

# The Democratic Necessity of *Reckoning*

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In the years since the onset of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement—and especially since the Ferguson uprising—scholars have tried to understand how the movement has affected public life in the United States. The scholarship overwhelmingly shows that periods of intense BLM protest have generated high levels of public awareness about systemic racism and increased support for criminal justice reform.<sup>1</sup> Police homicides have declined in areas with BLM protests.<sup>2</sup> And liberals exposed to BLM protests were more supportive of candidates who condemned systemic racism and supported criminal justice reform in the 2020 elections.<sup>3</sup>

Woodly provides an ambitious and compelling explanation for how and why the movement has had these effects and what the prospects are for long-term transformation of American society. The movement has performed an essential function in democratic life by introducing and reinforcing novel ideas into the public sphere. This infusion of new ideas, a new political philosophy, and new demands have fundamentally altered the conversations that are happening, the solutions that are available, and the futures that are possible.

The summer of 2020 saw the largest and broadest mass mobilizations in US history, with people rising up in unprecedented numbers to demand justice

<sup>1</sup>Zackary Okun Dunivin, Harry Yaojun Yan, Jelani Ince, and Fabio Rojas, “Black Lives Matter Protests Shift Public Discourse,” *PNAS* 119, no. 10 (2022), e2117320119; Tyler R. Reny and Benjamin J. Newman, “The Opinion-Mobilizing Effect of Social Protest against Police Violence: Evidence from the 2020 George Floyd Protests,” *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1499–1507; Mathias Ebbinghaus, Nathan Bailey, and Jacob Rubel, “Defended or Defunded? Local and State Policy Outcomes of the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests” (working paper, SocArXiv, <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/pbrqu/>).

<sup>2</sup>Travis Campbell, “Black Lives Matter’s Effect on Police Lethal Use-of-Force” (working paper, Social Science Research Network, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3767097](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3767097)).

<sup>3</sup>Bouke Klein Teeselink and Georgios Melios, “Weather to Protest: The Effect of Black Lives Matter Protests on the 2020 Presidential Election” (working paper, Social Science Research Network, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3809877>).

after the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.<sup>4</sup> Many supporters of the movement have been disappointed with the lack of radical policy change even as liberal politicians gained substantial access to political power in 2020, and have been alarmed by the emboldenment of a countermovement that is willing to reassert white supremacist ideas into the public sphere within conservative strongholds. Under such conditions, it is easy to understand why people would challenge the notion that popular movements can lead to systemic change.

This is precisely why Woodly's book is so urgent and necessary. She reminds us 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. They serve as intellectual laboratories for the articulation of new political ideas, the negotiation of relations between and among movement and civic actors, and the formulation and expression of demands that create greater accountability between public servants and their constituents. This book makes the crucial assertion that social movements are necessary for democracy to function effectively—particularly when the public sphere seems to be out of ideas.

Today's Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has emerged from and contributes to a broader movement infrastructure for Black liberation. These thinkers' key contribution, Woodly argues, is that of radical Black feminist pragmatism (RBF). Drawing together and expanding upon the intellectual legacies of Black politics and Black feminism, RBF asserts the value of Black life as "it is still being lived,"<sup>5</sup> the importance of focusing on the institutional, cultural, and political roots of systemic injustices, an intersectional lens, an insistent focus on the lived experiences of people at the margins, and a commitment to an ethics of care. Woodly carefully summarizes each of these core philosophical elements, drawing them out and making them more concrete through her discussions with key organizers and activists within the M4BL.

The political thought outlined in RBF is crucial in understanding the movement's framing, as well as its strategic, organizational, and tactical choices. Its commitment to meeting the material needs of people helps in part to explain how and why it was able to move through periods of discord and internal disagreement during its coalescence. In chapter 1, Woodly reports powerful discussions she had with Mary Hooks and Brittney Cooper, who recount a meeting in June 2015, when BLM affiliates gathered in Cleveland to plan an action in response to the killing of Tamir

<sup>4</sup>Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>.

<sup>5</sup>Mwende Katwiwa of BYP100 New Orleans, quoted in Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 183.

