

---

## Review Essay

# Democracy, freedom, and Afro-modern political thought

The Time is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy

Nick Bromell,

Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 200pp., ISBN: 9780199973439

Freedom as Marronage

Neil Roberts,

Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 264pp., ISBN: 9780226201047

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2017) **16**, 532–540. doi:10.1057/s41296-017-0087-1; advance online publication 9 March 2017

Robert Gooding-Williams (2009, p. 3) identifies Afro-modern political thought as a distinct genre of modern political philosophy “bound together by certain genre-defining preoccupations – for example, the political and social organization of white supremacy, the nature and effects of racial ideology, and the possibilities of black emancipation.” Over the past two decades, Patricia Hill Collins, Lawrie Balfour, Tommie Shelby, and Juliet Hooker, among others, have shown how key terms of political theory – freedom, democracy, citizenship, and coalition – take on different meanings when considered from the vantage point of the African diaspora and the underside of white supremacy. Reconstituting the history of political thought so that it fully acknowledges its Afro-modern strain affords us the opportunity to rethink and reconfigure keywords of modern political theory that all too often have been predicated exclusively on European and Euro-American political experience. Research into Afro-modern political thought creates opportunities for conceptual reconfiguration.

The two works under review engage in conceptual reconfiguration by analyzing how Afro-modern political thinking conceives of democracy and freedom in ways that differ from dominant Western understandings. Both works succeed in this endeavor: in Bromell’s case by re-centering our understanding of democracy on the idea of dignity and the experience of indignation; in Roberts’ case by re-centering our understanding of freedom on individual and mass experiences of flight from New World slavery. Both books also run up against certain limits in their scope. In striving so inventively to mine African American literature for democratic resources, Bromell falls short of fully acknowledging the tenacity of



inegalitarianism in U.S. political life and thus of specifying a realistic strategy to address it. Roberts strongly intervenes in the political philosophical literature on freedom by elaborating his new concept of freedom as marronage. But he falls short of showing that freedom as marronage displaces republican theories of freedom as non-domination; in so doing, he misses an opportunity to make the more plausible case that freedom as marronage and freedom as non-domination complement each other.

Bromell's *The Time is Always Now* draws from the history of African American political thought to develop a theory of the relational nature of human dignity and democratic citizenship. One of the lessons of African American political thought, according to Bromell, is the paradoxical nature of individual human dignity: "somehow, it feels intrinsic to one's being, yet it is produced through social relationships" (p. 23). In the work of Harriet Jacobs especially, Bromell finds this paradox at play: "Unlike Douglass, who tends to present himself as a heroically self-made individual, Jacobs locates herself within a network of relationships and makes clear that she has learned about her dignity by observing others and modeling her behavior on theirs" (pp. 22–23). It is not just that we learn to *perform* dignity by watching others perform theirs; we acquire and maintain a sense of dignity through others' attribution of dignity to us. This occurs first in childhood when nurturers invest (or fail to invest) warmth and security in the caretaking relationship. The vulnerability of personal dignity to the vagaries of social relationships carries over into adulthood. We can maintain a sense of dignity only if others – at least a few others – mirror it back to us. Once in the course of human development we have acquired a sense of dignity, we become acutely sensitive to affronts to it – so much so that when others fail to mirror dignity back to us, we become indignant.

One of the signal contributions of Bromell's brilliant book is his emphasis on the democratic political significance of indignation. He shows how numerous African American political thinkers – Jacobs, Douglass, Johnson, James Bevel, and Audre Lorde among others – "believed that an upsurge of indignation, precisely because it feels involuntary, gives powerful proof of our dignity" (p. 14). Dignity thus emerges in Bromell's account as an ongoing phenomenological experience – socially produced, yet internally felt, never really secured by either formal rights or moments of recognition. What the other can confer, the other can take away. Nothing can save us from this intersubjective vulnerability.

At the same time, Bromell finds resources in African American thought for buffering individuals against the pains of dignity's fragility. Here we move from the vulnerability of dignity to the positive possibilities of relationship. If dignity is vulnerable because it is subject to relationship's whims, developing arts of relationship becomes a way of (somewhat) stabilizing dignity. Bromell's analysis of democratic relationship in African American experience focuses preponderantly on failure. Taking seriously Orlando Patterson's analysis of slavery as a condition of natal alienation and social death, Bromell writes, "It is astonishing how quickly



and purposefully whites realized that striking at relationality was the surest way to perpetuate the slave system's denial of personhood" (p. 43). The abolition of slavery permitted the formation of more permanent kinship relations within the African American community, but Jim Crow segregation re-imposed subordination by precluding equal civic relationships: "whites were establishing a regime of segregation with the deliberate purpose of institutionalizing their right not to *see* their black fellow citizens" (p. 46).

