Critical Dialogue

We Testify with Our Lives: How Religion Transformed Radical Thought from Black Power to Black Lives Matter. By Terrence L. Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 312p. $120.00 cloth, $30.00 paper.
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— Deva Woodly , *The New School*
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Terrence L. Johnson's capacious book *We Testify with Our Lives* takes its name from a speech given by Audre Lorde in which she insists "change, personal and political, does not come about in a day, nor a year. But it is our day-to-day decisions, the way in which we testify with our lives to those things in which we say we believe, that empower us" (quoted on p. 17). In it, he convincingly makes the case for "Black religion's wide-ranging role in sustaining Black politics and political thought" and further that "Black religious radicalism sets the conditions for the emergence of organizations" and ideas that "serve as a site through which African Americans reimagine their freedom" (p. 17). Religion, for Johnson, is not limited to "Afro Christianity" or the Black church, but instead refers to the "sacred subjectivity" that has served as an ethical and political resource for Black peoples to understand, interpolate, conjure, and act toward a world beyond what Lewis Gordon has dubbed the "bad faith" of white supremacist modernity in which racial oppression (and race-making logics that justify and reproduce it) is a fundamental ingredient of dominant conceptual frameworks, social practices, and political institutions.

Johnson explores these ideas by looking at a broad spectrum of sources, from a fascinating examination of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* to archival letters and meeting minutes of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Utilizing these accounts, Johnson develops an argument about what he terms the "ethical turn" in Black political thought that marked a rupture from the movement liberalism of the early civil rights period and propelled the change to Black Power as the framework for liberatory politics in the late 1960s and beyond. Johnson defines this ethical turn as "the ongoing recentering of Black subjectivity as central, necessary, and foundational in any humanistic endeavor to imagine, interpret, and invent existential and epistemic legitimacy" (p. 144). He contends that the genesis of this ethical turn can be found in Black women's political thought, particularly that of Lorde, who challenged and still challenges her interlocutors to "revolt against perfunctory social integration and appropriation of liberal political ideals of equality and inclusion and capitalist values that promoted vast wealth inequality and stark individualism" in favor of "the strenuous work of imagining, cultivating, and building their *own*, intellectual and cultural traditions" … "building a political and social vision from *difference*" and developing "a way toward political freedom and human fulfillment" (pp. 4-5).

This "ethical turn" away from liberalism and toward something that exceeds its possibilities is, for Johnson, symbolized by Stokely Carmichael's spontaneous cry of "Black power" as a part of his refusal to be arrested (for the second time in a single day) as he peacefully protested for voting rights. This change in perspective was necessitated by the realization, which began to dawn in the early 1960s, that even though the civil rights movement was making incredible gains in terms of formal legal rights—that is, on the only terms political liberalism acknowledges as necessary and legitimate—there was a violent backlash and social retrenchment sweeping white America that made it apparent that newly won gains were tenuous and that to keep them the nation would demand a seemingly endless blood sacrifice. Throughout the sixties voting rights activists were murdered; Black movement leaders were surveilled, terrorized, and slain; and white people open to some action toward racial justice, including the President of the United States, John F. Kennedy and his Attorney General brother Robert, were assassinated. In the 1960s, as in the period of Reconstruction a century before as well as the half century since the civil rights movement, America has always treated small advances toward the equality described in the rhetoric of the founding with ferocious and lethal retaliation. The romanticized version of the civil rights movement now told in sweet stories of folks holding hands while marching down picturesque avenues glosses over the immense, deadly, and entirely historically consistent white rage in response to mild, lawful, liberal demands for equality in and before the law. In the wake of a movement cycle in which Black people, women, youth, LGBTQ folk, and workers have been making demands to push beyond the color-blind American Dream based inclusion and

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toward freedom and flourishing, we see this rage reprised as patriarchal white Christian nationalism becomes resurgent.

Johnson writes frankly about sentiments that many people share as the third decade of the twenty-first century commences amidst plague, environmental catastrophe, and an exhausting repeat of the brutal struggles for basic rights that characterized the last century: "To be frank, I do not have any hope in our institutions. I do not trust our leaders. And sadly, my faith is waning." However, he writes that "our ancestors beckon me—beckon us, to return to our history, what we have cultivated as sacred, to find our strength, power, and human dignity" (p. 48).

