

What the Black Intellectual Tradition Can Teach Us About Democracy

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[00:00:00] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center. The podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates, hosted by the center in person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the senior director of Town Hall programs.

[00:00:18] Tanaya Tauber: In this episode, we explore the ways key African American intellectuals reimagine U.S. democracy, from David Walker and Frederick Douglass, to W.E.B. Du Bois. New York Times columnist, Jamelle Bouie, and political scientist, Melvin Rogers, author of the new book, *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*.

[00:00:41] Tanaya Tauber: Join Thomas Donnelly, chief content officer at the National Constitution Center, for the conversation. This program was streamed live on November 14th, 2023. Here's Tom to get the conversation started.

[00:00:58] Thomas Donnelly: Hello friends, welcome to the National Constitution Center, and to tonight's convening of America's Town Hall. For this wonderful discussion, first we have Jamelle Bouie, he is an opinion columnist for the New York Times, where he covers history and politics, a former political analyst for CBS News. He previously served as chief political correspondent for Slate Magazine, and staff writer at The Daily Beast. He's also in the regular flow of the reading that I do each week, so thank you so much for joining us, Jamelle.

[00:01:27] Thomas Donnelly: And Melvin Rogers is Professor of Political Science, and Associate Director of the Center for Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Brown University. His extraordinary new book, which we're gonna discuss today, is *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*. I really can't recommend this book highly enough, it's extraordinarily illuminating, and I can't wait to explore it with Melvin and Jamelle during the course of the discussion. So thank you again for joining us, Jamelle Bouie, and Melvin Rogers.

[00:01:59] Jamelle Bouie: Thanks for having us.

[00:02:00] Melvin Rogers: Yeah, thank you for having us.

[00:02:02] Thomas Donnelly: So beginning with you Professor Rogers, your new book, again, is *The Darkened Light of Faith*, and it offers a powerful account of the Black intellectual tradition from Antebellum America, all the way up to the 20th century. I just wanna begin by asking you what inspired you to write this book now?

[00:02:18] Melvin Rogers: Right. So I've been I was working on the book I would say for about a, for about a decade. And what motivated the book was really my first book project, which was on the American philosophy of John Dewey. And center to that project was the idea of uncertainty that John Dewey sort of emphasized as being central to democratic politics.

[00:02:41] Melvin Rogers: 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.

[00:03:09] Thomas Donnelly: Excellent. Now, Jamelle Bouie, you've written and spoken powerfully about the Black intellectual tradition in your own work. How is it influenced your work as a political journalist, and also as a public intellectual?

[00:03:22] Jamelle Bouie: I'm gonna borrow a phrase from an edited volume, Professor Rogers worked on a couple of years ago. I think an introductory essay, where he used this phrasing to meet the African American intellectual tradition, which is broad and it encompasses a lot of different avenues, and a lot of ways actually sort of counter public the kind of mainstream American thinking about this country, about what American democracy is.

[00:03:49] Jamelle Bouie: And so, as someone who's worked 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 and thinking broadly about American democracy, I think the African American tradition, provides a incredibly useful perspective, based on 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.

[00:04:24] Thomas Donnelly: Insiders who are also political outsiders, it's excellent. Melvin Rogers one other thing, at the beginning of your book, you introduced really two ways of looking at the struggle of a race throughout American history. You can trust 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 thought of some of those specific thinkers. Can you talk about some of those key themes in the role that they play in your account?

[00:05:03] Melvin Rogers: Sure. 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. 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 premacy, the centrality of anti-Black racism and White supremacy, but, but the reason why this is the case, is precisely because it is taken to be constitutive.

[00:05:53] Melvin Rogers: And so if it's taken to be constitutive, one argument is, "Well, why invest in trying to transform the, the nation? Isn't this holding out a form of cruel hope that never, that never satisfies?" So 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 every day, ordinary Black people are still trying to get on with their lives, right? And so, you don't want and we must avoid at all costs opting out of politics.