Bromell engages the work of Charles Chesnutt to analyze the aggression at the heart of segregation – the "withholding" of relationship that "is itself a form of relationship" (p. 47). Chesnutt teaches that the moral logic of racial segregation – predicated as it is on a white right to (dis)association – is flawed: "we cannot have a 'right' to be averse to others and avoid them because we *share* our rights with them; as democratic citizens, we stand in relationship with each other whether we wish to or not because in fact our rights are coproduced through mutual assertion and recognition" (p. 55). Chesnutt's work exposes the fundamentally relational nature of dignity and rights: "[D]emocratic citizens should imagine themselves not as individual and autonomous bearers of rights but as interconnected persons cooperatively producing and recognizing their dignity and rights" (p. 55). Bromell's emphasis on interconnection and cooperative political production stops short of communitarianism because its telos is the individual person, not the common good. Bromell nevertheless finds in the African American tradition urgent reminders of dignity's and rights' communally produced character. Dignity and rights are not things of nature; they are things we make together as communities of equals.

Out of enhanced awareness of the relational quality of dignity and rights comes a theory of democratic citizenship as "relational citizenship," a face-to-face mode of citizenship in which we develop – in Melvin L. Rogers' words (2014) – the "care and concern" for our co-patriots necessary to honoring their dignity (p. 76). Bromell expounds this idea of "relational citizenship" through a beautiful reading of James Baldwin's *Another Country*. The relational citizen's orientation toward his fellows combines interest in their particularity with deep intellectual humility. Interest in individual particularity requires seeing a person as "not just an abstract self or soul but an individual person formed in part by complex historical forces, including racism and slavery." It also requires seeing her "as *more* than a historical person": "A person's dignity is thoroughly interwoven into his or her idiosyncratic personhood, into who that person is that no one else is or ever can be" (p. 75). Acknowledging individual particularity means acknowledging opacity and depth. This is why "relational democratic citizenship" requires modesty: "We understand that our knowledge of one another is and always will be limited and incomplete" (p. 76).

Focusing as I have on the relationship between dignity, relationship, and citizenship in Bromell creates the impression that *The Time is Always Now* is primarily concerned with politics at the interpersonal level. It is therefore important to note that other segments of the book broaden the political canvas and examine



black global consciousness, theories of collective action, and the negotiation of national antagonism. At the same time, *The Time is Always Now* strikes me as preoccupied with the politics of interpersonal conversion – specifically, how to convert citizens accustomed to various forms of hierarchy, especially racial hierarchy, to more egalitarian orientations. Given this preoccupation, the book would be even stronger if it tested its transformational aspirations against the literature of Afro-pessimism. Deeper engagement with this literature would have forced Bromell to specify how his politics of conversion addresses what Bell (1992) called “the permanence of racism” in American society. Is the politics of conversion aimed at all citizens? If so, does Bromell then believe that white supremacy is expugnable from America as we know it? Or does Bromell believe that white supremacy is intrinsic to America as we know it, and in aiming to destroy white supremacy, he aims to destroy the republic as currently constituted in order to give birth to something entirely new? If this is the case, then what is Bromell’s ethics of violence – since violence would be unavoidable?

Or is this line of thinking all wrong, and Bromell’s politics of conversion aims not at *all* citizens, but only at a convertible middle – one situated between a reliably anti-racist, egalitarian segment of the citizenry and a reliably racist, inegalitarian segment? Is Bromell’s politics of conversion part of a larger politics of containment, in which American anti-racists – to echo Baldwin ([1961] 1998) – “search for a majority” to keep the pathologies of white, masculinist Americanism at bay? If Bromell’s politics of conversion is but part of a larger politics of containment, then does this not concede that we are in perpetual civil war? If we are in perpetual civil war, then how do we prevent the harsh demands of war – figurative and literal – from perverting the highly ethical practices of honoring dignity, building relationship, and equalizing citizenship that Bromell makes so central?