This exploration of the source of strength and creativity that allows Black political thinkers, activists, and organizers to return to the epoch-defining breech of "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" as bell hooks termed it, is not faith in liberal ideals but instead, he argues, a spiritual commitment to a "politics of healing." This politics originates in Black feminist thought and is, according to Johnson, manifested in the development of Black Power philosophy (as exemplified by Stokely Carmichael) and organizing, which attempts to "give flesh to freedom" by making it clear that any justice worth the name must have a global, material, embodied, and experiential set of definitions not merely conceptual, procedural, or legal ones.

With these observations, Johnson joins a growing chorus of political theorists, scholars of Black politics, democracy and social movements that are urging consideration of alternatives to liberalism as the sine qua non of theories of justice. Importantly, Johnson, like myself and others writing to urge this reevaluation are not seeking to redraw the old oppositions between an inadequate liberalism and a socialism that is equally anchored in (and limited by) the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Instead, Johnson emphasizes the importance and usefulness of the material analysis and action precipitated by socialist critique, while also pointing toward the long tradition of visionary labor in Black political thought that does not subscribe to any political orthodoxy but instead insists on "discover[ing] new means by which to expand our knowledge of human strivings" (p. 234).

Johnson argues that religion has been central to this process in ways that have been too little discussed. This is because Johnson is not focused on the Black church as an institutional asset but instead wishes to point our attention to Black religious traditions as plural, fluid, and critical spaces of ethical and political imagination. He writes that "religion was fluid, not a fixed doctrine but a set of guiding principles to be applied to varying context and social problems" (p. 46). This religious register, he argues, is central to Black political thought and politics because it provides an "epistemological freedom" that allows Black peoples to conceive and enact a politics that exceeds the "grammar of Black suffering" (p. 94).

On these important points, Johnson is compelling. As a reader, I would have liked to see more examples from the archives of how Stokely Carmichael and others who developed into the Black Power wing of the civil rights movement wrote and talked about their move away from rights-based claims-making and toward an internationalist, Black, materialist, and humanist politics. Without a wider window into this process, it is not clear how the Black feminism and Black power aspects of that era's political thought sit together to catalyze the ethical turn that Johnson observes. Indeed, Johnson does not deal seriously with either the gender politics of the Black Power movement or the gender tensions that existed between organizers in the movement. The voices of women in the (BPP) are introduced only to excuse Carmichael's famous off-color "joke" about the proper place of women in the movement being prone. We do not hear the perspective of Elaine Brown, for example, the only woman leader in the Black Panther Party, and one who has written extensively about her experience. This perspective, or one like it, might tell us something more about how and to what extent the liberatory materialism of the BPP overlapped with or was informed by Black Feminist thought and practice. As the book reads currently, I instead get the feeling that Johnson is writing from the conviction that both these traditions are critically important—a notion I agree with wholeheartedly—but not how they are connected and whether and where they diverge.

In addition, I sometimes struggled to understand what makes Johnson's account of the ethical core of radical Black politics religious or "theological," rather than simply spiritual. However, it may be that the later ambiguity is a part of the flexibility that is characteristic of the practical yet prophetic thought that animates the tradition of radical Black politics. As one of my good friends, a fellow Black feminist scholar, once said to me: "Oh, I'm not religious, but I stay praying." The steadiness of that belief in, commitment to, and action toward, practices of living and arrangements of governance that exceed the incomplete freedoms that liberalism (and socialism) were able to deliver in the twentieth century is surely an essential asset today, if we are to face the monumental tasks before us and build a flourishing world.

Response to Deva Woodly's Review of *We Testify with Our Lives: How Religion Transformed Radical Thought from Black Power to Black Lives Matter*

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— Terrence L. Johnson

I would like to thank Deva Woodly for a generous and thought-provoking response to my book, *We Testify with Our Lives.* Her stimulating insight, which challenged my own framing of Black feminist thought and political

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theory, will inform my ongoing work in Black religion's significant role in radical politics and political formation. I will attempt to address the themes Woodly raises and link them to the fundamental concerns I addressed in my book.