[00:06:32] Melvin Rogers: But I think on the other side in part because of the kind of methos of the United States, a sense of of exceptionalism, a sense that we're always on the march forward. I mean, that side of the story has a way of sort of sort of rendering the persistence of racial inequality as anomalous, to the country, rather than seeing it as part of the, the tradition of American life that we're constantly fighting against. And this more romantic side, and sort of rendering the problem of racial inequality as anomalous, it doesn't take seriously the horror of our history and the way in which it keeps displaying itself in time.

[00:07:15] Melvin Rogers: 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, in order to manage the persistence of inequality, 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 prominent way.

[00:07:52] Melvin Rogers: There is a question about what ultimately what is, what sort of feel 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 in transformation into existence in the first place.

[00:08:23] 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. Jamelle Bouie, are there any other big themes from the African American political tradition that you'd like a place on the table before we turn to some of our thinkers?

[00:08:41] Jamelle Bouie: I think what I wanna do is of bolster a point, Professor Rogers, made with a historical example: we tend to think of Antebellum American politics, and as being, first an entirely White American affair, that Black Americans are only involved in it in any meaningful way.

[00:09:00] Jamelle Bouie: And we tend to imagine Black Americans we're thinking of even free Blacks, right, is like not they're sort of on the margins, but not the great revelations, regulation, and the great things that she explores in a recent book, that the historian, Kate Maser, in her book *Until Justice be Done*, is the extent to which Black free, free Black communities in Ohio, in Massachusetts, in New York, in 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 a political party is thinking of merging that are opposing slavery, actively organizing within those political parties, actively working to appeal anti-Black laws in the states in which they reside.

[00:09:53] Jamelle Bouie: I think to Professor Rogers is sort points to observations, it, all that raises a question, right, sort of what is animating this? As if people are living under conditions that we would call tyranny, right? They are living under quite dire political conditions, and yet, they're still engaged in ordinary politics, right, 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.

[00:10:30] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely.

[00:10:30] Melvin Rogers: Can I say a word about that wonderful historical example?

[00:10:33] Thomas Donnelly: Yes, absolutely.

[00:10:35] Melvin Rogers: First of all, Jamelle, this is what you always do in your columns, and I love it.

[00:10:41] Melvin Rogers: The way you sort of extract from what folks are doing in the academy, and then translating it. It's absolutely brilliant, and I so appreciate you. So when he says, "What's motivating these folks," another way to think about this is, how must they understand the political landscape 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 not a settled product. And that they see themselves as participating in, and attempted to lay claim to a tradition that they themselves play in as also theirs.

[00:11:27] Melvin Rogers: 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? 'Cause on that description they will have no spades, 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 a fort.

[00:12:11] Thomas Donnelly: Such a great transition to our first thinker here, and it truly embodies a lot of what you're saying, which is David Walker. So in your account, Professor Rogers, you spend a good amount of time exploring David Walker, his 1829 appeal. As you know 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.

[00:12:49] Melvin Rogers: Right. David Walker is 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 then lands in Boston in about 1825, a small Boston community there. He's a second-hand clothing dealer, but as he is sort of making his way north, he's being politicized. And he writes 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.

[00:13:28] Melvin Rogers: And he writes this what was at the time considered this incendiary pamphlet. I mean, Walker's appeal makes it way, it makes its way back south, and it antagonizes politicians in Georgia and North Carolina there are anti-literacy laws that are being passed, laws banning incendiary documents are being passed. And they're being passed because of the heart of the text is precisely the kind of revolutionary impulse that you see in 1776.

[00:14:05] Melvin Rogers: But now Walker, holding 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. 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 enticement 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.

[00:14:47] Thomas Donnelly: And Jamelle Bouie, 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 principals of America's founding, also Christianity itself, shape the battle of that other reformers during the era had, against slavery, and in favor of equal citizenship rights for African Americans.

[00:15:24] 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 at least read MLK's 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 situation, right, this is one of the, one of the, the threads in this period, in America history and throughout American history, is not simply making a claim for rights, but making a claim on citizenship, making a claim on national belonging, stating, right, 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, and we have a right to make demands on it.