That Bromell stops short of answering these hard questions does not make his book any less valuable. It is an essential work in the history of African American political thought – dazzling in its synthesis of the tradition’s democratic thinking. Yet the aspirational tenor of the work needs to grapple more fully with the pessimistic strain of much contemporary black studies. It is not simply that this is a significant body of scholarship; it is that the rise of Trumpism makes the question of whether to aim for universal conversion to anti-racism, or to search for a bare anti-racist majority, strategically urgent.

Roberts’ *Freedom as Marronage* focuses on freedom as an experiential condition of resistance, movement, and world-building. The “model” for Roberts’ idea of freedom is the experience of New World slaves escaping from slavery and establishing autonomous communities of freedom in the border zones of slave societies. Marronage, Roberts notes:

has been integral to the idea of freedom in Haiti as well as other Caribbean islands and Latin American countries including the Dominican Republic,



Jamaica, Suriname, Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Mexico. These communities of freedom... geographically situate themselves from areas slightly outside the borders of a plantation to the highest mountains of a region located as far away from plantation life as possible. (p. 4)

How does our understanding of freedom change when we center the flesh-and-bone experiences of escaping slaves in defining freedom? Roberts shows that taking the experience of New World slaves seriously requires us to make flight – and the uncertainties, dangers, and fears of pain and death characteristic of flight – fundamental. Freedom is even more burdensome than Europe’s existentialists had it: for the New World slave, risking freedom meant risking not just death, but re-enslavement, torture, and mutilation, fates arguably worse than death (p. 133).

*Freedom as Marronage* has five chapters. The first chapter examines the way both Hannah Arendt’s account of freedom in the American Revolution and Phillip Pettit’s theory of freedom as non-domination elides New World slaves’ own struggles. Arendt acknowledges racial slavery as an enabling condition of the American Revolution’s “success” – for racial slavery’s stable existence, on her account, helped revolutionary America circumvent the problem of material misery, or “the social question,” that bedeviled the French Revolution. But in failing to address the efforts of slaves themselves both during the American Revolution and afterward to seize their own freedom, Arendt misses an opportunity to explore an impressive instance of political action: slaves courageously initiating their own emancipation at various points between the colonial era and the late nineteenth century. Arendt, at least, acknowledges slaves’ existence. The experience of New World slaves is entirely absent from Phillip Pettit’s picture of the West’s republican tradition of freedom as non-domination. Pettit’s excessive emphasis on “governance... eclipses the actions of agents whose struggles in flight define the free life” (p. 43). Pettit, according to Roberts, denies “slave agency”: “(1) the capacity of slaves themselves individually and collectively to *imagine* their conception of freedom; and (2) the ability of slaves individually and collectively to *enact* their imagined ideal of freedom into practice” (p. 42). Against Arendt and Pettit, Roberts upholds the example of Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction in America*. Du Bois’s spotlighting of slaves’ decisions during the American Civil War to resist work and escape to Union lines, transforming the war for union into a war for abolition, “captures the capacity of the enslaved for collective action” and gives us a vision of freedom as “mass insurrection” unavailable in either Arendt or Pettit (pp. 46, 44). No theory of freedom is complete, suggests Roberts, unless it accounts for the importance of such instances of mass action and transformation. We must examine freedom both from above and from below, and examining freedom from below in the modern Atlantic world requires giving a central place to the perspective of the racialized slave.

Chapter two centers on Frederick Douglass’s conceptualization of freedom as movement and struggle. Roberts clarifies how, for Douglass, struggle for freedom



has both internal and external components. Slave societies literally *make* slaves: they transform thinking persons with an inborn taste for freedom into docile subjects uncertain of their own personhood. “The truest slavery philosophy is the elimination of education with the purpose of abolishing not slavery as an institution, but the slave’s awareness of, desire for, and right to the status of personhood” (p. 69). Moving toward freedom therefore involves re-conceptualizing oneself as a person with the right and capacity to act. The most interesting portion of the chapter addresses Douglass’s insistence on the language of “comparative freedom.” Even after escaping North in 1838 and securing legal manumission in 1846, Douglass still considered himself only “comparatively free” – for the federal government still accommodated the possibility of free black people being kidnapped back into slavery without institutional recourse; “comparative freedom” seemed the best way to describe a state in which you were only free insofar as you could show your “free papers.” Roberts uses Douglass to show the limits of “[c]onceptualizing freedom and unfreedom as fixed states lacking liminal agents moving to and fro between them”; such a binary conceptualization “prevents proper analysis of these agents’ imagined and actual acts of struggle and assertion” (p. 87).

