

Rogers, Melvin L. *The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023. Vii +380 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

The Darkened Light of Faith: Race, Democracy, and Freedom in African American Political Thought is a significant addition to the academic debate over the place of American democracy in the lives of African Americans. This is the most recent contribution to the field of contemporary democratic theory and the history of American and African-American political thought by Melvin Rogers, who serves as Professor of Political Science and the Associate Director of the Center for Philosophy, Politics, and Economics at Brown University. Rogers' work is distinctive for its innovative interpretation of the attitudes and beliefs of the leading African-American political theorists across a broad time period that encompasses the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Darkened Light* has successfully addressed why African Americans continue to have faith in American democracy that has operated for centuries under the banner of white supremacy despite centuries of disappointment, violence, oppression, and marginalization. Rogers' argument is sufficiently built upon the political theory, political thinking, rhetorical methodology, and belief in the potential for the perfectionism of the American polity of a handful of key nineteenth and twentieth-century figures within the African American community that includes David Walker, W.E.B. DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Billie Holiday, and David Baldwin.

In *The Darkened Light of Faith*, Rogers emphasizes the common vision across generations of African American political theorists in the realistic possibility of achieving a perfectionist future of American democracy that found their white counterparts capable of affective judgment and reform. This is achieved by the predominant underscoring of the wide range of African American political theorists' use of rhetorical devices meant to elicit emotional responses of shame, horror, and pain among both Black American and white American readers.

The evidence compels the reader that African American political leaders felt that the best way to convince their white audiences was through persuasion and emotional appeals or what Rogers termed “rich accounts of dreams unrealized, horrors encountered, possibilities that yet may be, and promises that seek fulfillment” (p.153). For example, in his detailed exploration of W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Rogers takes his analysis a point further and applies a linguistic analysis of the text that ultimately reached the conclusion that the goal of the Black rhetorician was to achieve “a properly realized community . . . shaped by sympathy and human interest.” (p.229).

Ultimately, Rogers’ latest work aims to explain how and why African American thinkers believed that as a ‘people’ within the same polity, white Americans could become receptive to changing their treatment of one another to include those previously excluded, marginalized, or simply oppressed. The text elucidates that, among a myriad of African American leaders that included the likes of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, and W.E.B. DuBois, there was a profound faith and hope that the polity was capable of acknowledging the nation’s history of oppression and that change towards an inclusive nation that lived out its founding creed was a distinct possibility. In his conclusion, Rogers, echoing the sentiments of James Baldwin, posits that if the nation fails to atone for its history of white supremacy that the faith of past generations of Black Americans will be in vain. However, the author argues that he shares the hope of past generations of Black American theorists that this imagined future of a truly democratic nation that voluntarily embraces equality is possible.

One of the most convincing parts of Rogers’ overall thesis is his insistence that the language used by the Black Americans he analyzes must be carefully examined. For example, his emphasis on Walker’s decision to ask his reader to ‘observe’ and that his *Appeal* was for their

‘inspection’ denotes the intention that the reader be persuaded by the emotional reaction to the images portrayed by the work. Furthermore, a critical methodological tool used by Rogers is his further elucidation of linguistic analysis of DuBois’ *Souls*, where he implores his audience to ‘listen’ and ‘see’ while taking an active role in the text. (pgs. 75, 219). Previous scholars who have examined the same works have often failed to adequately realize the two-sided nature of African American political writers’ appeals.

Rogers’ work would be strengthened by incorporating more twentieth century Black female voices. The additional analysis of the writings of bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Patricia Collins would present a more complete depiction of the Black American community’s political thought surrounding the failures of American democracy for its Black citizens. A minor critique of Rogers’ writing is that throughout his work there are moments where he brings up a topic only to state that it will be discussed at a later time.

Melvin Rogers' work is a valuable addition to the historiography and scholarship of not only African American political thought but also the history of American democracy, legacies of white supremacy, and the racism that we still face today. Not only does this work define the problem of white supremacy within American democracy, but it also presents a clear solution as to how the current polity can rectify the deficiencies of the past and present to create a nation that truly lives up to its founding creed. The African American thinkers that Rogers analyzes in *Darkened Light* would be happy to know that their words echo their visions of hope in American politics today. One wonders if, like their contemporaries, enough white Americans have their ears open and are receptive to their messages.

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