[00:16:23] Jamelle Bouie: So using the language of revolutionary America very much part and parcel of that, with of course that, that you're your second question obviously sort of the Christian theological tradition has been part, was a part of anti-slavery movements from the very beginnings, and the earliest, right, like the British and Anglo American opponents of the slave trade reacquainted the great awakenings also produced sort of anti-slavery further in the Americas and in Great Britain. All of this sort of makes the late 18th century this somewhat explosive period for the anti-slavery movement, is revival, and a logical transformation that is

poaching a lot of people on both sides of the Atlantic to reconsider their commitment to slavery.

[00:17:22] Jamelle Bouie: Not necessarily, sometimes commitment to notions of racial difference and racial inequality, like that's still not, people go both ways on that. But at least with slavery, there's a real sense, a real emerging sense in the way that there hadn't quite been before of the fundamental incompatibility of the slave trade and slavery with the project that's emerging. It's of course worth saving, that you always have to make, that those things were the case. But then also, the practical consequence of the separation of North American colonies from Great Britain was like an empowered set of North American slaver owners, with its own set of consequences, which is like, that's what happened.

[00:18:08] Thomas Donnelly: Professor Rogers despite Walker's reliance and 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?

[00:18:41] Melvin Rogers: Yeah. So, 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 and 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.

[00:19:27] Melvin Rogers: 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, and their fitness for a 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, and they can sort of chart their own chart their own course. But as he sees it they're deficient for participating in the American republic.

[00:19:59] Melvin Rogers: And Walker, knowing the status of Jefferson, and the imaginary of White Americans, and then the imaginary of the United States, goes directly after him, right? And there are two things that are going on there, one you know, 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. And there's a way in which it's sort of 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.

[00:20:41] Melvin Rogers: So, Walker in some ways is trying to displace Jefferson as an American founder, and then stall 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 four, "Look, do you understand the words of your declaration?" Right. 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 that they never imagined, which we should put Jefferson to the side and install what I'm offering up in its place.

[00:21:32] Thomas Donnelly: And Jamelle Bouie, David Walker in his appeal, it's situated in a broader battle by free African Americans to secure equal citizenship rights and Antebellum America. You discussed this a bit in your, one of your opening answers, where you leveraged the scholarship of, of Kate Maser, I think also of Martha Jones's classic work of birth right citizens in this regard. Can you just talk a little bit about the pre Civil War context for African Americans to place, just in a struggle of context around David Walker's work here, and then also the work of some of the thinkers who are gonna transition to in a little bit.

[00:22:06] Jamelle Bouie: Right. Sure. The thing to 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, more of in the old northwest, like my current Ohio those regions. But also in parts of Virginia, like there are free blocks in slave holding places of the country as well. And those people, like any people who are trying to live their lives.

[00:22:42] Jamelle Bouie: 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 places the ability to earn a living, the ability to disembark on a port down south, and not have your freedom taken from you. All of these things are up in the air, they're highly contested.

[00:23:06] Jamelle Bouie: 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 mixing with the Black population in Charleston in particular. So you have these restrictions on Black freedom.

[00:23:33] Jamelle Bouie: You have the fact that although you, these free Black populations are not directly touched by slavery, because Blackness has become this sort of badge of slavery in the country, also is a limit on their ability to operate as equals in the society. In states like New York, you have this in America, and so the expansion of the franchise among White men is happening alongside the restriction of the franchise, from either groups, Black Americans, Black men in particular.

[00:24:06] Jamelle Bouie: Also women in some places. So kind of in the political context here, is one in which the ability of Black Americans are simply live in this society, is like highly contested, their place in this society is highly contested. The idea of that they belong to it is very much contested. And so it's in all of this, that Walker is making his appeal and there are other there's a lot else happening throughout the country as well with regards to the political activism of Black Americans.

[00:24:44] Thomas Donnelly: And so Melvin Rogers, we have a question from Juliana, in the audience. She asked, just as clarification, "Was David Walker against the declaration, or was his pamphlet more against Jefferson's notes, and its vision against African Americans?"

[00:24:58] 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 you know, argue for a revolution, argue for separation. But in fact, he stopped short of, of that, because part of what he's trying to sort of stimulate in his, in his, in his White readers and listeners is he wants them to think in terms of the proposition.