Rice by Cleveland police. They report disagreements about which type of action to organize, as well as some additional principled disagreements, which led to some frustration among participants. But an incident outside of the venue became a visceral reminder of the purpose of the movement. Hooks and Cooper describe participants witnessing Cleveland police putting handcuffs on a boy at a park, and then intervening to ask him whether anyone had called his mother or his relatives, staying while police conducted blood alcohol level tests, waiting while his mother arrived and the police released him, and shouting "We love you!" as the mother and son drove away. The experience of effectively de-arresting someone brought immediate clarity to the nature of the necessary work and provided a unifying and joyful energy to the participants.

Although this was a largely spontaneous episode, it was core to the memories of key organizers as a critical moment in which moments of conflict or tension were transformed into an experience of productive, energizing solidarity. This vignette provides an important contribution to the social-movement literature because of an enduring question of how and why coalitions remain cohesive despite prevailing tendencies toward fragmentation (particularly in democracies). But it also speaks to the value of pragmatism as a core principle in the ideology, which can provide a source of focus for activities that improve material conditions immediately. Woody elaborates on such elements in chapter 5, where she discusses mutual aid efforts such as the organizing of bail-fund campaigns like the Black Mama's Bail Out.

While the concept of narrative frames often focuses on the rhetorical choices of social movements, Woody is more interested in the movement's production of new ideas. The production of a novel approach that incorporates both radical and pragmatic elements is part of why the movement has real staying power that can affect public discourse in ambitious ways. RBFP can accommodate demands for both immediate mutual aid and long-term reparations. It can consistently demand healing justice and abolitionist alternatives and also view the election of reformist district attorneys and a reduction in incarceration rates as progress. Affecting the public conversation by infusing more radical demands into routine policy discussions is part of how social movements like the M4BL have fundamentally moved the needle.

Through her compelling interviews with key movement organizers, Woody rejects the simplistic notion that BLM is leaderless. Woody carefully discusses the ways that the movement brought together various Black-led organizations around the country into separate policy tables to meet current movement needs—such as those focused on organizing, policy, electoral justice, healing justice, resources, and media and communications (149). Organizing around particular policy tables allows the movement to achieve representation from existing Black-led organizations, coordinate ideas and actions, and respond to changing priorities. The leadership is shared and distributed, cultivating a new generation of racial-justice leaders whose work and ideas will likely shape US politics for decades to come.

Some of the ideas put forward by RBFP have already been taken up and internalized by other movements and social sectors. For example, in the fall of 2020, it became widely understood that the incumbent president would try to stay in power despite electoral defeat, and would do so largely by trying to discredit and delegitimize Black voters' ballots in key swing states. Organizers and affiliates within the M4BL network organized rapid response actions to Stop the Steal protests that aimed to stop ballot processing in Philadelphia, Detroit, Atlanta, and elsewhere. Movement affiliates helped to make sure every vote was counted. We can see the legacy of RBFP across the progressive movement ecosystem. Even within the philanthropic sector, the elevation of Black leadership, intersectional analyses, and emphases on moving material resources directly to the sites of urgent need are becoming more common.

Dunivina et al. find that attention to antiracist discourses has endured far beyond peak protest periods and that the countermovement's discourse (measured by tracking the use of the hashtags #BlueLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter, and #WhiteLivesMatter) has been dwarfed by attention to antiracist claims.<sup>6</sup> Their study vindicates Woody's claims that the M4BL has fundamentally altered public discourse in an enduring way, in spite of the ever-present risk of backlash. Woody shores up considerable evidence regarding the decline in police homicides, the increasing number of elected reform or progressive prosecutors, the emergence of new police oversight boards, and the diffusion of bail-funds campaigns throughout the United States since 2014. Although it is always hard to demonstrate causality, the fact that ambitious social projects like abolition and reparations are being openly and seriously discussed—including by those inhabiting national office—shows that the movement has changed public expectations about what types of social relations are possible.

Woody's book is a necessary intervention for anyone who might doubt that social movements are prerequisites for democracy.

<sup>6</sup>Dunivin et al., "Black Lives Matter Protests Shift Public Discourse."