First, the problem of sufficient archival evidence to support my claim that the Black Power movement rejected political liberalism, specifically a voting-rights political strategy, is a warranted criticism. Had I done a better job of linking Stokely Carmichael's writings to SNCC's newsletters as well as its unpublished writings, I may have avoided such criticisms. I failed to link the debate between John Lewis and Carmichael regarding the future of SNCC as an example of the organization's growing frustration with the traditional political strategies bandied about by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and traditional (male) civil rights leaders.

This leads me to Woodly's second point: the problem of gender and misogyny within Black politics. Woodly invokes a Black feminist analysis that begs for a deeper gender analysis in my efforts to re-narrate patriarchal and heteronormative (Black) social movements. I attempted to disrupt traditionally male-oriented historical accounts of Black radical politics in three ways: first, I opened the book with Audre Lorde to disorient the reader, a way of construing through a Black feminist lens a political terrain embedded with new conceptual schemes such as a politics of healing and theory of difference to substantiate my account of the ethical turn in Black radical politics. Second, I turn to Ethel Minor, Carmichael's chief editor and political strategist, to signal the role of Black women's radical thought within the developing radical wing within SNCC and Carmichael's ideological worldview. I also point to Minor's important role in introducing and advancing a human rights and transnational political agenda within SNCC. Third, by introducing Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* into debates on Black politics and political theory, I was attempting to lend credibility to "new" epistemic resources for evaluating the content of politics and political formation. To this end, introducing healing as a necessary discursive category that Bambara invokes within her novel to disrupt debates on justice and freedom exposed my effort to expand the "vocabularies" and concepts political theorists rely on to conceptualize ideal theory and political norms. Woodly, however, seems to suggest that the descriptive work within my book is insufficient, and I would tend to agree with her. Linking this descriptive account in a more robust way to the ethical turn, I believe, would address some of Woodly's concerns.

Lasty, the problem of religion, and particularly theology within Black politics remains a bit foggy for Woodly, and she questions if the source of the ethical turn should be called "spiritual" or a denotation of spirituality. I implicitly address this concern when I turn to the category of Black vernacular reasoning as a resource for understanding the complicated and sometimes contradictory role of religion in Black politics. As I argue in my book, Black vernacular reasoning retrieves traditions like conjure and ancestral tributes as interwoven within the political imaginary behind W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the "veil," where religion and politics overlap to inform responses to oppression and discrimination. For instance, the idea of invoking the ancestors at rallies for Black Lives Matter might be disconcerting to some, but for many Black activists the concept of ancestors serves as a political resource for rethinking ideals of individuality and individual political agency as well as a historical benchmark for understanding both the limits and possibilities of social movements. With this background, Woodly's overall insight is a reminder of the need for theorists to return to archival research as a resource for discovering buried and new sources, such as religion and Black women, for theorizing politics and the formation of political thought.

Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements. By Deva R. Woodly. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 304p. $99.00 cloth, $27.95 paper.
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The legacy of Barack Obama's presidency and the ongoing tension between a rights-based political strategy versus a platform based on economic and group power underscore the fundamental political concerns grappled with by Deva R. Woodly in *Reckoning: Blacks Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements.* Woodly offers a thoughtful historical account of the democratic principles fueling Black social movements such as M4BL and sketches out a robust set of political concepts such as healing justice and radical Black feminist pragmatism to dismantle the divide between voting rights activism and structural transformation through economic and political power. One of the most intriguing aspects of *Reckoning* is Woodly's retrieval of first-hand interviews and Black feminist writers to expand the terrain on which the reader and scholar might gather knowledge for public consumption. By weaving together interdisciplinary sources, Woodly constructs a formidable argument for the usefulness of social movements to correct or transform existing democratic traditions, norms, and principles. Two principal arguments guide the reader: (1) social movements expose the limits of traditional civic groups and (2) governmental organizations shed light on political activism otherwise ignored by mainline media outlets.

