

On Black Radical Feminist Pragmatism

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A “reckoning” is an opportunity to settle a score. It is a moment of collision between what *is* and what is *due*. Woodly’s excellent book not only espouses the formation and political organization of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) coalition, but it also describes how social movements challenge the status quo and demand transformation in light of systems that work only for the powerful few. This transformation, Woodly shows, is brought about by the grassroots theorizing and political praxis of social movement organizers. *Reckoning* models the development of these new ideas, demonstrating both their intellectual and practical legacies. In this essay, I consider Woodly’s theoretical formulation of the M4BL’s philosophy of “radical Black feminist pragmatism” and what I see are (1) its promise for centering the reorienting practices of radical Black feminist politics and (2) the ways “pragmatism” as a frame stands in tension with those radical elements of the movement.

Centering Radical Black Feminism

Reckoning describes the politics of the M4BL (the BLM movement’s organizational center) as “Radical Black Feminist Pragmatism,” a political philosophy distinct to the twenty-first century with elements from Black, feminist, and pragmatic political thought reconstituted and bent to the needs of the political moment. *Reckoning* offers a path forward for the study of Black politics through close analysis and theorization of the M4BL—particularly their Black feminist praxis. The BLM mass movement is a turning point in Black American politics. In response to the “tragic parade of unarmed Black dead,” as Juliet Hooker has written,¹ comes the resurgence of Black mass movement. But this time, Black movement comes with an analysis of race,

¹Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair,” *Political Theory* 44, no. 4 (2016): 449.

gender, and sexuality from its central mobilizing and policy-making organizations. Woodyly identifies the Black feminist intellectual legacy of the movement as well as how it puts abolitionist and anticarceral principles into action, which creates and mobilizes a new Black public sphere and inaugurates a new era of distinctly feminist and queer Black radicalism.

For Woodyly, the pragmatism of the movement makes it distinct from political and theoretical “abstract humanisms” and roots the politics of the M4BL in what Black people need and experience. She remarks that the M4BL is not ideologically rigid, but nimble and responsive to the conditions of Black people, and asks how Black liberation can be built brick by brick. These Black feminist practices consider how our world would be different if we built societal structures that would mitigate and heal, rather than punish, harm in Black communities.

Reckoning shows how the M4BL orients Black people towards each other, rooted in a radical politics of care, healing justice, and accountability. Woodyly defines this communal care work as distinctly political, expanding the horizon of what can be seen as political activity. She shows the ways that the M4BL aims to put Black feminism into action to meet the moment and resolve the material crises of anti-Blackness. The M4BL reconfigures the practice of Black politics from the vertical, elite/masses relationship to the horizontal and communal. Rather than solely responding to social ills or even social difference with punishment or exclusion, the M4BL demands a recognition of and response to Black trauma, as well as celebrations of Black difference and deviance. These are central tenets of abolitionist Black feminism that inform the movement and mark the M4BL’s distinct contribution to Black politics.

Pragmatism in Black Politics

Black politics has always been pragmatic. The need to survive anti-Black forces means that a viable Black politics must answer questions of now and respond to the political system at hand. Constant states of emergency need Black movements that will fill in where the state fails. As I have written elsewhere, a number of scholars have called for a pragmatic Black politics or more generally considered the role of pragmatism in Black politics and Black feminism.² These scholars are discussing the Deweyan, socially informed and politically responsive pragmatism that Woodyly also deploys. Yet, despite the traditions of pragmatism in Black politics, I argue that 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.

²Elizabeth Jordie Davies, “Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 22, supp. 2 (2023): 83–86.

The movement's radical elements are what make BLM a meaningful social movement. These elements include mass uprisings, Black queer feminism, and practices of Black self-determination. Woodly's description of the M4BL's pragmatism focuses on the ways Black feminism is put into responsive, community-based practice. But it is the radical aspects of the movement that make BLM a unique departure from a staid, institutional Black politics as well as earlier iterations of Black radical movement that were less inclusive. These radical elements describe the weeks of angry uprisings in Ferguson and include the disruptive, direct-action protests orchestrated by M4BL organizations. The queer politics and representation in the movement push against tendencies to marginalize the voices and needs of Black queer people in Black politics and movement. With self-determination, we can still name how M4BL organizations work to develop transformative practices and policy proposals for a present and a future by and for all Black people. Importantly, these elements prioritize aspects of the movement that are unpalatable to those in power, or those who would rather practice Black politics as a process of incorporation rather than radical change. These elements can encapsulate both the liberation-minded and pragmatic work of the coalition, but within a frame of Black radicalism rather than Deweyan pragmatism.

Perhaps Woodly's pragmatism is a function of studying the most organized elements of the movement: the policy making centers, the established leaders, and organizations. And these are essential engines of the movement. But beyond the M4BL, the BLM mass movement includes outright unhinged elements that resulted in shutting down highways, disrupting white space, burning police stations, occupying streets, and looting department stores in response to police murder and violence—behaviors that perhaps were not done or condoned by organized movement leadership. Still, scholars should lean into the occurrence and nature of these events, as they evoked meaningful emotion and a latent dissatisfaction that moved members of the public to act, to call the police state down for a reckoning and repudiation. How can we foreground the scope of pro-Black anger and refusal in the BLM movement that prompts the desire to “shut it down” or “burn it down” that has animated protests over the years? These actions have forever distinguished the BLM movement and are the practices that let those in power know that we are coming.

As Fred Moten asks, “Where do we go, by what means do we begin, to study blackness? . . . Our aim, even in the face of the brutally imposed difficulties of black life, is cause for celebration.” He goes on: “The cause for celebration is the condition of possibility of black thought, which animates the black operations that will produce the absolute *overturning*, the *absolute turning of this motherfucker out*.”³ We cannot lose sight of this destination,

³Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (2013): 742, emphasis added.

this fundamental goal of Black radicalism—to undo politics-as-usual. The BLM movement, though pragmatic as Black politics always has been and always must be, has most importantly revived Black radicalism with a Black feminist lens.

And it is with this story, the revival of Black radical feminism and its practices, that *Reckoning* offers a path forward in the study and application of Black politics. Woodly demonstrates that real-world politics at the margins offers fresh ideas to push forward stagnant disciplines and provides a model for how scholars can engage with and learn from movement. The path it lights eschews the tendencies of studies of social movements and Black politics that solely focus on elites, mass behavior, or what white bystanders think about Black protests. *Reckoning* places Black women and queer activists at the center of a new Black radicalism engaged in a community-oriented politics that will save their lives and ours too. Woodly shows us what Black people do with and for each other and how this new iteration of Black movement is steadily working towards liberation.