

A Democratic Reckoning?

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“Defund’ has failed.”

“It’s a bad slogan. Most people don’t support defunding the police.”

“Who is the leader? The movement needs a Martin Luther King.”

“The protests were so big but nothing was accomplished.”

These are some of the skeptical questions, impatient dismissals, and anguished disappointments that I have often heard over the past two years (and more) from people taking stock of the Movement for Black Lives. While some of these retorts and rebukes come from political corners that, one has reason to suspect, are neither inclined to take the movement seriously nor invested in its success, others come from a place of despair. In the wake of the historic George Floyd uprisings of 2020, as a right-wing backlash gained speed and as hope gave way to disappointment, some laid the charge of failure at the feet of the movement: it had the wrong aims, the wrong organizational structure, the wrong tactics, the wrong message.

Reckoning pushes back against this narrative of foreclosure and failure in two ways. First, it substantially rethinks what social movements are and theorizes anew the terms and timescale of their success. Second, it details a new political philosophy and praxis developed by the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and shows us how the movement has already transformed the ecosystem of US democracy in ways not often or not yet fully recognized. In the midst of backlash and political despair, Woody’s book thus delivers a kind of radical optimism. I evoke radicalism here in two senses: one pegged to the movement’s horizon of possibility—a world that is not yet, in which care, abundance, flourishing, and freedom define the lives of Black people and supply the ordering principles for public institutions; and another rooted in the politics of the present—a world that is already being fundamentally rebuilt through the “Black Radical Feminist Pragmatism” of the movement.

Mirroring the philosophical commitments that Woody centers in her account of M4BL, *Reckoning* reorients the center of democratic theorizing and the sites of democratic politics—moving from margin to center and engaging with movement work as a mode of political theorizing. Building on in-depth interviews, Woody assembles a chorus of voices from within

the movement—Patrice Khan Cullors, Maurice Moe Mitchell, Jessica Byrd, Mary Hooks, and many others—and brings them into a rich and dynamic conversation with the work of John Dewey, Iris Marion Young, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and adrienne marie brown. The book thus demands and facilitates a reckoning of its own—over what counts as political thought and who its primary producers are—and suggests (implicitly but boldly) that doing democratic theory requires that we cultivate new, radically democratic, methods of theorizing.

The bulk of the book zooms in closely, taking us within the organizing spaces of the movement, to elaborate and reconstruct its theoretical frames and organizing practices. Woodly reconstructs a philosophy and praxis that are both pragmatic and radical—premised on both a deep acknowledgment of the political constraints of the present and a thoroughgoing vision for how such constraints might be transcended and transformed. “The movement’s understanding of politics builds in an acknowledgement that what is necessary for justice might not be politically possible at this time,” she writes; indeed, there is no static roadmap of how to get there. Instead, “those who seek a world where all Black people can live and thrive have to imagine, persuade, win power, and experiment their way toward a more just and flourishing world. Put differently, the political task of people in a movement is *world-building*” (70, emphasis original). As Woodly reveals, building a new liberatory world out of the materials of the present violent and unjust one requires not just mobilization and protest, but practices of care and healing justice for those harmed by oppression, both inside and outside the movement. More than a guiding principle or an ethical commitment, for M4BL, care “is also a *politics*, an essential activity of governance based on the acknowledgement of the basic need for and responsibility to provide the care that is *always* required for human life, and therefore must be attended to in the arrangement, management, and maintenance of society and politics” (91, emphases original). The movement lives out these practices in the norms they cultivate through organizing—“showing up,” “holding space,” and “intergenerational interdependence” among them (103–8)—and through the orientation toward the horizons of abolition and repair. These are as much the movement’s outward commitments to the political world they want to build, as they are the scaffolding for the movement’s practices among those whom it organizes.

The introduction and final chapter zoom back out to think about the larger democratic and institutional context against which these practices unfold, challenging common conceptions of the place of social movements within democracy and within democratic theory, and demonstrating the effects of the movement’s work. Woodly shows how—contrary to the skeptic’s doubts about the movement’s efficacy—M4BL has already had a transformative impact: first and foremost, by “changing public meanings” (170) around Blackness, police violence, structural injustice, and care; and second, by facilitating broad and stable shifts in public opinion about racial justice. They have

also innovated new tactics, devised novel institutions, and engaged strategically and creatively with electoral politics. *Reckoning* argues that social movements like M4BL must be seen not as periodic disruptions to democracy, but part of its very fabric, an essential democratic institution that provides “swailing,” the kind of “controlled burn” that combats despair and repoliticizes political life, “reminding ‘the people’ that they are at the root of all legitimate democratic authority” (17).

If we look only to policy change or electoral outcomes as the measure of movement success, we are missing a large part of their democratic value as well as the larger story of their transformative potential. Social movements are core democratic institutions not, or not only, because they affect how people vote or what policies are implemented, but because they teach us “how to reclaim citizenship in times when public life becomes anemic or repressive, and many have forgotten that political action is both necessary and beneficial” (17). Movements are able to make change in these other ways precisely because they also, and more fundamentally, promise to renew, restore, and return democracy to itself.

As a rejoinder to some of the skeptical questions with which I opened, I find Woodyly’s conclusions both convincing and important. Yet expansive as this sense of social movements is, the frame of “democracy” seems an uncomfortable fit for the movement praxis that Woodyly so beautifully excavates. Between the bookends of the introduction and the conclusion, readers encounter a movement whose horizon is not democracy or citizenship, nor the project of civic renewal and repair, but instead, I suggest, a racial Black feminist humanism that readily overflows the boundaries of democratic citizenship. As Woodyly argues in the chapter on care, “people in the movement do not center care because of a commitment to the idea of democracy or the duty and value of citizenship, but instead in accordance with the fundamental political claim animating the movement. That is, because they *matter* to themselves and to one another” (91, emphasis original). The prospect of vulnerable people mattering—deeply, materially, and substantively mattering—to themselves and to others might still be called a “democratic” vision, and a radical one at that. But its logic is not citizenship and civic ties, nor its boundaries those of US democracy (however reconstituted and renewed). To take this sense of democracy seriously would mean envisioning not only a substantially transformed domestic politics, but an entirely new global politics.

I worry that the frame of democracy occludes the vibrant Black internationalism that is also a part of the movement, but that does not appear very fully in *Reckoning*. This internationalism was on display vividly in the summer of 2020, when the mass mobilizations in response to the murder of George Floyd spread quickly across the globe. It was on display again a year later, as M4BL activists organized protests in solidarity with Palestinians, as escalating Israeli airstrikes in May 2021 killed hundreds of Gazans in under two weeks. As Adom Getachew has written, M4BL has “developed an incipient language of black internationalism, building on earlier traditions and

identifying a shared field of political struggle with anti-imperial and progressive forces around the world.” Quoting the 2016 Vision for Black Lives, Getachew argues that in organizing against police and state violence in the United States, M4BL has articulated “connections between black people’s struggles at home and wars abroad. “As oppressed people living in the US, the belly of global empire . . . we are in a critical position to build the necessary connections for a global liberation movement.”¹

In the face of technologies of racial violence, political domination, and economic exploitation that are not purely domestic but rather globally recursive, the basic but profound demand that Black lives must matter requires seizing shared ground that transgresses national and democratic borders. To envision and make a domestic “polity in which human thriving makes sense” (216), the Black Radical Feminist Pragmatism of M4BL must be oriented toward an entire world in which human thriving makes sense.

¹Adom Getachew, “The New Black Internationalism,” *Dissent*, Fall 2021, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-new-black-internationalism>.