Woodly frames M4BL through the narrative accounts of Alicia Garza, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the founders of Black Lives Matter, following the tragic killing of Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his murderer in 2013. The cry that awakened the nation

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and world to the ongoing dehumanization of Blacks, like the declaration for Black Power by SNCC members in the late 1960s, serves for Woodly as an epistemic framework for examining the killing of Michael Brown in 2014 and the Ferguson uprising that triggered a national debate on policing, Black suffering, and economic exploitation and neglect of Black communities. She takes a deep dive into the Black political infrastructure in Ferguson and the surrounding cities to showcase the substantive work of Black activism during and prior to Michael Brown's killing. With this expansive backdrop, Woodly constructs a category through which to understand and analyze state violence against Black and Brown bodies: "recursive trauma." According to Woodly, recursive trauma is the ongoing ritual of mutilating Black bodies for public consumption. It is performed within the public sphere and imagination as normal and necessary for the safety of the public and protection of the public good.

I wonder, however: do public institutions possess the necessary epistemic and cultural tools to address "recursive trauma?" How might counter-public institutions like the Black church, to borrow from Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, play a substantive role in addressing the varying ways trauma strangles Black communities? It is important to note that Black churches, even as they face rigorous and necessary criticisms from Black leftists, remain firmly rooted in areas abandoned by small businesses and serve as a mediator between "urban" communities and local and state politicians. In addition to the institutional value of Black churches, Black religion and spirituality continue to inform and shape the political imaginary of Blacks, especially within hip-hop culture and Black activism. Additional insight into Black religion and its epistemic role in Black political activism might offer new frameworks for addressing trauma within "public" and counter-public spheres.

Woodly's theoretical description of recursive trauma implicitly extends W.E.B. Du Bois's stirring notion of Negro problems, what Lewis R. Gordon characterizes as Du Bois's effort to expose how nineteenth-century natural and social sciences were retrieved by European scholars to justify racist claims of Black inferiority as an innate problem. Du Bois, dating back to 1897, condemned scholars for wrongly assuming the social and economic problems that plagued Blacks following Reconstruction and during Jim and Jane Crow emerged from their moral and intellectual bankruptcy. At issue is whether or not political actors at the individual or group level possess the political power to dismantle the living legacy of Negro problems. Put differently, beliefs in the inherent criminality, for instance, of Blacks are woven within the law and cultural practices within the United States. Indeed, the sources of recursive trauma are structural. However, as it stands, it appears as if Woodly's theoretical description of trauma serves as a hermeneutical account of Negro problems. She rightly articulates the "problem." What is needed is a heuristic category for imagining a society in tension with and beyond Negro problems. I wonder if we can retrieve the category both to describe the social world and to provide fragments for what Du Bois characterized as a striving towards a "truer" democracy and democratic nation. Lastly, Black women's literature, most notably from Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, offers broad and nuanced analyses for understanding and addressing trauma in Black communities. If political theorists like Woodly turned to "nontraditional" political sources such as Black literature, I wonder how such sources would shift and advance political platforms for addressing oppression and discrimination. In light of the ways Woodly is expanding the political vernacular to include categories like trauma and healing into the public debates on justice and freedom, it seems that scholars will be compelled to appeal to new sources for understanding politics in the post-BLM context.

One of the most astonishing moves in Woodly's argument is the development of a radical Black feminist pragmatism. The philosophy is informed by "social intelligence," "pragmatic imagination," liberationist outcomes, and "democratic experimentation." She builds this theory in conversation with thinkers ranging from Audre Lorde to John Dewey. This account is fueled by inquiry and deliberative interrogation and sustained by the imagination of the lived experiences of poor and working-class Black and Brown people. "This includes not only imagining what could be, but also, crucially, plotting a course and designing the process and means that those involved will use to make strides toward their goals" (p. 53). Woodly insists that her political philosophy rejects "heroic" leadership models of "great men" or "charismatic" figures, a move she says sheds light on the limits of historical methods within political science for documenting social movements and political behavior. Instead, she wants her colleagues to rely on Dewey's notion of "social intelligence"—the link between individuals and their social and political milieus—as a starting point for re-imagining how scholars account for social movements and political mobilization among organizations. Second, liberationist outcomes are not aimed at political freedom, per se, but are designed to inform hermeneutical approaches of engaging the problem at hand. Put differently, liberation for Woodly "calls for political, social, and interpersonal strategies that take aim at identifying and mitigating the complicated structural and institutional causes and effects of domination and oppression" (p. 62).