[00:25:36] Melvin Rogers: If it is the case to continue down this road, with respect to your treatment of African Americans, then they have every right, you know to revote, and to revote violently. And that revote 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 equality. The other thing I would say, which goes back, I think to some of the points that Jamelle was making, which is this context in which Walker is writing, is one which questions around citizenship are up in the air.

[00:26:22] Melvin Rogers: 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, very important very central to affirm in the rights of Black people but they would be meaningless if you don't simultaneously have a culture in which the humanity of African Americans are in circulation, rather than the existing culture to which Jefferson contributed it, in which African Americans are barely seen if they are seen at all as humans.

[00:27:03] Thomas Donnelly: Well, thank you for that great question, Juliana. Jamelle, 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?

[00:27:20] Jamelle Bouie: But before actually I wanna add to Professor Rogers' answer there, and this is drawing from the book you situate Walker and others of this period within the tradition of republicanism, republican ideology, and in particular, in republican ideology as in particularly in that moment there is this shrung believe that institutions of institutions meant to encourage liberty, hinge on the existence of civic virtue in the people.

[00:27:57] Jamelle Bouie: And you, and the founding fathers are constantly going on about virtue, about this is 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 republicanism, in dialogue with the question of racism and race, and what this republicanism of the civic virtue demand and 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 that are an obstacle to their ability to live freely and flourish in the society.

[00:28:51] Jamelle Bouie: And it sort of gets to, 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 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, dilemmas and questions we ourselves face. That's sort of like the operative thing there, not the past not as a map, but the past as sort of like a set of no helpful anecdotes.

[00:29:51] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. Helpful anecdotes, I like that. And, Professor Rogers, please feel free to weigh in or respond to anything Jamelle had to say about sort of 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, what 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 begin to place on the table, but thinking of Martin Delany as well.

[00:30:36] Melvin Rogers: All right, so I would say a couple of things about the republicanism point 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 the 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 as 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.

[00:31:30] Melvin Rogers: Those practices that would leave you at the arbitrary mercy of another, or whether it's internally, or whether it's by 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 that sort of reflect your freedom that properly situates you in the political process so that those institutions can track your interest and concerns.

[00:32:00] Melvin Rogers: And you wanna constantly be alive, alive and awake to the potential dangers. And one of the things that these figures, these African Americans thinkers so bring to the table, is the idea that, "Look, my willingness and my interest, and 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."

[00:32:31] Melvin Rogers: And that partly depends on the ideas that are in circulation about you and in the case of the 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, and 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 why the Americans did disregard them as human beings. And

the thought was that you have to challenge both of these in order to, to sort of render stable a racially just society.

[00:33:15] Melvin Rogers: And one of the things that comes out of this, and so studying this figures of the past, is that what it helps cultivate in us, is a kind of a kind of sort of intellectual agility, right? An intellectual agility in the sense that we become aware, as Jamelle said, to the ways in which those in the past understood their world, and try to grapple with it. And sometimes that cast into belief things about us as, that have developed in a positive direction, and sometimes it casts into belief 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, and the face of our problems.

[00:34:04] Melvin Rogers: Now, this idea of re enlivening 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 sort of typically identified with the tradition of Black nationalism is writing in the 1850s. He got into Harvard Medical School, admitted him, and then he was subsequently kicked out, because students and faculty was simply beside themselves, that a Black man was permitted to attend Harvard Medical School lectures. And in 1850 we get the Fugitive Slave law.

[00:34:40] Melvin Rogers: And so in 1852 Martin Delany writes his very important, *Atreides* condition elevation immigration destiny of the colored people. And this is a document *Atreides*, in which he argues that, that because the condition, the first word in that title, because the condition of the African Americans is one in which they are not recognized as political equals, it means that they cannot participate in the political system, and thus provide for their elevation.

[00:35:11] Melvin Rogers: And thus, as the second word in the title, and thus they need to leave they need to immigrate, which is, 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 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, well, we would call it anti-Black racism was constitutive of the American polity and political identity of the United States.

[00:35:47] Thomas Donnelly: Yeah, please, Jamelle.

