read our affirmative gestures in law and politics and culture through the trauma of Black life and the trauma of this country. And if you do that, Baldwin says, you don't get redemption because redemption would wipe away, in his mind, would wipe away the sins of that tragedy. Instead, he recommends that what you get are a series of atoning practices, because atonement is always about keeping in view the problem, about the way it sort of reverberates across time and the way in which our response to it sharpens our civic skill set that in sharpening our civic skill set, we might be able to communicate new sources of care and concern to one another. So, I conclude in that way because I think that this is the overall lesson of the tradition, rather than the more optimistic story about transformation that we typically push and hold onto.

**[01:03:28.0] Thomas Donnelly:** Thank you so much. And again, the author is Melvin Rogers. The book is The Darkened Light of Faith. Jamelle Bouie, Melvin Rogers is an absolute delight. So thank you so much for being here at America's Town Hall.

**[01:03:40.4] Melvin Rogers:** Thank you.

**[01:03:41.2] Jamelle Bouie:** Thank you.

**[01:03:46.4] Jeffrey Rosen:** This episode was produced by Tanaya Tauber, Lana Ulrich, Samson Mostashari, and Bill Pollock. It was engineered by Greg Sheckler and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Cooper Smith, and Samson Mostashari. Please recommend the show to friends, colleagues, or anyone anywhere who's eager for a weekly dose of constitutional debate and historical illumination and intellectual stimulation. It's so great to share these wonderful programs with you. And do check out the America Town hall programs live on our website. Check out the new Constitution 101 course that we launched in partnership with Khan Academy. You can find it at constitutioncenter.org/con101 Sign up for the newsletter at constitutioncenter.org/connect and always remember that the National Constitution Center is a private nonprofit despite that inspiring mission statement that I know you know by heart, we receive little federal or government money and are sustained by private philanthropy. That's why it would be so wonderful if you considered supporting our efforts by donating today at constitutioncenter.org/donate on behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Jeffrey Rosen.