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# Antiracism and Black Self-Defense in the Face of (Juridical) Catastrophe

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**Abstract:** In this paper we analyze the relationship between antiracism and black self-defense. We draw a distinction between liberal and political black self-defense and argue that antiracism can at most sanction a juridical and individualistic notion of self-defense rather than a communal one. We argue that any and all theoretical conceptions of contestation, resistance, or revolution need to seriously grapple with the necessity of theorizing black self-defense. In doing so, we thematize antiblack violence through accounts of self-defense given by black radicals. Together, these arguments outline a perpetual conditional threat of violence against any and all black freedom projects, which in turn justifies enunciative black counterviolence.

**Keywords:** antiracism; self-defense; Second Amendment; antiblack violence

## 1. Introduction

The summer of 2020 saw the beginnings of a widespread “racial reckoning”. A web search of the New York Times shows that the phrase was used in 29 articles between May 25 and October 1 of that year and in 168 articles between 25 May 2020 and 20 April 2022. What does the term mean? As used in the mainstream press, it seems to be an umbrella term used to describe the protests and rebellions of the summer of 2020 that occurred as part the backlash against, among other things, what Jackie Wang calls carceral capitalism, the existence of an antiblack and white supremacist state, corporate diversity initiatives and other similar attempts of status quo capitalism to adjust to new social realities, as well as bourgeois self-reflection on complicity (Wang 2018). “Racial reckoning” used in such a catch-all fashion illustrates the difficulty that contemporary U.S. society has with facing up to its history and the afterlives of that history that structure the present.

One effect of this difficulty is the eagerness with which certain types of solutions or analytical lenses are embraced, especially by the professional/managerial classes, which are inclusive of academics—Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* comes to mind (DiAngelo 2018). There is no doubt that there is truth in the notion of the fragility of white self-conception—that is impossible to deny. The framework of white fragility, however, leaves the complex nature of race and violence unexcavated in favor of moralized platitudes aimed at smoothing out the contours of the academic–administrative complex, which is indebted to expanding “multicultural white supremacy” (Rodriguez 2021). Similarly, Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to be an Antiracist*, the ur-text of the contemporary mindset that we diagnose here, offers an idealist (as opposed to a materialist) reading of social relations that defangs meaningful political action, especially as it relates to black liberation and freedom.<sup>1</sup>

These two texts, as well as the overall framework of which they are illustrative, work primarily in the service of assuaging petty bourgeois liberal consciousness while undermining any possibility of black self-defense. Put slightly differently, the possibility of black self-defense against state and/or non-state violence has disappeared from most acceptable political discourse. And yet, the state’s unwillingness or inability to eradicate



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or control phenomena such as “stop-and-frisk”, “police brutality”, or racially motivated killings raises the question of how black people exist both beyond the law and as the fetishized target of the law within democracy’s boundaries.

It is against this background that we author this paper. As we interpret it, the sort of “racial reckoning” just described is best understood as a part and parcel of a certain contemporary discourse of antiracism, which is exemplified by DiAngelo and Kendi. While we note that the definition of antiracism is contested, we are interested in the ways in which liberal reformist antiracism constrains more radical forms of antiracism. That is, the scope and depth of such a reckoning is limited in the same way and by the same forces that delimit contemporary antiracism and blunt its effectiveness. As such, we offer brief, albeit critical, considerations of that contemporary discourse of liberal antiracism from the perspective of the necessity for black self-defense, which is a form of radical antiracism that is “insurrectionary in its method” (Kundnani 2023, p. 7). Radical antiracism, as we understand it, works beyond the pale of white civil society, but liberal reformist antiracism works from within. In other words, our argument seeks to identify how liberal antiracism, or what Jodi Melamed calls “official antiracism”, often fails to apprehend how racial blackness serves as the onto-epistemic anchor for “race” in all of its permutations (Melamed 2011, pp. 1–50). Our argument is that black self-defense is not an acceptable form of political discourse from within such antiracism. Furthermore, liberal progressive antiracism as manifested in contemporary discourse actually dismisses black self-defense and contributes to what Dylan Rodriguez calls “an emergent cultural ensemble of counterinsurgency” (Rodriguez 2023, p. 129). To elaborate, liberal antiracism is only able to admit self-defense historically and in a redemptive sense, understanding self-defense only as a part of natural or legal rights.

Understanding the core problem with the discourse of liberal antiracism as we see it means recognizing it as a black/non-black issue rather than a white bourgeois issue. The latter centers white individual pathology as the core problem of racism that demands remedy. As a result, the human subject of antiracism discourse, which is constructed as non-black, is left un-interrogated and then imported into antiracism.

