



BRILL

Book Review



Toward a Democratic Canon

Melvin L. Rogers and Jack Turner (eds.), *African American Political Thought: A Collected History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 808p.

Melvin Rogers's and Jack Turner's magisterial volume *African American Political Thought: A Collected History* comprises thirty essays on thirty different thinkers, each grappling with a shared set of questions and themes. The volume chronicles a tradition in order to present a "provisional canon" of African American political thought. Addressing authors from Phyllis Wheatley to Cornel West, the volume provides a history of animating questions of American politics and democratic theory as well as compelling portraits of thirty original and powerful minds, each responding to while also working to reimagine their own historical contexts. The emphasis throughout is on how the individual thinkers considered might provide reflections on shared questions or concerns, while also evincing the distinctive approaches and creative insight they brought to those questions. In its treatment of the thirty authors under consideration, in addition to arguing for the coherence of a particular tradition – a coherence built around shared questions rather than shared answers, and transecting traditions like liberalism, socialism, and republicanism – the book also presents an argument about the ways in which such a canon is transformative, not merely additive, for the wider fields of American political thought and of democratic political theory. In doing so, and especially through running discussions of leadership, individualism, elitism, and the modes and genres of rhetoric, I'd suggest, it also implicitly poses an argument about how attention to the canon of African American political thought should not merely augment, but alter, standard conceptions about the nature of a canon. The book does not pretend to completeness but is composed in an expansive and open-ended spirit. At 762 pages, while many will be tempted to read selectively, it rewards reading cover to cover.

Historical reading and canon-based reading can sometimes appear as competing approaches: historical readings emphasize sensitivity to context, to how individual thinkers are indebted to their own moments and shaped by the language and questions of their age; canonical treatments, in contrast, tend to emphasize individual genius, a set of intellectual heroes speaking to us across the ages. Efforts at canonization often highlight transhistorical value, focusing on thinkers who might be said to stand outside their times, whose work sits above its own context. They focus on perennial problems rather than particular ones. At one level, in describing the book as a “collected history,” the editors mean it is a series of essays, each by a different author; in this way, it is a companion to a canon. And yet, as the subtitle already suggests, and the book’s chronological organization further clues us to, it is also a history. Part of the project of the book, as “provisional canon,” is to work within these terms, without losing sight of the individuality of each author considered. The book emphasizes “the individuality of black minds, the ways the thinking of individual speakers and writers draws on various traditions simultaneously” (p. 2); it is both canonical and contextual. By being both, and in its substantive discussions of the running questions that define this canon in particular, the volume challenges some of our assumptions not just about who is included in a canon, but about the politics of canonicity. After all, the very questions that define the “tradition” under consideration include questions about the status of individual minds in relationship to wider politics: questions of leadership and heroism, rhetoric and the position from which someone writes or acts, and sovereignty and freedom in conditions of interdependence.

While other treatments of African American or black thought have often focused on particular themes, and especially on left or radical politics, this volume features thinkers from across a range of political orientations. Its expansiveness here is a major asset, as is the running dialogue among the thinkers featured. Pluralism does not shut down questions about the relationship between a thinker’s identity and that thinker’s politics; instead, the diversity of identities, standpoints, and approaches facilitates reflection on the volume’s explicit conversations about epistemological positions and political views. It also makes it even more valuable as a teaching resource. Teaching African American political thought in ways that highlight not just lines of consensus but also points of disagreement among thinkers can challenge students – indeed, any reader – to engage more seriously and critically with both the tradition and the individuals within it.