Chapter three focuses on the political thought of the Haitian Revolution’s most famous figure, Toussaint L’Ouverture. As background, Roberts provides a “typology of marronage in Saint-Domingue.” *Petit marronage* refers to “a temporary flight from slavery by an individual or small group through fugitive acts of truancy” (p. 98). *Grand marronage* “refers to the mass flight of individuals from slavery to form an autonomous community of freedom” (p. 99). *Sovereign marronage* is a freedom national: “Its goal is emancipation, its scope is social-structural, its spatialization is polity-wide, its metaphysics includes the individual and community, and its medium is the lawgiver” (p. 103). Sovereign marronage’s reliance on the lawgiver, according to Roberts, is its primary weakness, and we can see this in the mixed legacy of Toussaint. Although Roberts credits Toussaint for securing emancipation, he criticizes Toussaint’s embrace of a distinctly French “cosmopolitan nationalism”: “Toussaint’s emancipation is a release into assimilation all the way down.” Toussaint furthermore replaced colonial slavery with a “militarized agriculture” that sowed the seeds of “postrevolutionary Haitian presidential monarchism and the predatory republic” (pp. 106–108). Toussaint’s example ultimately impeaches sovereign marronage because – though it secured abolition – “The desire for sovereignty collapses the vision of the lawgiver into a form of dictatorship” (p. 111).

In chapter four, Roberts upholds an alternative Haitian tradition of marronage that he thinks can more productively inform contemporary political theory. Here Roberts explores the significance of “the actions and events of people, particularly peasants, during the Haitian Revolution rather than sovereign leaders” (p. 115). They constitute a model of “sociogenic marronage,” of “macropolitical flight whereby agents flee slavery through non-fleeting acts of naming, *vèvé* architectonics, liberation, reordering of the state of society, and constitutionalism” (p. 116).



Practices of naming re-signify inherited political languages, bending them toward more emancipatory ends. So when Haiti announced “its entry into the comity of states as the first ‘Black’ Republic in the New World,” Haitian revolutionaries transformed blackness from a biological designation into a political claim: “Politically, *black* becomes the new *native*...Haiti indigenizes blackness, an accomplishment previously nonexistent in the Americas” (p. 124). Vévé architectonics denotes “the blueprint of freedom that an individual or collectivity imagines in a free world” – though Roberts says little about the concrete content of these blueprints. Reconstituting the “state of society” requires reconfiguring the relationship of the people to the land – though Roberts stops short of providing a full account of the land question during and after the Revolution. Finally, constitutionalism re-creates the nation. Through an analysis of the Haitian Constitution of 1805, Roberts shows how Haiti was configured as “an *imperial empire* resistant to imperialism,” and how Haitian citizenship was a distinctly *black* citizenship. But the blackness here is political, not phenotypical: so it could include phenotypically white subjects who locked arms with phenotypically black Haitians in resisting European imperial domination – “naturalized white women married to citizens,” for example, “and German and Polish mercenaries who reneged on their agreement with Napoleon” (p. 133).

Chapter four is the richest of the book; there are times, however, when Roberts assumes a great deal of background knowledge of Haitian history, leaving the reader without such background knowledge desiring more precise substantiating detail. A helpful supplement to this chapter is Adom Getachew’s recent *Political Theory* article “Universalism After the Post-Colonial Turn: Interpreting the Haitian Revolution” (2016), which, in addition to making a compelling argument about the way Haitian Revolutionaries reconfigured the very idea of “universalism,” provides a wealth of substantiating detail.

Chapter five meditates on the significance of the work of the Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant, who “more than any other major thinker in the last half century... situates both the figure of the maroon and the idea of marronage (flight) in its multiple types – petit, grand, sovereign, and sociogenic – at the center of his work” (p. 144). Roberts’ analysis of Glissant returns him to the book’s core thesis: “Marronage is neither reducible to fleeing from states nor to movement within state borders. It is perpetual flight from slavery and an economy of survival” (p. 150).

