Faith and Ghosts: Critical Responsiveness to History

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In his Kneller lecture, Melvin Rogers builds upon ideas initially developed in his recent book, *The Darkened Light of Faith*. In that longer work, Rogers articulates a longstanding tension between two self-evident truths about American identity, a tension reiterated in Baldwin's response to white liberals' uptake of Myrdal. Although Rogers's lecture does not explicitly mention contemporary battles over how Americans will teach our history in K-12 schools and universities, it is impossible to ignore this context of his insights. How does American history relate to American futures? What futures are possible if we face the tension in the American creed that Rogers points to; what futures are likely if we do not? Crossing Baldwin with James, Rogers suggests a heuristic device—twice born faith—in order to suggest a way forward from white Americans' history of refusing to face shameful aspects of our history. Rogers, with Baldwin, is surely right that critical responsiveness to history is a necessary attitude if we are to move towards any desirable future. The challenge, of course, is how to bring that critical attitude about, at the scale democracy demands.

First Truth: That one piece of the American Creed, namely the belief that all humans are created equal, endowed with an inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, appeals to us now, as always, as a *yet unachieved aspiration*. To say it *appeals* is to use that word in a sense Rogers carefully explores in his scholarship on David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*.[1] To appeal, historically and legally, is to petition a higher court to overturn the decision of a lower one. As Rogers notes, this makes "appeal" in some ways an odd word to appear in the titles of so many 18th and 19th century pamphlets that challenged state authority in the name of republican, liberatory values. Yet it is not, precisely because the "higher authority" appealed to by words written for the many, for the ordinary people to whom the appeal is addressed, is what Rogers calls "demotic rationality," the capacity of every person to render judgment. Jefferson's words in the *Declaration of Independence* are also, in that sense, an appeal, speaking to everyone's judgment, asking that we overturn any lower court

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decision that fails to uphold those rights. Misguided lower court decisions are, of course, ongoing; the *Declaration's* truths remain imperfectly realized. Unlike critics who treat the blatant evidence of that imperfect realization as grounds to reject the project, Rogers and the African American perfectionist tradition that he explores in *The Darkened Light of Faith* treats the project, this piece of the American Creed, as aspirational.[2] It calls on Americans to identify with its ideals, now and into the future, dissatisfied though we may and must be with the political realities around us, imperfect realities created by our imperfect fellow citizens and our imperfect selves.

A Second Truth: That in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson speculated on a racial taxonomy, in language that both reflected and cemented the political realities of his day. While Jefferson himself put it as "a suspicion only" that "the blacks … are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind," his suspicion combined with the political power of the dominant class of white Anglo men to render the *Declaration*'s "all men" *white men only* in American law.[3] The history of the effects of that alchemical reaction between delusions and power, which is to say the history of race-based oppression in the United States, has been equally, if unadmittedly, a piece of the American Creed. If the first piece of the American Creed is forward looking, this second piece exercises historical drag. Where the white liberals who picked up Myrdal would say "that is not who we are," and turn away, Baldwin and Rogers issue a reminder that not only *is it* who we are, but also that *we make it who we are* again and again, through our evasions.

How, then, to face it? Not, Rogers argues, by seeking *redemption*, as this drags us backwards into myths—disinformative histories, as it were—of origins. Origins, as Edward Said points out, tell us our fates, "who we are" as predetermined by "how we started."[4] Oedipus had an origin story and with it a fate; the 1776 Project and the 1619 Project similarly tell us stories of who Americans were always destined to be. The glory or the rot are encapsulated in the seed. In doing so, such stories ignore historians' reminders that history is what we make of it, in the researching and the telling as well as in the doing and recording. History is a messier business than fate. In her not-unsympathetic

critique of the *1619 Project*, African American literary scholar Michelle M. Wright usefully elaborates this distinction by contrasting what she calls "Middle Passage Epistemology" and "Middle Passage History." The history of the Middle Passage, like any history, she says, "is still being written, as decade by decade we discover more archival material, more material evidence, surprising individual narratives, and knowledge about the history. The evidence used to narrate Middle Passage histories tells many stories – some of them conflicting, many of them shaped by gaping holes in our knowledge."[5] In contrast, Middle Passage epistemology has "no holes, no conflicting stories … It consists of one historical line that connects West Africa directly to America, bypassing slave ships' most frequent ports of call in South America and sometimes the Caribbean. This is because the Middle Passage epistemology is a narrative constructed to tell US Blacks who they are and how they know who they are."[6] As a tidy origin story, Wright points out, the *1619 Project* neglects 10,000 years of indigenous history, neglects overlapping histories of empire and capitalism that stretched east as well as west, and forces stories about gender and sexuality into supporting roles. I have focused on Wright's challenges to *The 1619 Project* because that project's narrative of original sin, unlike its deliberately disinformative counterpart *The 1776 Project*, is embraced by, among others, white liberals in search of the kind of redemption Rogers rightly questions. All Wright's critiques apply *a fortiori* to any attempt to narrate history as a tale of original innocence. History as an origin story cannot teach the sort of critical responsiveness that Baldwin and Rogers call for.

