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Cultivating Abolitionist Despair

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Michel Foucault once wrote, “Do not think that one has to be sad in order to be militant, even though the thing one is fighting is abominable. It is the connection of desire to reality (and not its retreat into the forms of representation) that possesses revolutionary force.”¹ This affect of revolutionary force stems from the joyful militancy of bringing into existence the already possibly present worlds that are assumed to be impossible.²

Deva Woodly captures this already present possibility in “Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism,” the political philosophy of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL). Working in the tradition of critical theory as situated normative reflection, Woodly theorizes Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism from the ground up, based in the movement’s explicit and implicit organizing principles and practices. Echoes of Iris Marion Young’s approach to theorizing social movements run throughout *Reckoning* not only in Woodly’s passionate and clear voice, but also in Woodly’s steadfast refusal to retreat into ideal theory or the moribund reformist literatures on social movements that limit “successes” to legislative victories or political incorporation. Woodly demonstrates how the movement’s ability to connect desire to reality—its essential, realist, and abolitionist pragmatism—motivates a revolutionary force for our moment. The movement’s democratic cultivation of *joyful* political agency produces political action that grasps at the roots, action that is truly radical. One does not need to be sad to be militant when one can invest in the “politicized joy” of a politics of care, grounded in unapologetic Blackness, and against our abominable conditions (73).

¹Michel Foucault, preface to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xiii–xiv.

²Carla Bergman, Nick Montgomery, and Hari Alluri, *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017).

Woodly shows how the M4BL cultivates this political agency, activating and generating *new* capacity for political action in people brought into the movement. Deeper and more lasting impacts will be found not in its mass mobilizations, policy wins, or electoral outcomes, but in how the movement's *practice* of organizing cultivates politicized *relations* between people. The deep commitments of Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism *create* this democratic capacity, and the M4BL is an exemplar of social movements more generally; no wonder they are a *necessity* to democratic life.

The specific threat to democratic life that Woodly identifies is the "politics of despair." Woodly insists that the capacitating work of social movements is that they are an "antidote" to this politics, rendering despair as a poison. Despair is poisonous because it is anathema to political action, depoliticizing "citizens" by leading them to withdraw political trust and lose feelings of efficacy in institutional life. For "governors" in positions of institutional control, despair pushes them toward greater bureaucratization and ultimately into oligarchic rule. Against these depoliticizations, the power of the M4BL as a social movement is an antidote: the movement activates citizens and brings them into politics through a commitment to Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism and holds governors accountable both at the ballot box and in the streets.

But despair is powerful because it is a hopelessness which knows no bottom. While Foucault and Woodly are right that one need not be sad to be militant, one of the central lessons of the M4BL, especially in its abolitionist commitments, is that militant joyfulness also cultivates hopelessness in the institutions and practices that continue to kill us. Enabled by Woodly's analysis, I suggest that the abolitionist commitments of Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism complicate our relationship to despair. These complexities may lead us to question ideological frameworks that Woodly does not put under sustained question, such as the continued existence of nation-states and structures of citizenship. Woodly opens us to but does not follow the possibility that despair is both the appropriate affect and politics for *institutions and structures which must be abolished* for the sake of the repoliticization of public life: the police, prisons, whiteness and white supremacy, settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and perhaps even the state itself.

A key difficulty facing radical movements, especially for those who are ruthlessly pragmatic about defending Black life in the face of a fundamentally antiBlack world,³ is that many of the objects produced by parasitic social life are things to which people are deeply attached through fetishistic enjoyments.⁴

³See Lindsey's extension of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism in Treva B. Lindsey, *America, Goddam: Violence, Black Women, and the Struggle for Justice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 20.

⁴Andrew Dilts, "Carceral Enjoyments and Killjoying the Social Life of Social Death," in *Building Abolition: Decarceration and Social Justice*, ed. Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloë Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2021), 196–223.

Some *enjoy* the world of things produced by relentless Black death, even including those of us who also protest that world. Woodyly shows how the pragmatic success of the M4BL has been to reorient a huge number of people to realize that we *should be* hopeless and despairing of the police, of prisons, and the rule of capital. Such hopelessness in the existing state of affairs can, moreover, be mobilizing toward the generative refusals necessary to build worlds in which life can flourish. Abolition can be world building through its negations.

Woodyly's powerful framework helps readers think more broadly about the pragmatic attachments of social movements by offering us hope in the practices of communal joy in struggle. Yet Woodyly also, less explicitly, shows us how participation in social movements brings people into political life by facilitating a break and realignment of their attachments to those things which "we cannot not want."⁵ Woodyly opens possibilities beyond political action circumscribed by the nation-state and to the ideal of citizenship.

We can overread⁶ a passage from *Reckoning* to show the consequences of not attending to this side of despair:

At the point when belief in the efficacy of politics becomes tenuous in the majority, when people begin to despair . . . then the only hope for repair is a repoliticization of public life, an exercise of the political that reminds people that they are citizens (17).

Woodyly's characterization of despair as an affect that can only produce depoliticization risks missing the dialectical character of abolitionist commitments and radical social movements' power. Moreover, the reliance on citizenship and the citizen as the baseline of repoliticization risks affirming that the *state* is itself a capacitating rather than alienating institution.

Despairing of police, prisons, and the benefits that white supremacy confers on some persons at the expense of others can be powerfully politicizing. This negative power of abolition directs our attention to building new relations rather than trying to repair those which are failing all of us and killing some of us quite quickly.

Woodyly's own documentation of the abolitionist commitments of the M4BL make clear that the state itself must be included as an object for radical critique. Woodyly's careful reconstruction of Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism shows how a dialectical project of both negative and positive abolitionist world-building is central to the movement. The M4BL opens up greater horizons than reaffirming the figure of the citizen and state recognition. This means not only must we "do some of the delicate work of detaching from the

⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 110.

⁶On "overreading" see David Kazanjian, "Freedom's Surprise: Two Paths Through Slavery's Archives," *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 133–45.

cruel optimism of a political fetish,"⁷ but also be open to hopelessness in the *state form itself*. The state's demands operate through some modes of police, prison, necro-political sovereignty, and a force of closure against contingency and life. We also *need*, therefore, a strategic politics of despair and an active intolerance to the state as part of our freedom dreams.

I have a pessimistic hope that such a strategic cultivation is possible, because Woody has convinced me that our task is not merely to provide an antidote to a generalized politics of despair, but to be specific in how despair must be *redistributed* to some objects rather than others. Radical social movements move us away from a hopelessness in each other and toward a hopelessness in the institutions, practices, and ideologies that cannot but fail us. Social movements are surely democratic necessities for political life, rejecting a generalized and overarching politics of despair and feelings of inefficacy produced by rationalized politics. But that must not be at the expense of what the movement also teaches us: that those things which destroy Black life do so by creating a parasitic, violent, and genocidal *hope* in some people, those who, as James Baldwin puts it, "think they are white."⁸ And it is precisely this hope that must be countered with despair.

⁷Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 259.

⁸James Baldwin, "On Being 'White' . . . and Other Lies," *Essence*, April 1984.