

Author's Response

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In their generous observations about *Reckoning*, the participants offer diverse perspectives on what the most promising and troubling aspects of the book are; however, a few themes emerge. Broadly speaking, the authors agree that I have succeeded in conveying my central claims—that social movements are indispensable democratic institutions that repoliticize public life and the Black Lives Matter movement is exemplary in that respect, while also offering theorists a twenty-first-century political philosophy that I call radical Black feminist pragmatism as well as a novel approach to political organizing and the structuring of organizations in the social movements sector.

Erica Chenoweth helpfully summarizes my main argument, that “social movements can serve a unique and vital role by challenging prevailing discourses, diagnosing key societal problems, elevating new voices and thinkers as offering potential solutions, and renegotiating a social contract that has failed to deliver” (239) while also supplementing it with recent data showing the durability of attitude changes regarding race and justice in the American context. Juliet Hooker notes that the book “provides rigorous, complex answers to the question of how to practice democratic hope and refuse despair without trafficking in easy answers or simple prescriptions” (242). Erin Pineda observes “*Reckoning* pushes back against . . . narrative[s] of foreclosure and failure in two ways” (246) via reevaluation of the timescale of movement progress along with serious consideration of the intellectual work that movements do in defining new ways of thinking about political problems and their solutions. Andrew Dilts argues that the work falls within “the tradition of critical theory. . . [theorizing] Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism from the ground up, based in the movement’s explicit and implicit organizing principles and practices” (250).

Amid these positive attributions, however, there are also some recurrent critiques as well as a few singular challenges that this group invites me to address. Pineda and Dilts are made uneasy by the way I deploy the category of “citizen” in my analysis of the repoliticization of public life. Pineda notes,

“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” and implies “not only a substantially transformed domestic politics, but an entirely new global politics” (248). For Dilts “the M4BL opens up greater horizons than reaffirming the figure of the citizen and state recognition” (247). In both cases, I can only agree. The politics of care, a politics that holds as its most fundamental tenet that people matter, simply and inherently without any appeal to rights or legal status, is one that cannot be contained by the juridical logic of citizenship nor the implied sociology and affect of exclusion that characterizes the notion of the nation. I struggled with how to coherently describe democratic actors who have the authority and responsibility to govern themselves without the use of this concept. The trouble with transformative political visions is that sometimes we do not yet have the words. This lack, however, is mine and not the movement’s.

Pineda and Dilts are right that one of the challenges that radical Black Feminist pragmatism lays at our feet is what to do with the problem of citizen, nation, and state when and where the understanding of these categories limit the possibilities for human thriving. How do we address these borders and boundaries in both theoretical and practical terms? How must coordinating capacity and resource production and sharing change? How would self-determination be enacted in and through new institutions that would not require the designee citizen? These are and should be the questions that we endeavor to answer as scholars and political actors in the next epoch, but I do not have them at the ready.

Hooker has a different question, wondering whether political participation or organizing can salve all the wounds wrought by a politics of despair. She reports that

black citizens are the most likely to participate, become advocates, and vote following the announcement of school closure in their communities; yet even when they are successful at keeping schools open, the lack of meaningful transformation in how school policy is made undermines their belief in the power of political participation. . . . Is the problem the absence of a social movement around school closures or that this is participation rather than political organizing? . . . How do we reckon with the costs of activism, especially in deeply unequal democracies? (244)

It is true that Black people already have disproportionately high levels of participation across several domains (after controlling for socioeconomic status). In the case of school closures, police violence, and several other issue areas that disproportionately affect our communities, Black folks are the most likely to organize. But what happens when the results that advocates fight so hard for are judged to be neither transformative in the short term nor impervious to reversal in the long term? This reality can be demoralizing

and might not result in the repoliticization of public life that I argue social movements provide, but may backfire and inspire its opposite, a deepening of political despair, a further loss of efficacy.

To this concern, I must also concede ground. Organizing for any kind of political change, let alone transformational change, will, at some point, break your heart. Not because movement actors will fail, but because they are in a multigenerational and epoch-defining fight in which it is hard to see the potential lasting impacts of small victories. The organizers and activists of the current generation may not live to see daybreak on a new shore of political possibility and social organization. However, it does not mean they are not, via their vision, strategy, and actions, making the road that will allow those who follow them to shape the world anew in concrete and durable ways. The job of each generation of organizers, activists, and self-governing democratic actors of all kinds is to push off toward that horizon, disciplined, as Mariame Kaba reminds us, with hope. This is precisely why a larger vision—a political philosophy that is anchored in a vivid and practical political imagination—is necessary for long-term political organizing. Without such vision, short-term losses obscure the political progress that is made in both changing public meanings and policy, and the political opportunities that come into existence because of the work organizers have done and that could not have existed without that work.