Beginnings, in contrast, are the work of human agency. New beginnings are always possible, and to begin again, to become twice born as Rogers suggests, *atonement* serves as a better metaphor than redemption.

In advocating atonement and responsibility, I understand Rogers to be treating history education within the framework of a republicanism that depends on citizens' civic virtue, on character traits that incline citizens to treat our fellows as equals in dignity. In such a framework, a critical responsiveness to history becomes something other than a technical matter of facts and skills applied towards narrowly focused ends. "History" cannot be reduced to the

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ability to answer questions accurately on an AP exam, nor to evaluate Heather Cox Richardson's connections between Civil War politics and the rise of Trump, nor to the contextualization of popular uses of words like "fascism," "genocide," and "colonization," though these are also important. To be sure, a good history education must include an appreciation of history as a discipline: how it finds and uses primary sources, how historians build narratives, how historiography has shifted over the years. A good history education teaches that while history is not "just one damned thing after another," neither does it come served on a plate. But Rogers and Baldwin ask history education to do more. They ask us not to remove ourselves from history in making it the object of our study, not to estrange ourselves completely, but rather to view it as the grounds for current inquiry and action. This is, of course, a profoundly Deweyan view; here, I can only refer readers to Rogers's book *The Undiscovered Dewey*, which takes careful stock of Dewey's views on contingency, human agency, and, as Rogers puts it in his epilogue, "the emancipatory potential within critical reflections on society."[7]

As someone whose own religious beliefs fall between Congregationalist and Agnostic, and who works at a university whose institutional proclivities fall somewhere between Neoliberalism and the Spanish Inquisition, I am both sympathetic to Rogers's religious language and also, when it comes to putting it in the hands of *institutions*, inclined to caution. It can be, I think, simultaneously true that each of us would do well to respond critically to history with an attitude of atonement *and* true that asking institutions to shape history education around any invocation of holiness would be a mistake. Yet to rely on individuals to educate themselves and ignore schools, which are the place where most people learn what they know about history, is inevitably another evasion. Schools are, historically, not good at teaching criticality; all the same, teach history they must. So, what to do?

I'd like to conclude by suggesting that while, as individuals, Americans would do well to heed Rogers's appeal, schools, as institutions, might take up an alternative heuristic: the ghost story. Not the holy but the unholy. The basic ghost story plot goes like this: A place is haunted by the spirit of someone who was wronged, wronged so severely that after the body dies, the spirit cannot

move on until justice is done. Those haunted by the ghost *know* the ghost and know, on some level, why they are haunted. They remain haunted because they refuse that knowledge, *evade* it. What kicks off the plot of a ghost story is typically the arrival on the scene of a newcomer. Although not the *cause* of the haunting—because new to the scene—the newcomer is nonetheless obliged to address the ghost's demands. He or she wants to live in the haunted house, or marry the haunted woman, or care for the haunted child. Ties to the living, to the present and the future, compel the newcomer to figure out how the ghost was wronged and—most importantly—what the ghost needs to rest in peace. Inquiry is always the first step. Righting the wrong, which is sometimes a matter of simply speaking the truth, other times a matter of returning property to its rightful owner, or restoring a reputation, is next. In ghost stories that resolve happily, both the newcomer and the person haunted face the painful knowledge and right past wrongs in some way acceptable to the ghost. If the person haunted and the newcomer fail to face what they need to know, or fail to repair the harm to the satisfaction of the spirit, the wrong is extended forwards in time, with the newcomer joining the ranks of the haunted. Only the ghost gets to decide when justice has been done.

The ghost story, with its three key figures—ghost, haunted, and newcomer—serves, I think, as a complementary heuristic that suggests how *schools* should think about teaching American history to children. Ghost stories are often mysteries, requiring the newcomer and the haunted alike to practice honest inquiry, often sifting through conflicting details and stories told by unreliable narrators. What better model for teaching children to think about history? It respects truth; it demands responsibility to the living as well as the dead. It acknowledges the power of ghosts, which is to say, of those whose agency was previously, wrongfully, denied. The paradigm ghost story that reminds Americans how history haunts us is, of course, Toni Morrison's *Beloved.* If Rogers continues his project of expanding political theory by turning to literary figures, and I hope he will, I cannot wait to hear what he has to say next.

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6 Wright, "1619," e4.

7 Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 239.