

## **Poli & humani -epi13**

[00:00:00.62] TOM MERRILL: Welcome back, everybody. This is Politics and the Humanities, a podcast from American University. I'm Tom Merrill, a Professor of Government at American University. I'm here with my colleague, Sarah Marsh, who's a professor of literature at American University.

[00:00:14.21] SARAH MARSH: Hi, everyone.

[00:00:14.69] TOM MERRILL: We're lucky to be joined today by not one, but two guests. Melvin Rogers is Associate Professor of Political Science at Brown University, and Jack Turner is Associate Professor of Government at the University of Washington. They're here to talk to us about their big new book, and can I just say, it's a big new book. African American Political Thought, A Collected History, which is just out from the University of Chicago Press.

[00:00:39.41] It's an anthology of essays about-- can we call it the African-American canon? Is that a fair description? And it does, as all anthologies do, I think it tries to define the shape of our collective imaginary on a particular topic. I think that's the ambition of the book. So it's big not only in size, but also in ambition.

[00:01:05.06] And maybe I just start by first of all saying hello to both Melvin and Jack. Thanks for being here. It's a real honor, and we're really happy to be able to talk about this book. So greetings.

[00:01:17.43] JACK TURNER: Thank you for having us.

[00:01:18.99] MELVIN ROGERS: Yes, thank you both.

[00:01:22.95] TOM MERRILL: And maybe I should just start with, why this book and why now?

[00:01:30.28] JACK TURNER: Well, this book is sort of really rooted in our friendship. Melvin and I went to college together at Amherst in the late 1990s, and we actually met in a class on philosophy, race, and racism taught by Robert Gooding Williams who is one of the contributors to the volume. He wrote the chapter on Martin Delaney.

[00:01:52.42] And that was sort of the start of a friendship between me and Melvin both having interest in political theory, in Black history. And after we graduated from Amherst we went to graduate school at different institutions, he at Yale, and I at Princeton. And we sort of kept up our friendship and correspondence.

[00:02:14.32] He was really getting deep into American pragmatism. I was really getting deep into American transcendentalism. And we both were sort of developing interest in the African-American tradition, he primarily in Du Bois at the time, me in Ellison.

[00:02:29.71] And around the year 2007, we came up with this idea of putting together a collective history of African-American political thought, sort of on the order of Strauss and Cropsey's History of Political Philosophy. And so it was in 2011 that we really started to work on the project in earnest. And we recruited authors, figured out a table of contents, and had two conferences, one at University of Washington, one at UCLA where Melvin was at the time in 2014 and 2015. And now finally in 2021, we have a published book, and so that's sort of the story of how the book came about.

[00:03:14.42] TOM MERRILL: Do you want to describe the shape and scope of the book briefly? I mean, there's a lot of people here. There are some people who are not here. You want to say something about the scope of the book?

[00:03:31.05] MELVIN ROGERS: So the book runs from Phillis Wheatley and it ends with Cornel West. And we tried to pursue a thinker centered approach because historically, the way in which the tradition has typically been interpreted by historians and even political scientists is always to group the tradition according to [? ideological ?] positions. And we thought that approach often sort of flattened out the landscape of the individual thinkers, and it flattened out the texture of their minds.

[00:04:12.81] And so part of what we wanted to do was pursue the thinking centered approach that allowed for a more granular understanding of what these thinkers were up to. And of course in the course of doing this, we made some choices about who would be in and who wouldn't be in. But we took those places to be the beginnings of a conversation, an invitation, and in some instances, a provocation to others to raise the question, well, who else ought to be? Or how might we reconfigure the volume?

[00:04:58.76] JACK TURNER: In response to your question about the canon, we sort of characterize it as a provisional canon. You can't do a book like this without it being interpreted as the formation of a canon. So what we're doing is we're being very open about it and saying, look we made we make choices on these. These are considered choices, but these are eminently contestable choices. And so we invite others' contestation of the way in which we designed it, and we hope that 10 years from now, there are competing volumes telling us how we've got it wrong and how the scholarly community collectively do a better job of getting it right.

[00:05:42.14] TOM MERRILL: And it seems like that's the best that one could do because part of the ambition of the book is to-- I think you say in the introduction-- to be kind of a recommended reading list, which we as human beings need, right. We need someone to tell us, these are things to pay attention to. And you're bringing people up, right, some figures that we know well, but other figures that many of us might not know well. But that important task, it's really community formation from a certain point of view in terms of defining the boundaries of what we are collectively aware of, right.

[00:06:21.89] It seems to me partly that you just want to shine a light on many different thinkers, which is great. And the idea of expanding the canon or having a provisional canon is one that other people who have canons would do well to take. But it seems to me that there's also a kind of a theoretical ambition.

[00:06:40.01] And let me try to get you to talk about in this way. I mean, I think many political theorists teach some African-American thinkers. Frederick Douglass often gets taught. MLK often gets taught.

[00:06:53.66] And it often has the feeling of something like this. Like well, we know that America has a history of racism that we're embarrassed about. We often don't want to talk about. By teaching someone like Frederick Douglass, in a way, it allows us to say the Declaration of Independence was right all along, right.

[00:07:14.18] That there's a kind of confirmation that even though the history is horrible, the original ideal was something that was beautiful and noble. And it seems to me, as I understand the introduction and some of the chapters of the book, that you're not doing that, but you're doing something more. And so I wonder if you could talk about that aspect of how you see what the book is trying to do in the world.