The individuality of the authors comes through not only in their differences from one another, but in the originality and creativity with which they relate to established ways of thinking. Several of the chapters focus on how particular

authors drew on different schools of thought, recombining them in ways that help illuminate the politics of those ideologies themselves. Such chapters demonstrate the relationship between broader political movements, personal biography, and the workings of an individual mind, showing the creativity and nuance of individuals as they work to navigate the overlap and tension between supposedly disparate traditions and competing political approaches. In Farah Jasmine Griffin's chapter on Zora Neale Hurston, which elegantly combines biography with attention to text, we see "the way [Hurston] occupies a unique position that eschews social conservatism while embracing political conservatism even as she advances a protofeminist and anticolonial politics" (p. 314). Griffin highlights Hurston's "radical individualism," and belief in individual resilience over systemic or political solutions (p. 323). In showing this, Griffin renders Hurston's political conservatism plausible, even sympathetic, not only through attention to biography, but by attending to the ways in which Hurston's creative work "celebrates the complexity, sophistication, and beauty of black aesthetics and the extraordinary wit, style, and grace with which ordinary black people conduct their daily lives" – precisely as Griffin demonstrates how this view worked to obscure, for Hurston, some of the harsher workings of white supremacy (p. 329). In other cases, the point is that navigating competing traditions need not always be so difficult: Corey Robin, in his chapter on Clarence Thomas, traces the Supreme Court Justice's "combination of commitments, to racial pessimism and black capitalism" (p. 686), arguing that "though he eventually made his way from Left to Right, what's remarkable about his journey is how simple and easy it proved to be" (p. 704). While these chapters categorize the thinkers under consideration as "right" in some sense for their endorsement of (respectively) individualism or capitalism, they also show the malleability of such descriptions, and ultimately challenge the ease with which we might categorize. The volume highlights the creative power of individuals in their singularity, using this to better understand the complexity of their political positions and to motivate generous, rather than reductive, readings of both their work and the ideological movements with which they engaged.

The decision to focus on thinkers, rather than on mapping a particular ideological field, Rogers and Turner argue, facilitates a further move: "the reconstitution of American political thought itself" (p. 11), with implications for democratic theory more generally (p. 18). The priority on transformation rather than inclusion is a running theme in the book (this is a particularly central theme in Paul Taylor's chapter on W.E.B. DuBois, where it is linked to Cedric Robinson's treatment of traditions in *Black Marxism*; see p. 254). Such reconstitution is both historical and conceptual: as the editors write, "African American political thought reconstitutes not only key narratives of US national

history but also the key concepts shaping US citizens' political self-understanding" (p. 13). In offering a conceptual refiguration of democracy as both an idea and a practice, the book further offers an account of what it means to write and to read democratically. A common thread among the thinkers considered in the book, as summarized in the introduction, is "the sense that while the formal practices of democracy such as voting matter, it is a mistake to treat democracy merely as a form rather than a way of life that extends well beyond the voting booths" (p. 21). This implies a view of democracy as involving rhetorical strategies that expand what qualifies as deliberation, and a wide view of what it means to speak in public – what Rogers and Turner call the "expressive diversity of reason-giving" (p. 23) – as reflected in the range of forms of creative speech considered in the book, and the range of reading practices the volume's contributors deploy. It also suggests a view of democracy as requiring not only nondomination, but practices of mutual regard; in this way, democracy cannot arise from institutions alone (p. 25). Understanding what constitutes those practices of mutual regard, the editors argue, is not an abstract exercise, but requires consideration of what forms of redress are demanded by what specific forms of abuse (p. 25).

The notion of democracy as an ethos, and a set of affective and civic practices that goes beyond mere institutional arrangement, is connected to what Rogers and Turner describe as "a rejection of the myth of sovereignty" (p. 22) – again a clue that this is not just one canon among others, but that it stands to reconfigure the notion of a canon as well. According to Rogers and Turner, the thinkers considered in the book share an emphasis on "the inescapability of dependence for achieving the goods we desire"; they "work out of and often theorize a vision of social life where dependence is both acknowledged and viewed as inescapable. The only question for them, and in turn for us, is how to nurture and cultivate a healthy form of dependence" (p. 22). That question is an open-ended one, which several of the authors under consideration wrestle with actively, without rejecting ideas of individualism or agency altogether. Turner's own chapter, on Audre Lorde, brings forward a theory of "relational democratic individualism" (p. 587). Carol Whyte's fascinating chapter on Anna Julia Cooper emphasizes "her politics of radical relationality – in which the fate of each individual (or the one) is inextricably connected to all (or the many)" (p. 193), adding nuance to this notion of non-sovereignty by connecting it with Cooper's use of a "discourse of human perfectibility" and perfectionism (pp. 198–199), and to a "pragmatic orientation" sensitive to "the fact of interlocking multiple oppressions in America" (p. 204).