[00:35:48] Jamelle Bouie: In some context here, this like, and are worth knowing for the audience is that around the time of the fugitive slave a decade before, you see kind of a revitalization of the colonizations movement, is the American Colonization Society, which sort of just technically an anti-slavery group, like opposed to slavery, but its solution is to colonize Blacks back in Africa. And there's a real debate within Black communities across the country, but sort of what, what ought be our relationship to the question of colonization, a relationship to this question of leaving the country.

[00:36:29] Jamelle Bouie: And Delaney is taking his pessimistic view, right, that this country is not open to meaningful change. And so we are freedom elsewhere. But there are real opponents to its view saying, this is sort of the only country that we have, basically. And

so we can't for kind of broader reasons leave, for tactical reasons we cannot leave. There's a sense amongst many African Americans that colonization movement, which among its members, like slave owners, is sort of this stalking horse for the power of slaveholders within the federal government.

[00:37:08] Jamelle Bouie: So we can't give an inch. But I feel like this is really gonna an important piece of context, like there's like this live debate happening over whether Black Americans should stay, and there's by the 1840s, Liberia is 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 not longer wanna be here.

[00:37:40] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And I mean, one of the key figures that you're contrasting with Martin Delany, is Frederick Douglass, and his vision for the future of America. Maybe Jamal, if you wanna place on the table a little bit about his division and how contrasts with what we've been talking about with Martin Delany?

[00:37:56] Jamelle Bouie: Well, yeah, Douglass and Professor Rogers can speak to this as well. Douglas very much believes in the liability of the United States is, not believe it is a set thing, does not believe that 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, there's always sort of changing, there's always in this process of becoming something else, and it's a process that can be acted upon.

[00:38:26] Jamelle Bouie: Later, after the Civil War, he gives this speech, which I've written about before called The Composite Nation, where he, adopting a sort of, you might say is articulating a vision of the United States as, a beacon for a freedom for all the different kinds of people, all the different people, he includes White Americans, Black Americans as well, but he also includes people we would identify as Asian American, which is a very expansive view of what the country is, and for Douglass, 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 the tools in the toolbox to effect this kind of change.

[00:39:23] Jamelle Bouie: I mean what's interesting to Douglass, interesting to me about that he lives this relatively long life, and by the end of it, he is witnessing, he's observing the rise, 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 quote different than what it appeared to be at the end of his life.

[00:40:05] Thomas Donnelly: That's lovely. And that's a great transition for us. Professor Rogers, I mean, you can crass 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. You talk a little bit about those contrastic 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.

[00:40:29] Melvin Rogers: Right. So we're on the move now, about to get into the 20th century. So, the thing I would say about Martin Delany, I just wanna be very clear about this,

with respect to the book. Delany'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 taken place at the very heart of the nation. But the nation is now trying to really decide what will its civic identity be. And he's now in the Union Army, he is a general, he is trying to enlist people.

[00:41:15] Melvin Rogers: When reconstruction collapses, Delany falls back, not as aggressively, but he falls back to this earlier position. Delany 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, so that White Americans could be left to continue their practices of domination of those Blacks who were enslaved in the south. But Jamal is right, that there was this lively debate around colonization and, and where Black people should go, and that debate was premised on whether or not one thought back to the United States politically, not to the United States morally, was capable of being something otherwise.

[00:42:05] Melvin Rogers: And someone like Douglass, part of what Douglas, and this is sort of a crude example, but I think it captures it, so that when we think about 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, that is not a final loss, you can come back and do it again. And the notion behind that, is that the reason that you can come back and do it again, is because every election, every law, never fully exhaust and fully define what the American is. And Douglass picks up on that idea as the engine that drives the American system, and he invests a great deal himself of energy in that, as the basis of his own argument, that this nation can become otherwise.

[00:43:03] Melvin Rogers: But the thing that Anna Julia Cooper is writing at the tail end of of the 19th century and she is sort of reflecting also on the status of Black people in the United States. And she in a voice from the south, she's trying to make sense of how do 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 and political beliefs in one society. Douglas thought this as well.

[00:43:56] Melvin Rogers: And so they both thought that one condition to transforming the nation, is believing that it can be transformed, and allowing that belief, acting on the light of that belief in the way that can condition your activity, and the activity of your fellows. But if that's the way they're sort of thinking about a political engagement of that's the way they're thinking about faith, and I said that at the outset, then essentially they're running ahead of the evidence that they need to justify the stance that they are taking.