[00:07:42.87] JACK TURNER: I'll start on that. And then since you're so great on David Walker and the Declaration, I'll turn it over to you on that question. We very much sort of take after sort of what we characterize as sort of the Nathan Huggins school of Black History, which is the idea that Black history in the United States, it is American history. The two are co-constitutive, and you can't tell a story of the United States without telling the story of Black people, and you can tell the story of Black people without also telling the story of the history of the United States.

[00:08:18.79] And so coming from that point of view, that means that when we look at, say, how a speaker like Douglass takes up the Declaration of Independence, we're not simply looking at the way in which he sort of taps into a meaning that is already there, but we're looking at the way in which he sort of actively reconfigures the meaning and actively discloses it through his acts of creative reinterpretation. And so part of what this means is that you can't simply look at African-American thinkers and African-American thinking as an extension of a set of meanings that are already sort of lodged in the American tradition. Rather you have to look at them as creative reinterpreters. And in some place not simply as creative interpreters, but as conceptual innovators within that tradition and against that tradition. And so in that sense, what these thinkers are doing is not simply extending, but they are reconfiguring and reconstituting the tradition which they were born into, many of them always against their will, and many of them in conditions of profound unfreedom.

[00:09:39.74] MELVIN ROGERS: No, I think that's right. And in some ways, I think it's appropriate to see what these figures are doing as engaging. And Ralph Ellison called the American tradition a site of side of symbolic action. And of course Ellison there was [INAUDIBLE], but part of what he wanted to signal is that it is an opportunity to redeploy the terms in light of the conditions and the experiences that Black people find themselves in. And that in that moment, one discloses opportunities that were not previously available.

[00:10:26.97] And so one way to think about it is that all of us right here on this call, we make use of the English language. We make use of the alphabet. But it does not preclude novel sentences. And sometimes, the novel sentences involves breaking of the old rules. And the breaking of the old rules may actually point to a rupture.

[00:10:56.31] And at that moment, there are ways in which we actually are continuous because we're using one of the same vocabulary, alphabet, but in another way, not so much. The question is [INAUDIBLE] to think about those moments of why not so much? What has happened? I think that allows us really to see these figures particularly when they're deploying something like the Declaration, that they are not just simply deploying it as the founders understood it. They're often deploying it on a radically new and different terms, even as they are using one and the same vocabulary.

[00:11:37.47] TOM MERRILL: Right. So there could be a meeting that was-- I'm not sure if present at the beginning is the right word, but somehow a rethinking of something that's not simply rejecting the thing that was there, but doing something new with it, right. And I can't help but think-- this may just be me-- but Oakeshott's discussion of intimations, right, that a practice might have a certain way of doing things, but might have problems within it.

[00:12:07.21] And I think he thinks of a much more, how shall I say, tamer set of problems. But there is something about that, there's a kind of continuity as well as rupture that's going on at the same time. Can I kind of read you a sentence from your introduction and ask you to talk about it?

[00:12:23.61] MELVIN ROGERS: Go for it.

[00:12:26.31] TOM MERRILL: Forgive me. This is from page 12. And so you give three sort of theoretical reasons why this is important for theorists, not just here are more people to talk about, but here is a way of reconceiving something that political theorists and others have been talking about for a long time.

[00:12:47.79] "African-American political thought and American political thought are also essential to one another and share a common historical fate." And what I read that, I thought of-- there's this line from Ellison in the essay on the 20th century fiction about that you could see American history as being carried out on the body of a Black giant as the scene of the moral drama of American history. And it seemed to me that partly what you're doing, especially in the section of the introduction, is trying to show the way in which the stage has been something other than what political theorists traditionally thought it was. Can you say something about that?

[00:13:26.43] JACK TURNER: Can you repeat that line from Ellison real quick? Because you cut out it just then.

[00:13:30.85] TOM MERRILL: I'm sorry. Let me try to actually read the line. "Thus on the moral level, I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action unfolds."

[00:13:52.04] JACK TURNER: Yeah, I mean I would need to think more about that particular metaphor. But I think linking it to Ellison is absolutely right because in that particular line, that is in some ways an image to Nathan Huggins. Huggins, I think, was very much inspired by Ellison and Ellison's view of the American project as a paradoxical, eminently ironic, tragic, and comic

creation of people in conflict. And so Huggins sort of carries that forward in his own historical practice.

[00:14:37.22] It was very much absorbed by Jeffrey Ferguson, who was a teacher of both me and Melvin, the author of the chapter on George Schuyler in the volume, and, since he died in 2018, the person to whom we dedicated the book. Jeff Ferguson really conveyed that Ellisonian appreciation of American history to us, and that is sort of the frame of US history being this tragic, comic co-creation of different peoples. The violence of American history is not peripheral to the meaning. It's central to the meaning of being in the United States, and I think that's something that is shot through the volume.

[00:15:27.59] SARAH MARSH: This is the distinction that you set up between African-American political thought and maybe what's thought of as the Western tradition or European political thought is that while the traditional Western tradition is preoccupied with discussions about rights and sovereignty, there is this thread that runs through the African-American tradition that has to think about white supremacy as a fundamental force. Can you say a little bit about the tensions between those two traditions and how the volume maybe mediates between them?

[00:16:06.67] MELVIN ROGERS: Yeah, no, that's a rich question there. And I think part of what we were sort of going on about in the introduction is to try to help the reader to see clearly-- and I'm sorry for the feedback-- but to see clearly [INAUDIBLE] African-American political thought develops. And that that problem space is not principally a question about how do we legitimize the polity? How do we find grounding for rights over and against monarchical or theocratic regimes? That's not so the problem space, right.

