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

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Abstract

This is an overview and honest review of the 192 page, paperback edition of *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*, authored by Charlene Carruthers.

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Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements
By: Charlene Carruthers, 2018, Paperback Edition, 192 pages, ISBN
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Charlene Carruthers, a prominent community organizer based primarily in Chicago, presents a powerful field guide to the contemporary radical black liberation movement and the potential of a Black, queer, feminist framework in organizing successful social justice movements in *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements*. Organized around both personal and communal experience as a founding member of the Black Youth Project 100, *Unapologetic* offers a critique of anti-blackness, gender-based violence, and systemic racism, as well as, provides potential solutions in the reimagining of the radical black tradition and the practice of transformative justice. Carruthers' work epitomizes the conceptual underpinnings and practical actions of contemporary radical or "Leftist" movements in the United States and clearly delineates a Fourth Wave of feminist scholarship; in other words, *Unapologetic* embodies the feminist adage 'the personal is political.'

According to Carruthers, *Unapologetic* "reflects insights gained on my journey thus far as an activist, community organizer, and leader," (Carruthers, 2018, p. xi). To be sure, the account underscores lessons learned through over 10 years of work by the author with organizations such as the Center for Community Change, ColorofChange.org, and National People's Action. As well as the ways in which those lessons have developed in response to the author's discovery of, and education in, Black feminisms, queer feminisms, anti-blackness, and the work of contemporary abolitionists, to form the foundational praxis of the Black Youth Project 100. Not only does *Unapologetic* provide an overview of the ways that contemporary activist groups such as BYP100 or Black Lives Matter organize to combat racial, gender, and other social injustices, the work serves as a brief history of both national and international struggles against anti-blackness, homo/transphobia, and patriarchy that Carruthers refers to as the Black radical tradition. Indeed, Carruthers' (2018) text emphasizes the production and consumption of Black, queer, and feminist knowledges as inherent to the process of movement organization and the dismantling of oppressive systems, stating: "As activists and organizers, it is our duty to create and keep investigating new information to be transformed into knowledge," (p. 53). She further adds:

What is common terminology and practice in social justice circles today was theorized, written about, organized around, and fought for by people whose names we may never know. What we include in the story of the Black radical tradition must account for these forebears without apology. (p. 60).

Furthermore, Carruthers' (2018) reinforces her focus on the importance of education in the Black radical tradition with a discussion of what the author calls the Black radical imagination. For Carruthers (2018),

The Black radical tradition requires an ongoing and persistent cultivation of the Black radical imagination. It is within the spaces of imagination, the dream spaces, that liberatory practices are born and grow, leading to the space to act and transform. (p. 25).

Indeed, Carruthers exposes the history of anti-blackness as a means to diminish and disrupt perceived paths toward freedom and liberation, and calls for the regeneration of the Black radical

imagination as a way to infuse activist movements with new possible futures, organizations, and outcomes that do not reinforce capitalist, white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal systems of oppression. It is through her analysis of the ways in which the Black radical imagination is weakened that Carruthers calls for organizational action in which the means used prefigure the end goal; in other words, liberation is a process that requires action that creates freedom in the present.

Carruthers further elaborates on 'Three Commitments' and 'Five Questions' which the author recommends using as a way to guide activist movements in sustainability and regeneration. According to Carruthers (2018), "building many strong leaders, adopting healing justice as a core organizing value and principle, and combating liberalism with principled struggle" (p. 64) are integral to avoiding atrophy within radical movements. Moreover, Carruthers finds critical personal and collective interrogation of five essential questions - Who am I?, Who are my people?, What do we want?, What are we building?, Are we ready to win? - as the answer to constructing organizations that can create transformational change through social movements.