What emerges across the book is not hagiography, but what we might call a democratic canon. Indeed, the book provides an answer to what a democratic

project of canon formation might involve: not a set of heroic saviors, but a set of unique minds, creative and individual, yet committed to a politics in which the role of leadership is an actively discussed question. The question of leadership is not abstract, but is tied to notions of praxis. In their introduction, Rogers and Turner invoke Robert Gooding-Williams's description of an "Afro-Modern tradition" as united by a series of animating questions and concerns, in particular about what sort of politics might be adequate in response to white supremacy. They contrast this with Michael Dawson's approach – and yet Gooding-Williams's understanding of a set of questions or animating concerns is invoked most explicitly, outside of the introduction, in Dawson's own chapter, on Marcus Garvey, as implying both a question of resisting white supremacy and a question of leadership. As Dawson highlights, this is not just a question for political theory, but of "black politics as a *praxis*" (p. 263). The emphasis on African American thought as both an intellectual tradition and a political struggle is evident throughout the book, including in the dialogue between individual thinkers and the movements of which they are part.

Across several chapters, we see pragmatism and praxis not as the diminution of political theory, but its starting point. This comes through in Michael McCann's chapter on A. Philip Randolph, in which an analysis of segregation (p. 298) and of the intersection of race and class (p. 307) helps ground Randolph's analysis of rights, uniting his political thinking with his work as a labor and civil rights leader. In his chapter on Angela Davis, Neil Roberts takes up her theory of freedom not just as a philosophical concept, but as itself grounded in praxis (p. 678), and so helping to demonstrate the relationship "between experience and theory" (p. 661). In a different way, Tommie Shelby's chapter on Richard Wright brings forward Wright's attention to the material conditions of life and their psychic effects, and how those material and psychic conditions were changing under conditions of industrialization, even as Wright also saw the long-term staying power of both racial domination and white supremacy. For Wright, Shelby argues, this did not become a source of pessimism, nor did it occasion a turn to either black nationalism or Marxism (p. 437); instead, it was the unlikely starting point for an emphasis on "our freedom to engage in self-fashioning, to strive to realize ideals of life we have autonomously chosen" (p. 435).

Yet praxis does not mean popularization, and for the most part, the authors and editors are not interested, as Dawson is in his other work, in the public appeal of particular political ideologies. Still, the strategic potential of particular views, and their very political plausibility, does enter into consideration, and further illuminates the interplay of ideas and practical politics. Daniel

Moak's entry on Thurgood Marshall, which tracks a mid-twentieth-century divide between commitments to racial democracy and to economic democracy, argues that "Marshall's strategic and tactical approach to advancing his political vision was critical in the consolidation of a postwar consensus in black politics around a commitment to the pursuit of racial democracy" (p. 387). Moak traces how Marshall's views emerged not merely out of a notion of what might be publicly saleable, but through a confluence of his anticommunism (p. 399), his commitment to social science for its uses in providing legally admissible evidence of harms (p. 395, for example), and the centrality of the law to his thinking and the limitations that may have placed on his vision (p. 412). Here, the combination of attention to political salience with intellectual analysis enhances both. The focus on a running dialogue surrounding a set of core political questions, and the treatment of this not as a purely intellectual conversation but as part of political struggle itself, runs through the book. It also helps explain the inclusion of C.L.R. James – an outlier within the volume because he was born in Trinidad and spent much of his life, including many of his most productive writing years, in London. Anthony Bogues, in his chapter on James, focuses on the thinker's two "sojourns" in America, and argues for his inclusion in the volume on the basis of his contribution to African American political thought, as well as the centrality of the struggle of African Americans to his thought (pp. 365–366). Thought and struggle go together in a manner that itself characterizes and gives shape to a particular tradition, uniting many of the thinkers who otherwise have disparate views on the answer to the question of what form of politics might be demanded in their moment.