[00:16:53.83] The problem space here is sort of, how do we deal with the kind of constitutive disregard that seems to run alongside a political society that claims itself to be committed to freedom and equality? And so part of the question that emerges for the reader is just how is it the case that one can be so committed to those principles of freedom and equality alongside white supremacy, colonialism, dispossession, land dispossession, and the like? And part of what we want to do on the one hand is to sort of stake out our problem space in which Black folks are theorizing about the meaning of the good life, the meaning of political society, how to understand human nature against the backdrop of white supremacy. So we want to do that on the one hand.

[00:17:47.62] But we also want to raise for the reader the ways in which the suffering of Black folk reveal the undercurrent, the dark undercurrent, to the ways in which American society has been organized. And then ask, well then what must happen in order to really realize equality and really realize a freedom? Because to ask that question is to bring it up against an existing condition that in some sense is exhausted and to turn toward a tradition that has new resources.

[00:18:28.15] SARAH MARSH: It focuses us back to the Declaration in some sense, right. And you cite Edmund S. Morgan in the insight that the founders had a particular view to what unfreedom meant and how freedom might be constituted in a new republic because they watched what unfreedom looked like on their own plantations, many of them, right So this gets us back to

the founding of the country and the history that leads up to it, right. I mean, I think that's why Wheatley is such a critical starting point.

[00:19:04.22] MELVIN ROGERS: Right. Exactly right, because even there, Wheatley, as we see in the first essay, Wheatley is very aware that the unfreedom-- listeners can't see my [INAUDIBLE]-- but that on the unfreedom that the colonists seemingly experienced in comparison to Black people is metaphorical.

[00:19:33.48] SARAH MARSH: Right.

[00:19:35.51] MELVIN ROGERS: And what you also come to discover from Wheatley, David Walker, is that the colonists had started a very interesting distinction, that is say a distinction between the political slavery that they experience that was a violation, and the chattel slavery that Black people experience, which they seem to be in disagreement about whether or not that was a violation. I put it in disagreement because we know that there were actors during the period, [INAUDIBLE] is one for example, that had deep concerns about slavery. So we want to be true to the fact that there was some internal conflict, but the fact remains is that the chattel slavery story as being able to run alongside freedom won the day.

[00:20:32.28] JACK TURNER: The other point that sort of brings up is the necessity of the tradition of Black political thought in order to help resolve longstanding confusions within European tradition. I mean, this confusion between political slavery and chattel slavery is the confusion that goes back centuries. And so yeah, you see it in the founding generation, but you also see it-- like I remember seeing, not willingly, but being subjected to a speech by Michelle Bachman in which she said that the ACA Obamacare is slavery, and thinking like, how do we come to think that Obamacare is-- I mean, you may have objections to it, policy objections to it, but seeing it as tantamount to slavery?

[00:21:17.54] That seems a bit of a stretch. But nevertheless, it taps into this very large tradition in American libertarian thought that sees any sort of form of state intervention as approaching enslavement. And so I think one intervention I hope this book can help make into that discourse to say, hey, let's make some distinctions here between chattel slavery and other more metaphorical types.

[00:21:52.65] TOM MERRILL: A reminder. Doesn't Burke someplace make a point very much like Edmund Morgan point, right, that the American colonists talk so much about slavery to the king because they had the image of it. In a way, it formed their imaginary even though they were unwilling to follow through and think through what that actually meant about the human beings that they were living with.

[00:22:14.79] JACK TURNER: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, Burke was onto that point and thought that American enthusiasm for freedom was directly derived from their horror at the experience of slavery that white Americans themselves had created.

[00:22:29.98] SARAH MARSH: So this might be a good time to pivot. In addition to editing the volume, you all wrote chapters for the collection. And Melvin, I wanted to ask you about your

work on David Walker, potentially in relation to some of the claims of the Declaration because Walker is taking up in his appeal to the colored citizens of the world this genre of the appeal, right, which is the same form that Jefferson used, right, in some sense, in the Declaration. And I was hoping that you could just talk us through your argument about Walker and how he's transforming the genre of the appeal to think about citizenship in a racialized society.

[00:23:20.85] MELVIN ROGERS: Yeah, sure. So I mean, one of the things that I'm often interested in doing whenever I sort of handle I think like David Walker is to show the way in which he sits in a tradition. He's sort of rhetorically sophisticated with it, and then he can show you how he can do other things.

[00:23:46.06] And so the appeal itself, it goes back a century. And the idea always involves when we speak about appealing to, we always have a moment we're appealing to some high authority to render a judgment regarding some situation we find ourselves in. And the power of the appeal is not sort of, you don't readily sort of see it when you think about David Walker's book until you think about the whole of his title, Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular very expressly of the United States.

[00:24:25.11] And the immediate question, I try to argue the immediate question that you're presented with, is how is he using the word citizen? And part of what I try to argue is that you come to understand how he is using the word citizen by focusing on this other term, that is, the term appeal. And so he is appealing to African-Americans to judge themselves, to judge their world in a certain light. And by doing so, they basically bring their capacity for citizenship into existence.

[00:25:03.15] The novelty of it is the application to African-Americans. The American colonists, Jefferson in the Declaration, they were doing effectively the same thing. And so the language of the appeal already presupposes a capacity, the very capacity of black people were understood not to have the capacity to judge, and that that's the grounding of our citizenly capacity. Ultimately what we want to do downstream institutionally is to build up institutions to reflect and harness and deploy that capacity that we already have by virtue of being human beings.

