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## Book Review: Unapologetic: A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements

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# Book Review

## *Unapologetic: A Black Queer and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*

By Charlene A. Carruthers  
Beacon Press, 2018. 162 pages  
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The year 2020 has proven to be a historical time period. We are not only living through a global health pandemic, but simultaneously, we are also living through the most united and outward facing racial upheaval since the 1960s. Simply put, we *are* living history, and history has taught us that the times when the institution of “business-as-usual” is actively threatened, comes necessary peaks of progress (Bell, 1992). We are witnessing outrage and global protests that proclaim “Black Lives Matter,” in major cities on nearly every continent, in the workplace and in our

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homes. The senseless murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd at the hands of White<sup>1</sup> police officers or vigilantes, coupled with the disproportional rates of Black death due to Covid-19, ignited a moment where the institutional and systemic oppression of Black people in the United States is being elevated, discussed, and *finally* believed. Simultaneously, this political moment also sparked the necessity to reclaim our joy and ability to live, despite the pervasive negative messaging of Blackness being disposable. *Unapologetic* by Charlene A. Carruthers is a love letter, and a field notebook for all of us to follow. The author's powerful words are delivered with love and with a demand to fight for the liberation of *all* Black people, and break free from the capitalistic, patriarchal, racist, heterosexist, and classist ways of being.

### **All of Us or None of Us**

Carruthers begins her book by acknowledging her identity as a Black, queer woman and she honors the ways in which her intersectional identity manifests in her movement work. To this end, the first major pillar of this book is the demand to center the experiences of those who are Black, queer, women, and trans to ensure that the creation and sustaining of movements are intentionally inclusive of all who have been historically excluded. Thus, the call to critically review the history of Black liberation and its pattern of

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<sup>1</sup> Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

silencing those who do not fit the classist, patriarchal, cis-heteronormative experience of Blackness. Carruthers first walks us through historical movements and moments where folks who identify as both Black and LGBTQ were actively shunned from participating in the quest towards Black liberation and elevating that their needs in this fight look different from the ‘mainstream vision’ of Black freedom. For this reason, her first pillar provides the Black queer feminist framework as a mirror for movement builders, agitators, sustainers, and healers to step up and view. If you call yourself a freedom fighter for all Black people, you must unlearn the patriarchal and heterosexist ways that Black and queer people were silenced throughout the social justice movements of our ancestors. Carruthers defines the Black queer feminism as a

political praxis (practice and theory) based in Black feminist and LGBTQ traditions and knowledge, through which people and groups see to bring their full selves into the process of dismantling all systems of oppression. By using this lens we are aided in creating alternatives of self-governance and self-determination, and by using it we can more effectively prioritize problems and methods that center historically marginalized people in our communities... the Black queer feminist lens calls for us to be individuals and to work collectively, with neither being at the expense of the other. (p.10)

Carruthers calls upon the historical analysis of Danielle L. McGuire, author of *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. This book provides a thorough history of physical and sexual violence against Black women, along with an accurate account of the power of united resistance. Specifically, the book addresses the conditions for which White vigilantes and White supremacy culture and dominance continued to terrorize Black women, and how noted organizations (i.e. NAACP, YWCA) came together to resist (McGuire, 2010). Within this example, Carruthers so eloquently elevates the necessity of unity, but not for the sake of mainstreaming the issue at hand (i.e. cherry-picking the ‘perfect victim’ to fight for and leaving that person behind).

Rather, Carruthers argues that regardless of how movement builders select their cause within the struggle for Black liberation, if it is rooted in the quest for freedom, it must ensure that all are free - and not just those who fit the mold of what free *should* be based on the antiquated mold of respectability and white supremacy.

I want the lie that Black people cannot be Black, queer, trans and women and the same time to die a swift death...I want that lie to die alongside the idea that any one group of Black people is inherently more worthy to be free than any other. (p. 55)

She makes the case for unity of resources as well as intentionality of our collectivity, because our commitment to each other is rooted in freedom and liberation for all regardless of how their story of trauma looks to the masses.

### **The Black Imagination: Commitments and Questions**

In organizing for Black liberation, Charlene A. Carruthers reminds her readers to let go of the harmful and linear notions of freedom for Black people. The first step is to center the most historically marginalized groups, and the second step is the *quintessential* need to tap into the new possibilities of the Black existence, through reclaiming and refocusing the Black imagination. To do this, Carruthers builds upon the pillar of Black queer feminism as a theoretical framework by reminding us of our ability to dream beyond what we know (have known) to create new reality for ourselves. Carruthers guides us through our ability to dream, by offering a collective mindfulness - a caution of the incomplete stories of liberation we tell ourselves and each other.

If the stories we tell about Black people's experiences of resistance and resilience are incomplete, our movement to transform them, to enact them, will be insufficient and ineffective... If we told a more complete story of the Black radical tradition, one that grounds itself in the stories of Black feminist, queer, and trans liberation work, we would have more complete and effective solutions for the problems we encounter. (p. 44 and 58).

In this quote, the author reiterates that the experience of Blackness is not linear and to refuse to include all dreams, all hopes, all identities is counterproductive and counterrevolutionary. The author references the powerful work of Robin D.G. Kelley and the importance of cultivating radical dreams of freedom from all Black people, including our youth. The tradition of engaging the Black radical imagination centers the need to know what you are fighting for and how this is different from what you've fought against. It pushes movement builders to articulate the new reality they've collectively dreamed for themselves and others that is free from systems of oppression because that dream was for everyone (Kelley, 2002).

*Unapologetic* offers three commitments that must be made as new movements for Black liberation continue to take form, build many strong leaders, adopt healing justice as a core organizing value and practice and finally, combat liberalism with principled struggle. The author is explicit about her belief that "Movement building is spiritual work" (p. 63). These three commitments provide a strong foundation for folks to rethink the way they've been engaging (or will engage) in movement work. Without clear commitments to full Black liberation, systems of oppression will be recreated, thus reifying the very thing we seek to fight against. The author also offers intentional questions for movement builders, sustainers, and healers to consider when collectively and effectively creating a north star, a goal and guide towards where we want to be, as a people. Carruthers offers the following: Who am I? Who are my people? What do we want? What are we building? Are we ready to win?

*Unapologetic* by Charlene A. Carruthers has provided those of us engaged in the movement towards Black liberation with a field notebook that is specific to movement builders, sustainers, and healers. For those not involved in anti-racist movement work, she has gifted you a starting point for how to think about systems of oppression, how they impact all Black people, and what you can do to get involved. This book is meant for its readers to become active participants on their individual and collective journeys to creating the new world that we so desperately need. This book should be read by anyone who cares about justice, healing, and unity. Given this beautiful work, what will we decide to do with the new world that is on

the horizon? Will we continue down a path that seeks to reify all forms and systems of oppression, or will we seek to reimagine new possibilities of a new world in which all who *live* are seen as whole and equal participants of the new world?

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