Underscoring the entirety of the work, however, is Carruthers' identification with, and reliance upon, a Black, queer feminist theoretical framework for activism. For Carruthers (2018), the Black, queer feminist lens is an aspirational and "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," (p. 10). Black queer feminism, in other words, recognizes the multiple oppressions faced by Black folx around the world and the ways in which combatting the oppressions faced by Black people embodies the struggle for collective liberation. Despite a personal identification as both Black and queer, Carruthers makes clear that although the Black queer feminist lens "is derived from and rooted in personal identity" (p. 10), identification as Black or queer is not mandatory, rather the Black, Queer Feminist lens requires a politic that centers identity and lived experience. Notwithstanding this recognition, however, Carruthers fails to explore the ways in which those of non-marginalized identities can be incorporated into radical activist movements that subscribe to a Black, Queer feminist theoretical lens. To be sure, the voices of those of marginalized identities, including Black and LGBTQ+ folx, should be the most prominent in radical activist movements, but if building movements for collective liberation requires an interrogation and understanding of one's self-interest and personal stakes, as Carruthers (2018) claims (p. 66), what strategies do the Black Youth Project 100 and Carruthers suggest employing to engage those whose stakes may be obscured?

Carruthers similarly omits a coherent discussion of a few key points. For instance, the first of Carruthers' 'Three Commitments' calls for building strong leaders, however, leadership, and the qualities that leaders should possess, is not clearly defined. Much of the discussion on leadership is centered around critical interrogation of self-interest in the movement for collective liberation and the importance of 'showing up' for the movement in daily life and during critical actions but the ways in which self-interest and 'showing up' relate to building leadership skills is not entirely obvious. Carruthers' (2018) suggestion that "All leaders must ask themselves: what work needs to be done, what am I being asked to do, and what am I best positioned to do?" (p. 68) seems to suggest that leadership requires the ability to critically assess organizational and movement needs in conjunction with critical self-reflection, but this is implied rather than definite.

One of Carruthers' (2018) 'Five Questions' for radical movements - Are we ready to win? - is equally vague. This section acts as a clarion call to rally enthusiasm but, ultimately, leaves more questions than answers. By focusing on calls for experimentation and implementation of new "practices that match the type of world we want to create" (p. 109), Carruthers (2018) ignores the integral question, what does winning mean? How do activist movements in struggle for collective liberation measure a 'win'? Does winning entail one successful action that produces a desired result - such as the reparations achieved by the anti-torture campaign against the Chicago Police Department (pp. 120-121) - or does winning require a fully radical transformative change? A more complete conceptualization of what winning means could only bolster Carruthers' rallying call, as well as foster a rejection of the individualistic, 'us versus them' mentality that popular conceptions of competition create.

These small quibbles aside, *Unapologetic* successfully affords the reader the ability to see the importance of storytelling and narrative - of major importance to both critical race and women and gender studies - to the process of movement creation, the creation and centering of marginalized knowledges, and the development of successful organizing strategies. Furthermore, Carruthers' (2018) work effectively highlights the importance of maintaining an intersectional analysis in all movements aimed at doing social justice work. While academics working in the field of race, gender or sexuality studies will find the work an accessible, yet thorough introduction to key ideas of the fourth-wave of feminism, the work may be better suited to those who come to the movement for collective liberation from an activist background due to a more conversational tone and lack of traditional citations throughout. However, the work would be well suited to classroom discussion in conjunction with key theoretical texts of the Black feminist, radical feminist, and critical race traditions. Overall, *Unapologetic* is a particularly timely addition to the scholarship of activist academics seeking to create transformative change in our current culture of insecurity.

Author Notes

Stephanie Gibb-Clark is currently pursuing a master's degree in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies program at Iowa State University with a focus on revolutionary and liberation movements through the study of History, Sociology and Women and Gender Studies, in addition to the Certificate in Education for Social Justice program. Her research interests include projects on anarcho-feminisms, anti-fascist activism, the convergences of radical critical social theories, and contemporary liberation movements, especially Rojava in Syria. Previous works include "Toward an Anarcha-Feminist Understanding of Revolutionary Change," presented at the April 2019 Iowa State University Transforming Gender and Society Conference. Ms. Gibb-Clark received her a Bachelor of Liberal Studies from Iowa State University in 2017.

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