[00:44:30] Melvin Rogers: 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? And so I say that with care, so you name the 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.

[00:45:09] Thomas Donnelly: Absolutely. And I mean, just think about your own rules as a commentator, I mean, Jamal, how do you wrestle with the type of questions that we see Douglas and Delaney, and Cooper wrestling with here, really sorta how to balance skepticism, and sometimes in purism, and purical reality against the value of faith, aspiration, political imagination, as an engine of political and constitutional change?

[00:45:33] Jamelle Bouie: This is why there are a variety of reason why I've majored in 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.

[00:46:17] Jamelle Bouie: And so I find myself drawn really to 19th century American politics, as this stage where as Professor Rogers says the evidence for the claim that things could get better, 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, struggling for justice devoting their lives to the struggle for justice. Not knowing how the story is gonna end, not knowing if they'll ever, not knowing if they'll do anything other than pass up the time to the next generation of people.

[00:47:02] 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, 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 sort of recurring problems that it's hard to see beyond that and looking, looking at the past, looking at this particular period, really I think is a useful way to try to help break out of that.

[00:47:43] Thomas Donnelly: What a beautiful reflection on the value of history and current discourse. And here's a question from the audience here, from Maurice Goodman. It can go to either of you, who 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 key African American figures.

[00:48:06] Melvin Rogers: Right. So, I mean, James Forten is also this 19th century figure, he's part of these wider debates, in an attempt to sort of deal a blow to the institution of of slavery. He is very much involved in the sort of wider discourse of of abolitionism. I mean there are a number of figures around this, around this time that I engaged in this. In the book, I don't discuss the moral James Forten appears quite briefly as does Henry Highland Garnet, another important figure, as does Alexander, another important figure.

[00:48:52] Melvin Rogers: And so many of the figure that I tend to, even in the 19th century, are taken really as kind of representative figures. But the thought is that were one interested in telling a wider story with a wider cast of characters, the thought is that they should be able to fit within this sort of conceptual, this kind of philosophical, historical framework that I've put in a 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 attaching, both the institution of slavery, and importantly, the ideas and practices in circulation that make slavery possible.

[00:49:40] Thomas Donnelly: And Professor Rogers, two figures who have that straddle the 19th and 20th centuries, are Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. 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, powerfully, the role of the forces of sympathy and shame, they hoped might play in political transformation. Can you offer some reflection both on Wells and Du Bois, and sort of sort of the audiences they had in mind, and the visions of change they were trying to bring?

[00:50:17] Melvin Rogers: Right. So, it's a great question. I mean, one of the things that I tried 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 paracidal on a prior one which is, well how were 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 and 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.

[00:51:08] Melvin Rogers: But emotions for these figures, are not these sort of eruptive things. They think that emotions themselves are judgements of value about the world, right? So I'll give you a crude example here, if you're at a funeral for a loved one, and you're crying, you're experiencing grief, pressure about why you're crying, why you're experiencing grief, obviously it'd be inappropriate at the funeral, but 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 DuBois, Ida B. Wells, writing, the bit her I sort of focus on is the tail end of of the, of the 19th, of the 19th century, and she's dealing with.

[00:51:58] Melvin Rogers: She is trying to figure out how to move here her readers, how to move the American consciousness to a position of moral rectitude, or uprightness. And one of the things that she attempts to do, is to use horror as a means to generate revulsion in her audience, she wants to pull back from this. And she has no problem attempting to sort of shame the audience and the United States at the very moment in which the United States is claiming for itself this sense of developed as a civilization. And Du Bois too, and his text of 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*. No in the 19th 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.

[00:53:06] 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, the idea was that these emotions could work to move them, to move their audience, that's not the only thing both of these figures are on the ground working, engaged in activism. But they are always again, keeping these two modes in view, this kind of activism and mobilization on

the one hand, institution development on the other, and the sense that you wanna try to reach the interior live of those to whom you are appealing, as the basis for transformation.