Finally, democratic experimentation is a concept designed to encourage organizations to create new organizational structures and outcomes that align with a decentralized leadership model. With this conceptual backdrop, organizations can establish protocols and structural norms that prevent individual leaders from hijacking the

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organization for individual monetary or political gain. "This approach creates a situation in which decision-makers must adopt the frames and address the concerns present in movement messaging because they are unable to silence the claims or change the subject by wooing individuals with prizes and perks" (p. 60). To this end, Woodly demonstrates how M4BL's decentralized paradigm created the conditions in and through which new political norms and social concerns could emerge, most notably the growing interest to include trauma and an ethics of care as political matters "because the ways those facts shape our experience of the world and our motivation and ability to organize and become mobilized are considered indispensable information for any political project, especially those that consider justice to be their aim" (p. 85).

Black social movements, according to Woodly, engender new political life into the public sphere by "democratizing" ignored and marginalized people through their participation in civil disobedience and nonviolent protest. This, she astutely argues, lifts the veil to the "submerged state" where structural racism, economic exploitation, and gender oppression form and shape the lived experiences of far too many Blacks in the United States. "In revealing how structural racism constrains the lives of Black people and other people of color, as well as how the intersecting ideological systems of patriarchy and neoliberalism constrain and order people's lives in a way that perpetuates and maintains ascriptive hierarchy, M4BL has found a way to repoliticize public life" (p. 162). In fact, through interviews and archival research, Woodly offers the reader poignant accounts of how Black women and men retrieved the trauma from the Trayvon Martin killing and subsequent police shootings of unarmed Blacks to advocate for new public policies ranging from police reform and mental health advocacy to public housing improvements. "This assortment of policies springing up like mushrooms all over the country may seem small in their impact, but they are the signs of initial acceptance of the fundamental logic that animates modern abolitionism; that is, if we, as a society, want to make individuals and communities safer, we need to directly invest in them and the provision of basic needs rather than in the apparatus of punishment" (p. 191). At issue is the degree to which "new" political actors may engage institutions at the state and federal level. In other words, many BLM activists who now hold elected seats at the local or federal level have been rebuked by established leaders for pushing against tradition and the power structure. The most popular example of this happened soon after the so-called progressive "squad" of the Democratic Party—most notably Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—voiced concern about moderate Democrats in 2019 regarding the infrastructure bill and its inattention to the concerns of the progressive arm of the Party. I wonder how Woodly might engage these concerns in her next project. The ongoing inability to advance institutional change sits at the heart of Black politics in the late twentieth century.

Woodly's analysis sheds light on the fierce debate on the future of progressive or radical politics within the United States in general and electoral politics in particular. The Trump era, like Reconstruction in America, catapulted nationwide efforts to suppress voting rights and to limit immigration rights (i.e., the Muslim ban) through legislation designed to restrict political access to nonwhites and non-Christians. The ongoing legal battles at both the federal and state level left many Black activists politically exhausted and full of despair as it relates to the future of electoral politics. Woodley acknowledges the political conundrum facing Black activists but remains cautiously optimistic in "electoral justice," what she defines as the values of deliberative reflection, engagement, and accountability to those who suffer. Woodly writes that "despite these consequential disputes, there was a critical mass of organizers in the movement who had come to believe that even though electoral politics could not be the only path toward social transformation, it had to be among the tools in the movement's repertoire" (p. 195). *Reckoning* compels the reader to imagine political justice beyond traditional racial uplift and accommodationist philosophies to include liberationist ideologies that address mental health and trauma alongside fighting for economic justice and political freedom.