The theory of democracy that emerges is in this sense not just an ideal theory, nor a nonideal one, but intimately tied to that notion of praxis. This is encapsulated by Danielle Allen's summary of the three tasks of democratic theory: to render ideals of equality plausible in conditions of inequality; to explain what a functioning democracy might look like; and "to provide a psychologically and institutionally plausible account of how we can transition our organizations and social practices from the arrangements that grew out of the first, unstable, disjunctive conceptualization of democracy to a new, stable, and harmonized conceptualization of the relationship between rights and power" (p. 460). Allen argues we find answers to all three of these tasks in the work of Ralph Ellison, notably through his theory of invisibility and his concept of ritual (p. 461), as well as his use and understanding of laughter (p. 480). Allen argues that Ellison "rewrote American history and democratic theory to make African Americans a necessary part of both" (p. 461). Brandon Terry's chapter on Stokely Carmichael takes up similar themes, considering Carmichael's "democratic radicalism" (p. 607) as it related to a theory of

leadership. Terry shows how, by “defending ordinary people’s ‘capacity to grow and lead and articulate,’ Carmichael also mocked the reduction of the supposed epistemic bases for political authority to technical and managerial skills rather than ethics” (p. 608). Carmichael’s understanding of the connections between philosophy and struggle, Terry argues, have relevance both in their potentially portable lessons about democratic leadership, and in their historical significance as part of that struggle itself (p. 629). Part of what the volume offers, through the account of praxis, rhetoric, and leadership, is not just an account of nonideal conditions and an image of an ideal, but a simultaneously philosophical and historical account of the requirements of social transformation, and past struggles to achieve it. Again, this works not just to augment, but to transform, a democratic theory that itself must be historically responsive.

The notion of praxis here extends to the work of writing as well. That the act of writing, rather than simply transmitting knowledge, might initiate a non-sovereign, even democratic, relationship between author and reader arises as a theme in the very first chapter, Vincent Carretta’s contribution on Phyllis Wheatley. Rhetorical form here is connected with political content. Carretta tracks Wheatley’s intellectual shifts, from “patriotic royalist” around the time of the Stamp Act and Boston Tea Party (p. 36) to her declared loyalty to the revolutionary cause in 1775 (p. 47). As Carretta describes Wheatley’s early writing, the issue of patriotism was connected with the fact of writing itself: she was “laying claim to being a protonational American laureate by inserting herself into the political discourse. And by doing so explicitly as an ‘Ethiopian,’ she compelled her readers to at least imagine women and people of African descent as participants in the conversation” (p. 36). Jason Frank takes up related themes, though in a different vein, in his discussion of Langston Hughes. Hughes, Frank shows, developed a distinct theory of “political expressivism” (p. 368), one that navigated challenges around authenticity and vernacular culture, poetry and modernism, and aesthetic representation. Frank argues that Hughes “had a democratic suspicion of aesthetic and political vanguards and of the epistemic authority proclaimed by intellectual elites” and aspired to be a poet “for ‘the black masses’” (pp. 376–377); at the same time, Hughes worried about ascribing false notions of authenticity to vernacular culture. Frank traces Hughes’ “attempt to stage a productively transformative and ambivalent relationship between the poet and ‘the people’” and, with this, the consistency yet ambivalence of his egalitarian expressivist commitments (p. 385).

The emphasis on rhetoric as itself containing political and philosophical content unites several of the chapters, and discussions of rhetoric in the volume often work to unsettle any straightforwardly hierarchical relationship between author and reader. That the relationship between author and reader

is a political relationship, and a potentially democratic one, is a central theme of Rogers's entry on David Walker. In the chapter, Rogers focuses on Walker's use of an "appeal" as a form, and on Walker's invocation of the "citizen" status of people who were not legally citizens. Rogers writes: "To say that rhetoric situates us in the political world is another way of capturing the idea that authority is answerable to our judgment quite independent of and prior to legal recognition" (p. 57). Here, Rogers is both thematizing and expanding on Walker's own terminology, while also taking Walker's mode of writing as philosophical evidence, in order to explicate a decidedly non-sovereign concept of democratic citizenship and engagement. For Walker, Rogers continues, "it is from the perspective of judging that our citizenly status emerges ... and what invites the judgment of the reader – what elicits their citizenly status – is Walker's appeal to them" (p. 58). He describes the relationship between judgment and citizenship: "this is the hallmark of demotic rationality – that each of us can reflectively engage the important decisions of our political world" (p. 65).