[00:25:44.45] SARAH MARSH: Well, that points to the bifurcation of chattel slavery and political slavery, right. Jack, you're shaking your head. Can you elaborate that point a little bit more? I mean, I'm thinking about the way that Walker is engaging a system of racial apartheid with a kind of normative political discourse that he insists is more universal than it may be recognized by the state.

[00:26:15.25] MELVIN ROGERS: Jack, I'll let you get in on this. I mean, in some sense, right, the point is that it is presupposed by the very movement of the colonists.

[00:26:21.85] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:26:23.52] MELVIN ROGERS: And so in some sense, Walker is merely deploying the varied tools and capacities that they presuppose as a condition of their own revolution, their own resistance to domination. In this respect, even as they have in mind the distinction between

political slavery and chattel slavery, the idea of being dominated or being at the [INAUDIBLE] mercy of another is in fact what binds them together.

[00:26:56.92] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:26:57.94] JACK TURNER: I can't say it better than you. I mean, the one point-- and this is a point that I very much have learned from Melvin and from his work on David Walker and on 19th century African-American political thought-- is that just as figures like Walker insist on a distinction between chattel slavery and political slavery, at the same time figures like Walker have used their membership in a subordinated population, a racially subordinated population in an enslaved population, as sort of a claim to special expertise in Republican political theory. It's like, well, if this is the lingua franca, if republicanism is lingua franca, I happen to have personal experience in being subordinated and dominated, and let me try to shed some light on this phenomenon that you've made the groundwork of your public philosophy. And then so you have sort of the excluded using their experience of inclusion as a claim to not just inclusion, but as a claim to expertise within the public philosophy which supposedly justifies their exclusion.

[00:28:18.30] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. So Melvin, can I get back? I want to talk about this notion of judgment because years later James Baldwin would write in "Letter From a Region in my Mind" that one of the chief obstacles to racial egalitarianism is the inability of white Americans to allow themselves or to want to receive judgment of Black people. And does Walker have a sense that the judgment goes both ways? Or is he focused in the appeal mainly on the judgment of African-Americans as constitutive of citizenship?

[00:29:03.51] MELVIN ROGERS: I mean, part of what is going on in the appeal is that Walker is focused on the judgment of African-Americans because he wants to say that freedom is the kind of thing that one needs to claim.

[00:29:20.88] SARAH MARSH: Yeah.

[00:29:21.99] MELVIN ROGERS: And so this attempt to awaken the judgment of Black Americans is sort of holding them to claim their freedom. But he also realizes that merely standing up and judging that one is being dominated and being abused and that's unaccepted is only one part of it. But the other part of it has to do with one's white counterparts.

[00:29:47.17] So this is why he says toward the end of the book, "Do you not understand the words of your Declaration of Independence?" Here, he's speaking to his white counterparts. And this is in part because what Walker is trying to suggest to his readers as African-Americans thinkers downstream, most of them would want to do is to say, freedom is not a kind of individual property that we just possess. It is a socially distributed phenomenon that needs to be supported, right.

[00:30:15.99] And this is, of course, another reason why people like David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Du Bois, is so concerned about the ways in which American culture is saturated with norms of disregard, is saturated with a way of devaluing, ideas of devaluing it, and why one ought to devalue Black. These are the ideas in circulation. And insofar



as those ideas are in circulation, it functions to justify withholding support, withholding our regard for one's Black counterparts, and in turn of course, withholding freedom.

[00:31:05.43] To now invoke Baldwin, the problem for Baldwin ultimately turns out actually not to be a problem with Black people. The problem really turns out to be with one's white or white counterparts. And there's a whole series of other reasons Baldwin wants to stay, and we can talk about that, a whole host of reasons why Baldwin wants to say that. And John Drabinski has a wonderful essay on James Baldwin in the volume. A much darker Baldwin, but Baldwin all the same.

[00:31:41.07] TOM MERRILL: Melvin, can I ask a question about Walker? Just the historical context of the appeal. It's published in what, 1829 or 1830?

[00:31:48.70] MELVIN ROGERS: 1829 would be the revision.

[00:31:51.35] TOM MERRILL: I'm sorry, what?

[00:31:52.32] MELVIN ROGERS: It's 1829, and then we get a revision in 1830 of the final text that we typically use.

[00:31:58.99] TOM MERRILL: So I have a theory that the 1820s is a really important decade for this issue, slavery. But part of it is that I think that people are really beginning to realize that despite what the Declaration says, white America has no intention of doing anything about slavery. It's also an important moment. So in Virginia if I remember correctly, there's a Constitutional Convention in the early 1830s, which is the last time that slavery is sort of publicly discussed as an open issue.

[00:32:32.89] But there's a kind of solidifying of positions, especially in the South, at that. And I kind of fear that it seems to be in part prompted by David Walker, right. But that they realize like what the principles in a way mean, and they get a clear view that they want to say no.

[00:32:50.73] And also that Walker, if I understand your essay correctly, it's the moment when the South starts saying, well, we can't have these things go through the mail, right. And so like a real regime of censorship. You might even have to censor the Declaration of Independence if you took that seriously. Can you just talk about what his role in the historical moment is?

[00:33:12.30] MELVIN ROGERS: Yeah. So basically, the appeal is published, is circulated in South through seaports. And basically, I'm being a little crude here, but Southern governors are losing their minds.

[00:33:31.14] Obviously, this is a heightened period of rebellion generally, slave revolts and the like. And so Walker's text is taken to be a text that will incite revolt. And so there are a number of petitions in North Carolina and Georgia and Virginia to ban slaves from reading or learning how to read or to be read to.

