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Broadening the "Problem-Space" of Political Theory

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Pineda's book is an original and imaginative reconstruction of activist strategy and political theory, upending the orthodox account of civil disobedience during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Against liberal and democratic theorists who domesticate civil disobedience in the United States, with the aim of legitimizing the nation's constitutional democracy as "nearly just," or in need of reform rather than revolution, Pineda argues that civil rights activists "theorized and deployed" civil disobedience as "decolonizing praxis" (16). She traces the decades-long history in which Black activists in the United States crafted their strategy of civil disobedience through embodied spaces, relationships, and practices of "imaginative transit" with revolutionaries in India, South Africa, and Ghana. These networks of transit enabled activists to diagnose segregation and colonialism as sites of a "shared, global condition" (59) of white supremacy, "operating with a common, reinforcing logic" of economic, political, and psychological domination (89). As a decolonizing praxis, civil disobedience combined an "inward-facing politics" of self-emancipation with an "outward-facing politics" (16) of disruption and disclosure—aimed not at reforming aberrations in constitutional democracy, but at "transforming the psychological, structural, and relational bases of white supremacy" (59).

As important as the book's conceptual interventions are to debates on civil disobedience, Pineda's methodological innovations are groundbreaking for the field of political theory. She challenges liberal and democratic theories that see "like a white state" (17) with the effect of "lending racial states normative validity" in academic and public spheres (25). Most instructive, though, is how she unravels political theory's white gaze—by turning to the civil rights movement not as an "object lesson," but as a "generative source for theoretical insight" (11). Pineda is thus an inheritor not only of Charles Mills, but also of Robin D. G. Kelley, whom she references in her exhortation to political theorists to see "like an activist." Seeing like an activist

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is an alternative, more capacious "practice of political theorizing" that begins by acknowledging that the "interpretive categories of political life are themselves produced in action and in specific material contexts" (198). This entails "interrogating the uncritical performances of power that categorize" formally trained academic theorists who inhabit purportedly objective academic spaces as "producers of knowledge," while casting activists caught up in the urgency of political struggle as "its objects—or its raw materials" (198). If "theorizing can itself perform racial power," either maintaining or disrupting structures of white supremacy (and often doing both at the same time), Pineda encourages academic political theorists to adopt methods for engaging intellectually with people on the front lines of struggle (17). This is "an imaginative, contentious, and collaborative practice of political theorizing—one that can enliven and challenge academic practices of thinking as much as our own sense of the possible" (198).

Pineda's methods for seeing like an activist are historical and archival, reading letters, speeches, press statements, oral histories, radio interviews, and media footage with an eye toward activists' "intellectual labor and conceptual innovation" (56). Exemplary of this method is chapter 3's careful recounting of the "jail, no bail" campaign waged by student activists involved in the sit-ins and Freedom Rides of the early 1960s. Liberal theories of civil disobedience hinge on the assumption that lawbreakers accept punishment as a symbol of their respect for the order they seek to reform. Pineda shows that, in reality, activists turned going to jail into a collective opportunity to enact fearlessness and freedom in defiance of racial terror and domination and to refuse bail payments as a "means of withholding cooperation from illegitimate power" (98). In this way, the tactic of collective jailing "multipl[ied] protest across new arenas" (104) and enlarged critique from "the site of one injustice (segregated accommodations) to another related one (the mockery of legal justice dressed up in a coded language of law and order)" (107). Activists also leveraged their time in jail to build networks of solidarity across cell and jail walls into "new communities galvanized by the arrest of nonviolent student protesters" (112). By enlarging their critique of racial state power in the United States, activists further imagined their growing movement as part of "a worldwide struggle against white supremacy" (123). So too did they prefigure a strategy of imaginative transit across jail and prison walls that would be pivotal for solidarity and movement building during the Black Power and radical antiprison movement later that decade.

At stake in Pineda's methodological commitments is not replacing academic truths with activist ones, but rather broadening the "problem-space" (18) of political theory to account for the questions activists are asking and the answers they "are bringing to bear on the world" (197). She insists that civil rights activists cared little about the problem of justification that preoccupies liberal-democratic theorists of civil disobedience. That framework "presumes that a legitimate, defensible order already exists where one does not." Instead, activists "envisioned their activism as a bridge leading from

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the world they inhabited to the one they desired." By focusing on "what activists [were] doing"—building new relationships, cross-border networks of solidarity, and decolonial visions—Pineda shifts debates on civil disobedience to highlight the ways in which disruptive protest is often tied to world-building practice (196–97).

This is an important shift given civil disobedience's limits as a strategy for Black liberation. If tactics of disruption and disclosure aim to "reveal white rule to itself" (196), Pineda argues that activists "underestimated the depth of white ideological identification with, and material investment in, their own supremacy" (198). She chronicles the "techniques of disavowal" through which a white citizenry and white state clung to racial innocence while acceding to token reforms, co-opting nonviolence as a mechanism to discipline Black rage, and ultimately whitewashing civil disobedience in the annals of history (194). The limits of activist vision and strategy in the "classical phase" of the civil rights movement forced new questions to the surface, posed by Black Power activists and inherited by today's Black liberation movements.

Activists in the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and the larger movement to abolish the carceral state still engage in disruptive protest aimed at white moral awakening and transformative changes to the structures of white supremacy. They pursue state-facing action, for example, through M4BL's "Vision for Black Lives" policy platform and electoral and legislative strategies aimed at what abolitionists call nonreformist reforms. But historical debates continue over the viability of these strategies and their relation to militant or anarchist strategies for Black liberation—including violence, but also the hyperlocal, world-building practices of mutual aid, regenerative economics, land stewardship, transformative justice, healing justice, and more.

These questions take shape and intensify as Black radicals and abolitionists build networks of solidarity and imaginative transit with antideportation and antidetention activists, Indigenous water and land protectors, Palestinian liberation activists, and others engaged in decolonial struggles within and beyond the borders of the United States. As they question the legitimacy of the nation-state form in decolonial futures, and debate whether and when to use disruptive tactics to transform the state-in-the-meantime, today's Black radical activists remind us that the slower, less dramatic work of cross-border solidarity, movement-building from margin to margin, hyperlocal experimentation, and prefigurative world-building is elemental to Black liberation.

Liberal-democratic theorists and actors continue to engage in techniques of disavowal in the face of Black protest—for example, blaming right-wing electoral gains on "identity politics," rejecting demands to #DefundThePolice as unworkable in the Democratic Party's legislative agenda, and dismissing abolition as fantasy. As activists evaluate their theories of change and adapt their strategies in real time, Pineda calls academic political theorists to work "in transit and in solidarity" with them (202). This raises crucial—and largely

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unanswered—questions about the methods for seeing "like an activist" alongside historical and contemporary struggles for Black liberation. As Pineda notes in the book's acknowledgments, theorists do not typically receive training in archival work. Nor does our disciplinary home (or much of academia) encourage or provide access to training in emancipatory methodologies for engaging today's activists. An emerging cadre of theorists, including Deva Woodly, Paul Apostolidis, Joe Lowndes, Rom Coles, and others, have used on-the-ground interviews, critical ethnography, and participant observation to refashion the "problem space" of political theory across academic and activist categories and lines of expertise. Given the resistance and inertia of academic disciplines, and their tendency to reinforce racial and other forms of state power, transforming the problem-space of political theory will require its own organizing and movement building. As part of this struggle, Pineda's book is a welcome reminder that political theorists can and should develop practices of knowledge creation that prioritize collaborative inquiry across boundaries and explicitly address power, injustice, and possibilities for freedom.

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