Response to Terrence L. Johnson's Review of *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements*

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— Deva Woodly

In his attentive review of my book, Terrence Johnson notes that one of the fundamental animating arguments explores the tension between rights-based political appeals and those that seek to reimagine the scope and potential of economic and group-based power toward a fuller and more functional well-being in democracy. The Black Lives Matter movement, like many twenty-first-century movements, seeks to exceed thin rights-based conceptions of equality and aim instead for a liberatory politics that puts at the center an acknowledgement that rights are of little use if they are functionally inaccessible, systemically blocked, and structurally maldistributed. Instead, the Movement for Black Lives offers a radical Black feminist and pragmatist political philosophy that suggest that the solutions to the ills of systemic inequality of all types that plagued the twentieth century must be found via a reconception of what politics is for and what it can accomplish: Namely, that a liberatory politics must be a politics of care—an approach to power sharing and democratic governance that puts lived experience at the center

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of assessing the efficacy of policies, programs, and systems. Those who practice a politics of care seek to accomplish this by acknowledging that oppression causes social trauma that cannot be resolved by individuals on their own but must be addressed via political action; that interdependence is a fact that cannot and should not be avoided but should be supported by laws and policies that support its most beneficial manifestations; that accountability is a necessary corollary to healthy interdependence; that the unapologetic and joyful embodiment of selves that are marginalized and read as deviant by dominant culture and dominating socioeconomic and political structures are essential for the practice of freedom; and that abolition, restoration, and repair are the watchwords of a self-governing people in opposition to punishment, abandonment, and despair.

However, Professor Johnson wonders whether my treatment of this topic privileges public and secular institutions in a way that does not reflect the full range of the resources required for the long struggle against white supremacy, anti-Blackness, patriarchy, and unfettered capitalism. Johnson is quite right to point out that spiritual resources are key for Black political movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, but despite the historical role of the Black church as an institution, and the involvement of some churches in some places (notably, St. John's in Ferguson, MO), Black churches and Black Christianity seemed to be but one spiritual resource among many in the contemporary movement. Indeed, the plurality of religious and spiritual traditions —including a recovery and reinvigoration of traditionally West African practices like Ifa and Santeria—is one of the most striking things about this twenty-first-century movement. Additionally, Johnson suggests that the use of "nontraditional" political resources like literature could help to expand the tools of analysis for political movements. On this score, I can only agree. The literature and political philosophies of Black feminist writers are highly influential in M4BL spaces, particularly the work of Octavia Butler, whose quotes I use in epigraph but do not include in my analysis. I am still grappling with how to utilize this work methodologically and I appreciate Johnson's goad and encouragement that it is worth figuring out.

There is one set of characterizations in Johnson's review that I think requires me to clarify my position. Referring to the DuBoisian conception of "Negro problems" Johnson writes, "at issue is whether or not political actors at the individual or group level possess the political power to dismantle the living legacy of Negro problems." Let me be clear—none of the problems discussed in the book or addressed by the movement are "Negro problems." They are America's problems. They are white supremacy's problems. They are contemporary capitalism's problems. They are patriarchy's problems. It is Black movements, labor movements, feminist and queer movements, disability and environmental justice movements—particularly at their intersections of concern and organizing—that are addressing these problems and white supremacist, patriarchal, and reflexively capitalist institutions that refuse to do so and indeed perpetuate and deepen them at every turn. The most fundamental argument in *Reckoning* is that social movements are the source of the *mitigation* of these problems and are the *best hope* for their resolution. Unfortunately, we are in the midst of a familiar American cycle. After any advance in basic equality there is a ferocious white supremacist backlash that can last longer and go deeper than the previous progress. The backlash in this moment threatens not only the practice of equal democracy, which has always been incomplete, but also the commitment to equal democracy as an ideal. That means we are locked now in a recurrent battle at a dangerous inflection point that may re-shape the world to come. This is a struggle that is not only for an abstract "justice" but also, and more importantly, for the concrete possibility of twenty-first-century democracy in America and globally. The outcome is uncertain, and our choices are stark—multiracial/multiethnic democracy or fascist white Christian nationalism. The first cannot be had without reimagining and recommitting to enacting what would be necessary for freedom and justice for all, for the first time, in this time.

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