[00:34:06.78] And Walker is in the mix of this, right. And one of the things that I try to say in the essay is that, look the way to read Walker's text [INAUDIBLE] is a defensive insurrection. Well, that's partly the story. It is insurrection and a kind of if, then proposition. If white Americans are not properly moved, then, right.

[00:34:38.10] The reason why I insist on this is because when he invokes the Declaration, he does not invoke it as a statement to say now Black folks, we are divorced. He invokes it to alert his white counterparts. Look, if you really think freedom is as important to human existence as you claim, then you must know that one possibility, one likely possibility, is that Black people will stand up, right, and might that moment of fear be enough to get you to judge rightly, to do right by the words of your declaration?

[00:35:20.77] And I'll stop here. Another reason why Walker is important now beyond this period is that if you read the appeal carefully, you'll see various pieces of what becomes the tradition of African-American political thought. So in Walker, we're already seeing a kind of nascent nationalism, but not yet fully embraced. And that goes off and becomes its own thread.

[00:35:55.50] And you see a deep commitment to the American polity, albeit in an attempt to reconfigure it, and that becomes its own thread, right. You see Walker saying in his appeal, right, that this must be read by every man, woman, or child. Woman, child? Oh, the status of women. Well, that becomes its own thread.

[00:36:17.63] The status of religion, whether God is going to intervene or not. Walker at one point seems to suggest he will, but then he says at one point, no. God will not drag you by your heads. Well, those become interesting and mature threads as we--

[00:36:33.60] TOM MERRILL: [INAUDIBLE] has a similar thought in the narrative in which he says, is there a God? So can I make a point about political theory? Because it seems to me that something important to what you say. I mean, when we are in times of crisis, we appeal to principle, right, as the colonists do in 1776.

[00:36:55.39] But part of the thing, and I try to say this to students. I mean, even though the colonists were bad people in many respects, when you articulate a principle, you don't know how far it's going to go, right. You don't get to put it into a box and say, it goes this far and only so far and no more, that there's something that is unpredictable about what it's going to do.

[00:37:17.01] And that just seems to be something that's just important, not just about this moment, but about what we do as political theorists in general. We're not sure where this is going to end up. We're not sure what these principles are going to turn out to mean when we do we really think them through.

[00:37:38.66] SARAH MARSH: Well, the same thing is true in literary criticism. You really never know what the books are going to tell you. And I think that's sort of a similar principle to the one we're talking about.

[00:37:50.06] Jack, I'll pivot now and ask you about your work on Audre Lord. And this is more of a teaching question. Whenever I can be in class, my students often invoke Lord's notion of the master's tools. And I was wondering if you could walk us through Lord's idea of the master's tools.

[00:38:14.57] And the full quotation is, "The master's tools can never be used to dismantle the master's house." And I'm wondering if you can help us understand that within Lord's theory of a politics of difference and all the different meanings of the word difference that you chart out in your chapter. And then maybe as a addendum to that, how might students apply that insight to their own education?

[00:38:40.71] JACK TURNER: Yeah, no. It's a terrific question, and it does come up frequently in teaching. First off, in order to understand the sentence, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," you really have to put those words in their original local context, which is, they're part of comments given at the Personal and Political panel at the [INAUDIBLE] conference in New York, September 29, 1979.

[00:39:10.52] Now what did the master's tools and what did the master's house refer to at that particular conference? Well, this is a conference where basically Lord is quite famously-- I mean, this is a legendary moment in second wave feminism-- is calling out academic theorists, white academic theorists, the [INAUDIBLE] conference for marginalizing the concerns of women of color, of lesbians, and of poor women, and basically using her as a token to compensate for the marginalization of those concerns. And one of the things that she does in those remarks is she's basically showing the ways in which the white feminists in the audience are reproducing white capitalist patriarchy in their very practice of feminism.

[00:39:54.57] And so what she's showing is that, in fact, in their practice of feminism, they are using the master's tools, and what they are doing is reinforcing the master's house not simply to the exclusion of women of color, poor women, and of lesbians, but to the impoverishment of feminist coalitions themselves. So what she's doing is she's basically calling for [INAUDIBLE] a coalition that sees differences among different groups of women as subjects of discussion and as sources of potential strength. And she's calling for the emergence of a new form of feminist coalition that is not built on the white capitalist models that second wave feminism has taken on from white capitalist patriarchy.

[00:40:48.12] So when she says, "A master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," what she is calling for there is a more egalitarian practice of women's organizing. And what that means concretely for the white feminists in the audience is that they need to critically interrogate the way conferences like that are organized. They need to critically interrogate the way in which they rely on women of color to take care of their children while they're away at those conferences. They need to interrogate the matter of conference fees and whether or not conference fees are marginalizing feminists that cannot pay those fees.

[00:41:26.10] So I think that the way to teach that particular sentence is by doing a very close analysis of that address and of its context and that only by doing a very close analysis of the particular concerns of it can you really derive what "The master's tools will never dismantle the

master's house," means. That was a general proposition, however. And that's how students usually use it, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

[00:42:00.90] That's a more problematic proposition generally because I think one thing that the African-American tradition shows is Black people using the master's tools all the time, but they never use them as given. They always use it with a creative turn. The classic example I think on this is literacy. When you think about it, literacy is sort of a classic master's tool, and depriving people of literacy is a way of enforcing their enslavement.

[00:42:28.02] What happens when someone like Frederick Douglass acquires literacy? It is a master's tool. He uses it as a way of unlocking a way to freedom. He then uses it in ways, such as writing fictive slave passes and writing fictive free papers in order to make his way to freedom. And finally then, he uses the master's tools and turns them against white supremacy in his own practice as an abolitionist and is arguably the greatest orator of the 19th century.