To be clear, these petty-bourgeois liberal modes of “racial reckoning” are not the only ones that have become prominent in the last few years. As mainstream media articles about antiblackness and defunding the police have appeared in the mainstream press, writers and activists such as Mariame Kaba who have been undertaking this work for years and years have risen to greater prominence (Kaba 2020). Yet the disparity in uptake by the academic-administrative complex between the antiracism that we focus on and its more radical anti-carceral cousin is stark, and illustrates that black self-defense continues to be, as Joy James has cogently observed, the “third rail” of politics (Ball and James 2020). There is a reason for this, of course, and it finds its forebears deep in the annals of black study. From Martin R. Delany to Malcolm X, white co-optation is infinitely castigated. As Malcolm shrewdly observed, “This is their role—they’re there just to restrain you and me, to restrain the struggle, to keep it in a certain groove” (X 1969, p. 210).

A racial reckoning of a totally different sort, black self-defense in the face of antiblackness and white supremacy in the United States, has a long and varied history. Contrary to sanitized narratives of the Civil Rights Movement as well as resistance to enslavement, such self-defense has often taken the form of armed struggle out of necessity. The list is long, from Denmark Vesey’s thwarted plans, Nat Turner’s revolt, David Walker’s *Appeal*, Robert and Mabel Williams, the Deacons of Defense, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense to the countless unnamed practitioners of counterviolence who are not found in the historical archive. The variety of explicit and implicit rationales given in actions, writings, and speeches across the history of black self-defense in the United States emphasizes a basis in materialism wholly at odds with the individualized psychologism of contemporary liberal antiracism discourse. Given their divergent orientations, as well as the absolute necessity of black self-defense, it is worth asking whether meaningful self-defense can be grounded

at all by the dictates of such antiracism or whether it merely serves as a rhetorical and performative alibi for the status quo of domination and oppression.

That is, given the conception of antiracism noted above, what can we say about black self-defense? In other words, what forms of self-defense are countenanced by this discourse? And what are the alternatives? We argue that the forms of black self-defense implied by contemporary antiracism are wanting. With their focus on the subjective, they foreclose meaningful collective—that is, political—action aimed at the roots of antiblackness and white supremacy.

In Section 1, we briefly outline what we mean by “antiracism”, circumscribing the specific context of our argument. That account of liberal reformist antiracism and its shortcomings will be couched in the distinction between the individual and the communal, as well as two distinct registers of black self-defense, the liberal and the political.

In Section 2, we first consider two ways that contemporary political philosophy has understood and grappled with contestation inclusive of self-defense. Whether in the theoretical contexts of democratic theory or the just war tradition, we illustrate how the operations of resistance and inclusion function according to the same problematic logic that we locate within antiracism. In working toward the construction of an alternate logic, we then consider the long tradition in black radical politics of thinking about armed self-defense in the United States and beyond. From that history, we extract two different registers of black resistance, the liberal and the political.

Lastly, in Section 3, we specify three lessons. The first is the necessity of self-defense within any theoretical conceptions of contestation, resistance, or revolution. The second is the perpetual conditional existential threat to black life in its context. And the third is the manner in which self-defense of a revolutionary sort remains the third rail of black politics even as we attempt to show why it is legitimate.

We are drawn to the connection, both conceptual and practical, between antiracism and self-defense because liberal antiracism has become the primary analytic with which contemporary society is diagnosed. At the same time, self-defense has taken center stage in multiple ways as follows: on the one hand, as a spurious justification for white violence that takes policing into its own hands (including the invocation of Stand Your Ground laws); on the other hand, as the necessary yet perpetually denied response to white violence.

There is a long history of tactical and theoretical thinking about self-defense within black resistance movements. If liberal antiracism is the analytic that is being used to fight back against the contemporary unjust social order and self-defense has historically been a necessary tool in carrying out black freedom struggle, then what can antiracism say about self-defense? Does it have a theory of self-defense, explicitly or otherwise? And if so, is it one that takes the necessary steps?

## 2. Understanding Antiracism

To begin, we briefly outline the contemporary concept of liberal antiracism.<sup>2</sup> Liberal antiracism, as an ideology and practice, is predicated on certain axiological and epistemological formations. First, antiracism often asserts a false universalism (i.e., all sentient beings are human) with little to no attention given to the particularity of racial blackness within the discursive terrain of Western social imaginary.<sup>3</sup> In other words, liberal reformist antiracism presupposes a genre of the human that is singular and falsely universal. In doing so, antiracism fails to recognize and engage with the structure of antiblackness that creates the need for a certain form of racial reckoning in the first place.