[00:54:01] Thomas Donnelly: Jamelle, the response on Wells and Du Bois, it gets us thinking about the relationship of law and culture in enforcing racial hierarchy. And I mean, you write quite a bit on both institution reform and American political culture in your own work. If 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, versus non-institutional factors we've discussed today, like civic virtue, social morays, and public opinion, what's sort of the dynamic relationship there?

[00:54:39] Jamelle Bouie: Oh, institutions law forms the ground on which much of political contestation actually happened, right, sort of the opening up of the American political system, in the wake of, of the Civil War during the reconstruction period is not obviously like 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, right is that, when you're tracing sort 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, is changes in actual in federal law you see how those become the foundation for later movements, for later efforts.

[00:55:44] Jamelle Bouie: But you can't reduce the struggle to simply, the struggle for changing laws and changing the foundation on which these struggles happen. But generations of activists very clearly that this is part of the battle, right both in a miniature way, but also in things we might relatively minor. So an example I like, is efforts to win to end the segregation of war industries, at sort of the second world war, in the Second World War. And one sense is sort of like this is isn't like a big expansive battle, but in another, Randolph sort of recognize, sort of this was not just a battle for connecting Black workers to well paying jobs, but also a battle for establishing, right, the equal regard of Black Americans by the government, and also by the public at large.

[00:56:43] Jamelle Bouie: The public at large to see Black Americans, as like participating in this effort in a full way. And that should institutional struggle was also part of a larger or a cultural struggle, they all kind of act together and so I very much see this writes quite a bit about constitutional rights, writes quite a bit about law I think those are not things to be disregarded, those are things to be thinking very seriously, taken very seriously in the sense that changing them is part of the project of, of building a more free and equal society.

[00:57:26] Thomas Donnelly: And Melvin Rogers, the last question, do you all end our discussion where you end, with James Baldwin. And you describe his vision as one of faith, without redemption, what do you mean by that? And also, why did you choose to end your account with James Baldwin and his vision?

[00:57:45] Melvin Rogers: So I decided to end the book with James Baldwin, is because throughout the book I'm tracing this kind of aspirational politics of this African American thinkers. And aspirational politics fits very nicely with, it articulates well with our national

preoccupation without exceptionalism. And it can easily be sort of cooptive in this way. And so, I wanted to turn at the end of the book to what is been developed in up until that point, but that's crystallized, and Baldwin, and which is part of, so this sort of illuminates the title, the dark and light of faith, I wanted to sort of turn to this kind of chasing aspirational politics.

[00:58:27] Melvin Rogers: And which Baldwin sort of sees slavery and White supremacy as those factors that in some sense of, it's just so scared the could of the nation and it scared all of us. And there is no way to think about, for Baldwin, how affirmative gestures and response to racial inequality, independent of the reminder of that scar, of that trauma. And so, what Baldwin is trying to resists, I sort of contrast him to another form of aspirational politics that's far more optimistic, that fits with the romantics side of the story that you see in the work, the American dilemma of 1944, as he's reflected on the Negro problem, as he calls it.

[00:59:13] Melvin Rogers: And, what you see and Baldwin is someone that is trying to get his Americans, his American counterparts to take seriously that, "Look, our racial history matters, that our racial history 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, in politics, in culture, through the trauma of Black life, and the trauma of this country. And if you that, Baldwin says, "You don't get redemption." 'Cause redemption would wipe away, in his mind would wipe away the sense of that tragedy.

[00:59:59] Melvin Rogers: Instead he recommends what you get are a series of atoning practices, because atonement is always about keeping in view the problem, but the way it sort of reverberates across time. And the way in which our response to it sharpens our civic skillset, and in that sharpening our civic skillset, we might be able to communicate new sources of care and concern to, to one another. So I conclude in that way because I think that this is the overall lesson of, of, of the tradition, rather than the more sort of optimistic story about transformation that we typically that we typically push and hold onto.

[01:00:46] 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, it's been an absolute delight, so thank you so much for being here at America's Town Hall.

[01:00:58] Melvin Rogers: Thank you.

[01:00:58] Jamelle Bouie: Thank you.

[01:01:04] Tanaya Tauber: This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill Pollack, and me, Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by Greg Sheckler. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Cooper Smith, Samson Mostashari, and Lana Ulrich.

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