[00:43:03.34] So I think that we have to, with students, in terms of the master's tools, yes, we have to show them what that means in this particular speech. But as a general proposition, I think we actually have to problematize it because I think that the general lesson is it's not that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, is that the master's tools as given, often subordinated populations take the master's tools and then use them in new and unsuspected ways that can have a dismantling effect. So I think that in teaching, that is actually an opportunity to problematize and to complicate in very useful ways and to show the ways in which subordinate populations actually use the master's tools all the time, but in ways the masters never would have suspected.

[00:43:56.85] SARAH MARSH: I mean, it makes me think about Melvin's point about the appeal itself and its particular rhetorical form that is taken and repurposed as a rebuke to the Declaration, as a way of questioning the Declaration and imagining new ways of political action in the world. So the other question, Jack, I have for you is when students think about their own educations as being a kind of tool, a tool for liberation, a tool for an election. How do Lord's insights help them see their education as a self-actualizing process?

[00:44:44.59] JACK TURNER: Yeah, that's a great question. On the one hand, I think Lord radicalizes a certain idea of self-trust for people of all different experiences, of all different bodies, learning to trust the reactions of their own body, to trust their own feelings, their own effective responses to the world and to injustice, and to use those as sources of knowledge. So on the one hand, she's sort of a radical practitioner of self-trust.

[00:45:21.05] On the other hand, she not just encourages but I think exhorts everyone to put their own sense of the world into conversation with difference and to test it dialogically. I don't want to make her sound like J.S. Mill, but there is a commitment in her to a dialogical testing of one's own impressions of the world, and that the idea that through this process of dialogical testing, that we can arrive at new truths about experience. And so in terms of education, I think one thing I try to use her in the classroom to do with my students is to, first of all, help them see how she uses embodied knowledge, her own sort of reactions as a woman for whom her world was not designed, to use those embodied reactions in order to sense injustice in our environment.

[00:46:39.00] But at the same time, she really had confidence in the ability of us to use language to speak across difference. I mean, she cuts her teeth on certain romantic poets. I believe Byron and Shelley are two of the first poets she studies as a teenager, and ultimately her poetic practice becomes much broader. I don't think she ever shied away from using the master's tools occasionally in order to merge with her own experience and to articulate new insight.

[00:47:24.77] SARAH MARSH: Yeah. So the question about the Romantic poets and Lord's reading of them makes me think of a bigger question I have about the volume, which is that many of the writers here are writing in literary critic traditions, memoir, poetry, novels. And I was wondering if you both could say a few words about why is it that literary form presents this forum for thinkers in the African-American tradition? Why are these genres so valuable to the kinds of political action the writers want to undertake?

[00:48:05.92] MELVIN ROGERS: That's a good question. So I suppose I have two kinds of responses. One kind of response is that in a context in which one's capacity to reason and to join is thought to be nonexistent, that the literary, rather than the philosophical, becomes a way to circumnavigate so that one is engaging in [INAUDIBLE], but is taking place through a side or through a genre that is not typically sort of caught up in that moment.

[00:48:51.15] But I think another way of thinking about this, which is different from the [INAUDIBLE], has to do with African-Americans thinking what is the genre-- and I'm going to [INAUDIBLE]-- what is that mode of engagement that will help deliver the texture of the lives, the texture of our lives, the texture of harm that we're experiencing? And so now the novel, the poem, the biography, becomes quite central. And it even become central in control where one is not actually trying to be or is not primarily interested in being biographical, right.

[00:49:49.98] Du Bois is classic in this regard, right. But basically the point is how do I deliver sort of the depth and texture? And thus, these genres make themselves more available to do that than let's say that the idea of the treatise.

[00:50:19.60] TOM MERRILL: Something about the embodied character of life, that you're never just a brain in the vat. [INAUDIBLE] thinking of elaborating a whole theoretical system all by yourself or something. I was thinking about Desmond Jagmohan's essay about Booker T. Washington. And not to get all Strauss, but it's a way of saying certain things that you don't want to say directly, right, that there's something important about that both for self protective reasons but also maybe for deeper reasons, that the literary form has virtues that a more theoretical treatise might not have.

[00:51:03.05] MELVIN ROGERS: I mean, I do think that Booker T. Washington, a figure that's not in the volume, James Weldon Johnson, for example, I do think that there are some figures that sort of fit the kind of reading that Desmond gives of Booker T. Washington. I'm not confident that that is a sort of central reason because these black thinkers mean for ordinary everyday folks who can read to be able to read this and to receive the deliverances, to receive the message that is being offered. And in that way, I think it's less sort of clandestine in that regard, even if it's a different means of showing how one can deploy judgment.

[00:52:07.80] JACK TURNER: The other thing I think we have to take into consideration on this is that, and I think is true not only of African-American thinkers but of all sorts of different thinkers within democratic traditions, is that they've been excluded from the philosophical establishment, and they have not had the wealth and leverage necessarily to pursue the philosophical treatise, which is sort of the tradition of the traditional genre of political philosophy. And so they've used other genres. Lord liked to say that the poem is the most democratic genre because the poem can be written on a lunch break. It's a genre that particularly fits working class life.

[00:52:54.22] So I think that's one point. The other point, I don't think the invocation of Strauss is completely off. Just one quick anecdote here. Years ago, I taught a seminar on Frederick Douglass and James Baldwin. And one of my students was really sort of taken with the way in which Douglass sort of celebrated free thinkers throughout *Life and Times*, Frederick Douglass.