In part through attention to rhetoric, several of the volume's contributors argue that even what might otherwise seem like straightforward praise for, and participation in, a hierarchical notion of leadership in fact belies a more complex view of power, or even endorsement of forms of political ambivalence. Desmond Jagmohan's chapter on Booker T. Washington argues for reading Washington as "a theorist of political deception" (p. 170). Here, we see deception and the "veiling style" endorsed and modelled by Washington as part of an answer to the kind of politics adequate to white supremacy: "Washington's conviction that political efficacy couldn't be divorced from political opportunity came not from caring little for ideas ... but from prioritizing institutions, especially those that provided the material and social resources needed to effectively challenge white supremacy" (pp. 174–175). The prioritization on institutional change, and the rejection of self-sacrifice as a legitimate political demand, led Washington to an understanding of ambivalence and forms of compromise as appropriate styles of leadership, Jagmohan argues. He suggests that, in Washington's biography of Frederick Douglass, we see "a deceptive approach to his defense of deception," as Washington praised Douglass for "moral flexibility, dissimulation, and prudence" (p. 185).

Jeffrey Ferguson's chapter on George Schuyler also emphasizes the interrelationship between questions of leadership and rhetorical style, arguing that this led Schuyler to reject the notion of a question-and-answer model in itself. As Ferguson summarizes: "Detecting the hook in the bait, Schuyler chided his readers for their slavish desire for big answers from big men. In the process, he challenged the whole idea of a 'Negro Problem' and questioned the adequacy of problem/solution thinking in approaching issues of social

justice” (p. 332). Rejecting the idea of a “Negro problem,” Ferguson argues, Schuyler would fill but also refuse the role of a leader who could provide answers, by “setting an example of skepticism, rationality, realism, and critical thinking rather than offering blueprints or ‘two-by-four’ schemes” (p. 338). And yet Ferguson takes Schuyler’s rejection of the demand for straightforward answers as itself an answer to the problem posed by his moment. In this, he claims, Schuyler has a surprising relevance to the present, which Ferguson suggests helps explain his growing reception from the 1990s forward. Certain rhetorical strategies appear repeatedly across time, precisely because those strategies both respond to and encapsulate the impossibility of conforming to a problem-and-solution model.

That varying rhetorical modes might serve as a response to relationships of political impossibility is also a theme of Nikhil Pal Singh’s chapter on Malcolm X. Singh describes Malcolm X as a “performance artist” whose rhetoric is characterized by “bursts of sonic invention” (p. 502). As Singh reads him, Malcolm X’s “method was to ‘play the dozens’ with US nationalist mythologies” (p. 504). He used this form of provocation as part of a broader democratic theory: “Malcolm X remained doggedly focused upon indicting the serial brutalities of the US racial order and imaginatively reversing its symbolic valences and institutional capabilities” (p. 510). Political argument emerges from within this rhetorical parrying. Singh persuasively puts Malcolm X here in dialogue with Judith Shklar, suggesting that his rhetoric worked to both argue for and perform what Singh calls “putting *racial* cruelty first” (pp. 514–515).

Through attention to rhetoric, even the chapters on authors who one might expect to champion a notion of the centrality of leadership, including in its more hierarchical and even elitist forms, and to rely on a notion of freedom as sovereignty, instead work to highlight the non-sovereignty of any author. Rogers’s chapter on Walker, Dawson’s chapter on Garvey, Ferguson’s chapter on Schuyler, Jagmohan’s on Washington, and Singh’s on Malcolm X all work to question a sovereigntist or heroic notion of leadership through an attention to rhetoric. Gooding-Williams’s chapter on Martin Delany, highlighting precisely “the sovereign principle” as a concept unifying Delany’s thought (p. 78), would seem an obvious outlier. And yet Gooding-Williams explains Delany’s “sovereign principle” as a distinctly republican conception. Sovereignty here is premised on a robust understanding of nondomination, one which entails relationships of mutual acknowledgement. As Gooding-Williams puts it, “acknowledgment has a *constitutive* force” (p. 80). To Delany, one cannot be sovereign, even over oneself, without being acknowledged as such. Gooding-Williams highlights the connection between Delany’s political philosophy here, his notion of struggle, and the use of prophecy as rhetorical style, invoking “the