*Freedom as Marronage* is an exhilarating book that powerfully integrates European, North American, and Caribbean sources into a political theory more truly reflective of the creolized complexity of the modern Atlantic world. It would have been an even stronger work, however, if it concluded with a final comparison of freedom as marronage to Arendt’s theory of freedom, on the one hand, and Pettit’s on the other. Roberts does not press sufficiently on the ways “freedom as marronage” corrects Arendt and Pettit, leaving the reader to guess on this count.





My own sense is that – as Roberts expounds it – freedom as marronage serves as a strong corrective to Arendt, less so to Pettit. The acts of resistance, movement, and world-building that Roberts documents resonate with Arendt’s own account of the exhilarations and risks of political action; at the same time, they also show the limits of Arendt’s suggestion that violence specifically – and perhaps physical resistance generally – is speechless. The acts of physical escape and revolutionary violence that Roberts documents have expressive significance. If he had pressed harder, he could have shown how Arendt’s arguments on the speechlessness of physical resistance failed to account for the ways marronage expressed slaves’ humanity, desire for freedom, and longing to create a world that made universal freedom secure. A closing comparison of freedom as marronage to Arendtian freedom, in other words, could have strengthened Roberts’ critique of Arendt.

As for Pettit, Roberts does not convince me that freedom as marronage invalidates Pettit’s theory of freedom as non-domination. Pettit’s republicanism is without a doubt parochial in its exclusive reliance on the European and Euro-American traditions for its historical case studies and philosophical sources. As a historian of political thought, Pettit erases the thinking and experiences of non-white political actors in our shared Atlantic world. At the same time, freedom as marronage is an account of freedom as a lived experience of struggle, while freedom as non-domination is an account of freedom as a structural end-state. Conceptually speaking, these two portraits of freedom are complementary rather than contradictory, and while we can certainly say that freedom as marronage shows that freedom as non-domination is not an *exhaustive* theory of freedom, we cannot say that freedom as marronage invalidates freedom as non-domination as an ideal for state and society. In fact, Gooding-Williams uses Pettit to elicit from Douglass an ideal of black politics as a struggle against domination that Gooding-Williams then upholds against the Du Boisian model of black politics as a struggle against exclusion (2009, Chap. 5). It goes too far to suggest that Pettit’s theory of freedom is conceptually inconsistent with Afro-modern political experience and thought. For freedom as marronage to displace freedom as non-domination as a political ideal, it would have to offer a more detailed blueprint of the social and political institutions on behalf of which it struggled, and specify how those blueprints express a social and political ideal of freedom substantively different from Pettit’s republicanism.

Bromell’s *Time is Always Now* and Roberts’ *Freedom as Marronage* are both vital additions to the history of Afro-modern political thought. While Bromell shows us the internal richness and variety of the African American tradition, Roberts offers us a political theory of the black Atlantic – tracing the interchange of political ideas from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century “as ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 4). One question both books raise is whether the ongoing elaboration of the Afro-modern tradition will eventually result in a new synthesis of Atlantic political





thought that gives its black constituents their due. Will, in other words, some enterprising scholar someday write a work that merges the spirit of Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* with Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* and re-synthesizes Atlantic political thought such that Douglass and Dessalines stand co-equally alongside Harrington and Rousseau? It may take another generation of research into the still under-studied area of Afro-modern political thought to prepare the ground for such a re-synthesis. But the historical excavation of the Afro-modern tradition will, in any case, continue to disclose that Atlantic political theory – in Baldwin's words – “is white no longer” (Baldwin 1998 [1955], p. 129). It was never white at all.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Lisa Beard, Melvin L. Rogers, and Andrew Schaap for helpful comments on a previous draft of this essay.

### References

- Baldwin, J. (1998 [1955]) Stranger in the village. In: T. Morrison (ed.) *Notes of a Native Son*, in *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America.
- Baldwin, J. (1998 [1961]) In search of a majority. In: T. Morrison (ed.) *Nobody Knows My Name*, in *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America.
- Bell, D. (1992) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Getachew, A. (2016) Universalism after the Post-Colonial Turn. *Political Theory* 44(6): 821–845.
- Gilroy, P. (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gooding-Williams, R. (2009) *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rogers, M.L. (2014) Disposable lives. *Theory & Event* 17(3) supplement. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/559375>.

Jack Turner  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98105, USA  
jturner3@uw.edu