[00:53:20.78] The more and more we read, the more convinced he was that Douglass was a closet atheist. And he wanted ideas on how to test this idea. I said, all right, well, go read Strauss' *Persecution and The Art of Writing* and see if his idea of the esoteric strategies of the closet atheists sort of apply. And he goes, writes this paper, and the whole thing fits like a glove.

[00:53:42.80] Douglas' writing gets lively and colorful whenever he's talking about free thinkers. It gets sort of staid and orthodox every time he's talking about orthodox clergy. And the student came away enthusiastically convinced that Douglass was a closet atheist in *Life and Times* and he used Strauss to kind of get at this point.

[00:54:07.07] I'm not a endorser, necessarily, of Straussian textual strategies, but I do think there could be points of contact between the Straussian tradition and certain African-American texts. And one of the first white political theorists to pay attention and take seriously Black text was Herbert Storing. Another was Wilson Carey McWilliams who, even though he wasn't a Straussian per say, he called himself a fellow traveler of the transience.

[00:54:40.41] TOM MERRILL: Right. I have that Storing volume in one of those anthologies of African-American thought in the '70s. In our time left, I want to ask a question about teaching. And so partly just your experience as teachers, but also ask for recommendations.

[00:54:56.47] So Sarah and I teach a first year seminar together, and we're always thinking about what kinds of texts are right for students at that stage. What kinds of texts should be part of a general education program? Understanding by that, not what's the internal planning that everyone should know, but somehow a set of texts that's both deep and rich, but also right for the students that are right in front of us.

[00:55:20.22] And I guess I want to start with an anecdote, and then ask for your recommendations. And the anecdote is this. I was talking to a Black student just recently. We're reading James Baldwin.

[00:55:32.84] And she said to me, this is a hurtful text. This is a harmful text, that the amount of trauma is serious, and I just don't need any more of this, basically. And so we got to talking, and

she was talking about lots of other classes she's had. And she said, I often feel like I'm sort of spotlighted.

[00:55:52.68] I'm the only person of color in the classroom, and all of the texts that we read are depressing, demoralizing texts of trauma. And I had to think, right, because of course I love Baldwin and I have all kinds of theories and interpretations and whatnot, but it made me think, like what should I say to that student? And how should I think about the text that I pick in the light of those concerns?

[00:56:26.63] MELVIN ROGERS: That's the tradition. The experiences of joy, of hope, of possibility, of love, in this country for Black people stands in an intimate relationship to the denial of all those things. And so to read any of Toni Morrison's texts is also to encounter those wonderful things, but they will always be laced with these dark and tragic undercurrents.

[00:57:11.46] And one of the things that I think is quite compelling about this tradition is that what it foregrounds with respect to the condition of Black Americans, you should really want to say is a feature of living a human life, generally. What they are interested in doing is trying to guard against the kind of categorical and dramatic experiences of harm and devaluation that is visited upon them by the poverty to which they belong. But that is not to say that they want to disabuse us that exclusion and domination and denial is not part of what it means to live the messiness that we will call the human experience. And in fact this is what someone like Baldwin wants to offer. This is in part what one's white counterparts want to deny.

[00:58:22.54] TOM MERRILL: They want to preserve that innocence.

[00:58:24.37] MELVIN ROGERS: To really deal with what is happening with respect to the black counterparts is to deal with their own need, their own erotic attachment in some moments, to engage in this kind of harm of Black people, right. So to put a final a point on it, what these figures want us to understand is that denial, harm, punishment, these are part of a human life, right. And it is part of living a democratic life in which we share. What they want to guard against is that experience only falls, that is to say, the bad only falls on a certain segment of society, right. So that the real distribution, as we say, of benefits and burdens, are not really shared.

[00:59:14.48] TOM MERRILL: Right. But there's an insight into the tragedy or that the pain, the sadness of life that can't be avoided, but that doesn't have to take this particular form. So what do you do with students? What do you do with freshmen students? What do you think would be a good text if we were expanding the canon or expanding what we were doing with freshmen? What would you recommend?

[00:59:44.62] JACK TURNER: I mean, one of the texts that is sort of a go to text for me and I start many of my classes with is texts by Ralph Ellison, 1970, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks." It's this amazing sort of excursion through American history. And he argues that the fantasy of an America without Blacks is as old as the nation itself, and he goes through the history of colonization. He goes through the fantasies of Black extinction that occur in the aftermath of the Civil War.

[01:00:27.07] He also goes through African-Americans' own sort of embrace of back to Africa movements during the Garvey era and recently during the era of Malcolm X. But then he sort of makes his turn that this idea of an America without Blacks is ultimately a fantasy because Black and white and Indian identities, he says, are complexly interwoven, and that what we think of as American Blackness, well, it's something that's been forged on American soil, and it's been forged through the English language. And there's no sort of pushing the rewind button on the way in which the institutions and language, the colonizer imprinted themselves into the culture of the colonized.

[01:01:28.91] But he also then sort of goes on to show in the way in which the dominant white elite, one of the things they took on was some of the rhythms and cadences of Black speech. So he talks about the way in which below our most polished Harvard accent, there's a [INAUDIBLE]. And if there's such a thing as a Yale accent, there's a what he says is quote, "a Negro wail in it." And he says that this Negro wail was probably introduced by John C. Calhoun who got it from his mammy.

[01:02:14.77] Ellison sort of models this ironic distance from the ability to observe the pains of our experience, to witness their complexity, but also to turn them into a source of not just illumination, but also of laughter. And this is very difficult to do. It's very difficult to become a laughter at wounds, especially when those wounds are, as Melvin said, disproportionately borne by one set of people versus another. But Ellison models, I think, sort of productively ambivalent ways of relating to the pain of American experience that produce illumination, and sometimes I find that that can be helpful for students to take on.