spirit of 1848,” and forecasting “the black struggle for political independence as a grand drama on a global scale” (p. 94). It is not only sovereignty, but this revolutionary spirit and prophetic tradition, Gooding-Williams argues, that gives shape to the black nationalist tradition (p. 94).

Rhetorical strategy is not just a matter of style, but of praxis, a means of navigating challenges that themselves evade direct solution. This connects Gooding-Williams’s Delany with Delany’s sometimes collaborator, yet also sometimes ideological opponent, Douglass. Sharon Krause’s account of Douglass argues for reading him as a theorist of the “nonsovereign character of freedom” (p. 118). Within this, she claims, he remained optimistic – but “his optimism was partly prophetic, in the language of Cornel West, meant to inspire the very progress that he promised” (p. 121). Similarly, in David Chappell’s entry on Martin Luther King, this is King’s contribution to political theory: certainly, King offers an account of nonviolence, but to Chappell he also demonstrates that “the sources of courage and valor” are something requiring more than philosophical description, something “King had to evoke, recall, and conjure” (p. 536). In some ways, these two chapters are also the most immediately recognizable as canonical in style, highlighting and distilling key philosophical contributions of individual thinkers. And yet they also evade straightforward philosophical explication, considering a thinker in relationship to his rhetorical modes and texts as more than a transparent statement of views, but as political interventions.

The emphasis on context and rhetoric dovetails with a concern about the place from which one writes, observes, or claims to know the world. The position of epistemic authority is an open question across diverse chapters, both those that emphasize perspective and claim a Machiavellian inheritance (Dawson on Garvey, Rogers on Walker, Ferguson on Schuyler) and those that emphasize ideas about intersectionality and what we might call a form of standpoint epistemology. Claims about standpoint and position emerge as a dialogue across chapters: the emphasis on Machiavelli and the “black prince” (p. 263) in Garvey, for example, mirrors, in inverted form, the emphasis on the view of the “little man” in both the chapter on Malcolm X and that on Ralph Ellison. Malcolm X’s father had followed Garvey and was killed in part for it; as Singh tells it, Malcolm X “was himself the ‘little man in the street,’ someone who had been brutalized, with a sharp sense of his isolation from channels of influence but with pretensions to lead a black united front and outsized aspirations to change the (racial) order of things” (p. 505). Allen emphasizes the status of “little man” as a standpoint for Ellison: “Because the ‘little man’ has had to look at democracy from its underside, he is an expert in what is wrong with it and could be better ... Not only will decisions that fold in the perspective of

the little man be better and more stable; they will also create a culture that will be necessarily dynamic and hybridizing” (p. 461).

The notion of place and perspective continues elsewhere: Lawrie Balfour’s chapter on Toni Morrison argues for reading her as offering a “critical geography” (p. 547) that can emphasize both movement and flight, whether forced or fugitive, as well as home-making and situatedness, using both to understand a freedom that is itself embedded in place and history (p. 541). Shelby’s chapter on Wright emphasizes the “kitchenette” as metaphor as well as part of the material geography of racial oppression (p. 419). John Drabinski brings forward James Baldwin’s account of place and the problem of belonging (p. 483) and the significance of social space (p. 494). Nick Bromell’s chapter on Harriet Jacobs emphasizes her “loop-hole of retreat” (p. 96) as both a physical space and a temporal one, describing her as an “*immanent* theorist” (p. 103) who, “by suggesting that it is delusional to suppose that *anyone* can stand apart from the turbulence of their historical conditions,” worked to “expose the limitations of traditional political philosophy, especially its specious claims to universality” (p. 95). In contrast to the false universality of political philosophy, and its projection of an open future, Bromell highlights in Jacobs an alternative understanding of temporality, a “now” that is neither past nor present but a “time out of time” (p. 107). Bromell suggests that, reading Jacobs, we might see that “all readers are viewing life from within a loophole of retreat, with much less freedom and with a much less certain future than most of them suppose” (p. 97).