Jordie Davies argues that the pragmatism I include as a descriptor of the movement's generative political philosophy may do injury to its vibrant and critically important radicalism. She writes, "the addition of pragmatism on the M4BL's 'Black radical feminist' philosophy dampens the central role of the distinctly radical aspects of the BLM movement" (255). For her, the pragmatism in radical Black feminist pragmatism is misplaced. It flattens the politics of the BLM movement into one that is too close to synonymous with the midcentury civil rights movement or the moderate democratic party politics of some Black elites who have paid "the price of the ticket," that James Baldwin (and Fredrick Harris) warn might be freedom itself.

I was worried about this critique from the moment I penned the term "radical Black feminist pragmatism." Despite my assurances that I do not mean pragmatism in its colloquial form as public opinion triangulation or moderate politics, it is a word and a tradition that is bound to alienate some. My reliance on John Dewey's political thought and his position within the liberal tradition makes many folks wary that I intend the label as a curb against the movement's potential radicalism. To these concerns, I can only repeat what I have said in the book. The examination of philosophical, not colloquial pragmatism does not yield a dichotomous or oppositional category to radicalism. The pragmatism I describe refers to what I observed in the movement, both within organizations and at protests on the street—the determination to have effects in the world that reduce harm to Black people now, today, along with the resolve to both envision, experiment with, and build infrastructure for a world in which Black people and all people can

live and thrive without the constant threat of violence, exploitation, and precarity. Davies acknowledges that this practical harm-reduction orientation is prevalent but contends that this has always been a feature of Black politics and is therefore not unique to the contemporary movement. And, in any case, she prefers that this tendency toward salving real-world harms and solving immediate problems be called self-determination rather than pragmatism. I disagree with the first claim—the purposeful and deliberate fusion of the pragmatic and the radical together in one political philosophy is unique to the current movement. However, the second claim deserves consideration. Pragmatism, as I understand it, is a method for self-determination. This might be a meaningful reframing and I am not opposed to it. However, I will note that nothing about pragmatism negates the directly disruptive activities that Davies wants to rightly acknowledge as essential. There is a tension between the radical and pragmatic elements of the Black feminist political philosophy of the BLM movement, but I believe it is a productive tension.

The last concern to address is brought by Dilts, whose careful and affectionate reading of the text nevertheless yields a crucial hesitation. He writes that while “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” (251). Perhaps despair is not depoliticizing but a necessary source of realization and mobilization with the right posture, that is, toward the dismantling of prevailing relations and institutions that do not serve most people most of the time and the building of those that would deliver a better shot at a world where thriving is more possible and more likely. I am in total agreement with Dilts that disillusionment with the institutions and mores of the long twentieth century is a necessary step toward building alternatives. However, disillusionment, in my view, is very different from despair. Although Dilts believes that the kind of despair that he thinks is necessary is a part of the “dialectical character of abolitionist and radical social movements’ power” (252), I disagree. I am not a great believer in the figure of dialectical movement. I am not sure that it helps us tell, as Grace Lee Boggs exhorted, what time it is on the clock of the world. In my view, dialectics are a linear relation of progress laid out in a triangle. I do not think political time moves in this way. It seems to me that there are long trudges through similar conditions broken by somewhat unpredictable fits and starts of environmental, material, or social shocks, followed by ebbs and flows of organizational activity as people try to make sense of new relations, and then spirals that may take us backward or forward or sideways in temporalities of progress (as measured by human thriving). In such a disorderly cosmos, I do not think despair profits us. Disillusionment leaves room, even has an expectation, of future agency that despair occludes. Disillusionment is an obstacle; despair an oubliette. I do not agree that tipping into that kind of fall is necessary for political transformation.

There is much more in these reflections, and it is my great hope that readers find even more to grapple and argue with. My response here and my work in general is not the end of any conversation. It is my deepest hope that *Reckoning* and the conversations surrounding it are one of many beginnings. I do not know the world that will come into existence as the current epoch is succeeded. If those with whom I am allied—who seek the self-determined thriving of every human being, in their diversity, with the fullest possible support and cooperation of their fellows through a democratic politics of care—are able to shape the next age, they will have to invent and build both a material and relational infrastructure that I cannot quite fathom because it is not yet possible. For some, this might be cause for alarm. For me, it is the source of an effervescent, anticipatory, and pragmatic hope.