[01:03:17.12] TOM MERRILL: That's great. I appreciate that. That's a good suggestion. Melvin, do you have something you want to recommend?

[01:03:22.88] MELVIN ROGERS: Oh, I don't know. I mean, I'm more like Jeff Ferguson. I sort of throw the book at you, and you just kind of work through it. I tend to think that reading is an exercise. It's a struggle. And that if you don't feel that you're stretching, that you don't feel that you're on your tippy toes trying to get it, then something is not right.

[01:03:50.57] And so David Walker's text Appeal is a great text in part because students never heard of David Walker. And it's a great start if you want to say other things later downstream about the tradition because you will see the threads in David Walker. So David Walker is a figure I'd like to start with. One, because it's a pamphlet.

[01:04:24.95] So in this regard, I really want to take seriously his claim, every man, woman, and child, OK. So it's meant to be egalitarian in this way. And this text is selected partly because it's deceptive. Students think that the first cut is the only cut, but the text is meant to stay with you. You're meant to linger on it.

[01:04:55.87] And when you linger on it, you come to see that the first cut, that there's more going on, that there's a story about god here, that there's a way in which he's trying to dethrone Jefferson and install himself. There's a way in which he really sort of attacks a particular black



woman in Article Two. And one of the things that you come to realize in a kind of ironic fashion is that the very attacking of her means that she's actually an equal.

[01:05:35.82] That is to say, that she can understand just like everyone else the demand of freedom and how she ought to respond to it. And so there's some interesting stuff going on there that the students typically get a kick out of. I think is a rich text, a familiar figure, but not the text itself, not the text that people would most want to use.

[01:06:04.05] Du Bois' Darkwater. But I use that text for, let's say, freshman students in part because I'm trying to develop and push their interpretive skills. Can we make sense of these parables?

[01:06:24.25] Can we fold them into the bits that seem to be transparent? What's the relationship? And it's also a text that actually stages to different kinds of genres that African-American thinkers often use. But I'm always using the text that will push them the most, give them the hardest time because at the end of that, you come out, the text then becomes yours in some ways.

[01:06:52.40] TOM MERRILL: They're not used to reading texts, right. They're not used to the idea that texts have layers. There's irony. There's jokes, right.

[01:06:59.75] MELVIN ROGERS: It's a descent.

[01:07:01.51] TOM MERRILL: Yes.

[01:07:01.96] MELVIN ROGERS: Descend into the text, right. Whitman, right. What does he say? A gymnast's struggle? And that the reader actually has to complete the work? We think of Du Bois' The Souls of Black Folk, right, where he invites the reader to join him and study his words with him.

[01:07:31.31] Look, democracy is not just simply the system we live in, but sometimes it flows through us. So I try to model a sort of democratic reading in which I want to authorize your judgment, and I hope you will authorize mine in turn.

[01:07:50.90] SARAH MARSH: Well, you make this point in the introduction that democratic life extends beyond electoral politics and voting booths are real important, but so are classrooms and so are methods of engagement with our interlocutors who may not be alive today, but who are nevertheless there on the page inciting us to understand who we are. You have this lovely line in your introduction about one of the criteria for selecting these texts is that they reward rereading. And I circled that, and I think I'm going to tell my students about it because it really does speak to the depth of the text and the way they keep talking, right. I mean, I think a lot about Equiano's image of the talking book. These books are always talking to us, and the key is to figure out how to listen.

[01:08:52.24] TOM MERRILL: Guys, I think we're coming to the end of our time. I just need to say one last thing to the two of you, that this book is a big achievement, right. I mean, it's big in

size, but even more than that, it's like a landmark that is going to-- all of our books are message in bottles, and we have no idea who's going to read them in the future or what they'll do with them. But this is like a gymnasium of things that we'll be working on for a while.

[01:09:22.09] I mean, you say in the introduction it's like a recommended reading list. Well, it's going to take a long time to work through and to think fully about the things. And I just want to express a sense of gratitude to both of you for having put this together because I think it is a big deal. And I think it's not only for political theorists, but also for lots of people who are trying to make sense of this messed up world. I really thank you for that.

[01:09:43.65] SARAH MARSH: It's really tremendous.

[01:09:45.98] JACK TURNER: We're grateful that people are taking up the challenge of the book.

[01:09:56.90] MELVIN ROGERS: I think that there is more to this tradition in here. I mean, it's more expansive. There's more to this tradition than we know. And it's for all of us.

[01:10:12.15] And so it's titled African American Political Thought, but this is the American drama, and these are resources. We always have to think about, what are the sources on which we rely that we can turn back to deploy [INAUDIBLE] to new ways to grapple with the challenges that we have today? And Jack and I hope that people will see the volume in just that way, as actually a resource to think with and think about, but to continue to grapple with the challenges that we have today.

[01:10:45.63] TOM MERRILL: Well, I think we're out of time. But I just want to say again, thank you to both of you for spending the time with us. We're going to be spending more time with the book. I know that Sarah and I will, and perhaps we'll talk again about other things.

[01:10:56.69] JACK TURNER: This was a great conversation. Thank you so much.

[01:10:59.15] TOM MERRILL: Thank you for taking the time with us.

[01:11:00.76] MELVIN ROGERS: No problem. Thank you.

[01:11:03.55] SARAH MARSH: Thanks y'all.

[01:11:04.38] MELVIN ROGERS: Wonderful.

[01:11:05.28]