Bromell uses his account of the location and temporality of political theory to address the present. Drawing on Cornel West, he argues we might build political theory around a hope that is distinct from optimism (p. 115). The chapter also comments on the reception of Jacobs, and here Bromell suggests that, in placing her within a provisional canon, we might also reconsider the politics of the canon of political theory. Lionized in the 1960s, her readers initially focused on her use of the second person to recover a feminist solidarity (p. 99). We might think of that as a classical moment of canonization, in keeping with other accounts of a history of reception as a story of recovery and celebration (Carretta’s chapter on Wheatley is also relevant here). And yet, Bromell notes, that heroic treatment of Jacobs “soon collided with two critical developments that cast doubt on their assumptions and aims”: “an emerging ‘politics of difference’” and “a new sensitivity,” influenced by Michel Foucault, that was skeptical of “an individual heroic ‘subject’ with ‘agency’” (pp. 100–101). This is, of course, a very generous account of why the project of canonization presented in this volume might not have appeared before now: first, an attention to a politics of difference that both called attention to the need for different voices and also militated against yanking authors out of context to place them on a

pedestal; second, a broad skepticism about heroism, authorship, and the sovereign subject. Rather than simply return to the project of praising great minds, however, Bromell's chapter shows how Jacobs's work itself offers resources to reconsider and navigate concerns with an over-emphasis on the sovereign subject, and so might offer insights on the politics of canonization itself.

The canon that emerges in the volume offers resources for contemporary politics – yet it does so without reducing history to a history of the present, and without insisting on the simple portability of ideas across time. Several of the chapters directly address the question of what sort of politics might be appropriate to our moment: Dawson's on Garvey (p. 264), Ferguson's on Schuyler (p. 332), and Shelby's on Wright (p. 437) all suggest that problems from the past might resonate in our moment as well. Naomi Murakawa, in her chapter on Ida B. Wells, cautions strongly against progress narratives (p. 234), and highlights the political uses and misuses of periodization and accounts of “endings” (p. 214) to suggest the relevance of the past for understanding the persistence of domination in the present (p. 230). In his chapter on Bayard Rustin, George Shulman argues for the continued use of understanding the interactions among argumentative traditions, not to lift lessons for the present from the past, but to understand the past as conditioning the present, and so to see contemporary impasses of both democracy and democratic theory instead as places of beginning. Tracing competing “argumentative traditions” present in Rustin's work and in that of his New Left and Black Power interlocutors “between ‘progressive’ visions of state-centric social change focused on the nation and ‘horizontal,’ decentralized visions of participatory practice” (p. 455), Shulman argues that an account of these tensions is necessary because, in looking at Rustin and his interlocutors, “the visions in this three-way agon appear credible, undone by history, yet resonant still” (p. 441). Understanding their interrelationship is necessary to understand both the history of our moment, and how the present might become not a source of a despair, but a place from which to begin: “How we conceive our moment now, and *if* we can make it a condition of possibility, still depends on how we rework – and relate – the argumentative traditions we inherit” (p. 459).

As “collected history,” *African American Political Thought* offers a rich point from which to begin. Transfiguring the history of American political thought and democratic political theory, the volume proposes a canon of political thought that might itself be a starting point for democratic politics. This follows neatly on the editors' own prior work: each Rogers and Turner, in their own individually authored scholarship, has challenged the usual political valences attached to particular concepts, offering avowedly democratic versions of ideas we might otherwise think of as conservative or even elitist

(religious commitment and civic religion for Rogers, individualism for Turner). Along similar lines, what they have achieved here does not only augment our existing canons, but works to transform those canons, and indeed the project of canon formation itself.

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