In this sense, antiracism belies the history and philosophy of the black radical tradition. Liberal antiracism too often understands racism as instances of subjective violence as opposed to objective structural violence. It is no coincidence that the results of the discourse so far have largely been confined to corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion workshops in which participants are asked to interrogate their potential subconscious biases rather than the structural and paradigmatic limitations of this world.<sup>4</sup> In other words, racism as a form of violence is “performed by a clearly identifiable agent” that disrupts “the

‘normal’ peaceful state of things” (Žižek 2008, pp. 1–2). Alternatively, objective violence is paradigmatic and includes that which is symbolic and systemic (Žižek 2008; see also Zalloua 2020). Relatedly, liberal reformist antiracism as a theory or a set of theories (i.e., a constellation of ideas) seldom, if ever, engages the practice of black self-defense. One reason for this, as we see it, is the way in which the academic–administrative complex captures black movement (Woods 2019, pp. 18–20). That is, liberal antiracism is often the academic and activist grounds for reconstituting petty-bourgeois liberalism more generally and possessive individualism more specifically; it is a means to reconstruct and represent the social contract. If liberal antiracism took black self-defense seriously and, by extension, the political forms of identification that it enables beyond ontic designations, it would become ontologically vulnerable. Therefore, to disregard black self-defense has ethical implications.

Second, black self-defense is redacted from the annals of the black freedom struggle, while nonviolence is venerated and prioritized as the anecdote to a more “just” world. For example, Alex Zamalin’s account of antiracism is interesting in that his work is oriented toward correcting the history and philosophy of antiracism (namely official, state-sanctioned antiracism), which often excludes and/or evades the history of black resistance. For Zamalin, antiracism provides “a rigorous political philosophy and mode of direct political engagement that provides an exemplary model for tackling racism in all forms” (Zamalin 2019, p. 7). Yet, throughout the book, Zamalin stays clear of black self-defense while prioritizing, like so many before and after him, the history and philosophy of nonviolence.

This omission is ironic, especially since the pallbearer and paragon of nonviolence, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood firm on the principle of self-defense (For example, King 1991). In fact, King echoes Assata Shakur’s observation that “Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing. They are turning out thousands of us” (Shakur 1973). As King claimed, expressions of black counterviolence “are not the causes of white resistance, they are the consequences of it” (King 2010, p. 12). In relation to this, the point we would like to emphasize here is that liberal antiracism is steeped in a historical and theoretical doxa that intensifies nonviolence versus violence while offsetting the historical heft of black self-defense.

As such, liberal antiracism as a corollary for nonviolent political practice fails to admit that armed black self-defense ensured that the brave men and women of the civil rights movement, for example, would see another day (Cobb 2015; Umoja 2013). Instead, as Huey P. Newton once affirmed, “they . . .”, which in this case refers to antiracists, “just employ no tactic that will make the oppressor whites angry. . . There are certain tactics that are taboo. . . So black people may protest but not protect. They can complain but not cut and shoot. In short, black people must at all costs remain non-violent” (Newton 2009). The antiracist is appalled by the frequency of racist violence, past and present, yet disavows its root cause. Since the dawn of the African slave trade, black self-defense has been consistently and affirmatively denied at all costs, that is to say, “no black suffering warrants rebellion” (James 2014, p. 214).

The third axiological and epistemological formation that undergirds liberal antiracism is expressed in the work of antiracist activist and best-selling author Ibram Kendi, who resolutely claims that “racism is death. And anti-racism is life”, an idea that has made its way authoritatively into mainstream liberal news outlets (Deggans and Nguyen 2020). Kendi’s pithy idea about antiracism is important, for it highlights a conceptual confusion, as per the black radical tradition, between survival and life. While both life and survival are states of existence, we need to question what one really means by life and therefore reckon with the idea of survival as life. For if we disentangle the two concepts of life and survival, only the latter as a matter of course brings us to the political ontology of blackness. Put slightly differently, confusing the structural for the empirical leads to an analysis of race and antiracist praxis that misses the essential violence of antiblackness and is grounded in an inaccurate understanding of racism. Antiblackness positions bodies in very particular

ways no matter how the people in question act or define themselves. As Tendayi Sithole has made clear, “to survive is not to live and to live is not to have one’s existence questioned” (Sithole 2020, p. 36). Sithole’s important observation continues in his most recent work *The Black Register*:

“To live the life that is put into question is obviously to be in the domain of death. Having its humanity questioned and being structured by violence in the form of the banal and the everyday, blackness cannot claim any ontological status of being. It is the zone of non-being where blackness is declared dead at any time, which is to say, life under siege is the life which can arbitrarily be declared dead”. (Sithole 2020, p. 8)

Given Sithole’s cogent observation, it stands to reason that liberal antiracism is one side of the coin that pays forward the extension of black life as being always under siege or “incommensurably insecure” (Jung and Vargas 2021, p. 3). Put slightly differently, black life through antiracism is almost universally rendered parabolic as a story of transcendence that stays clear, once again, of the point of origin that created racial blackness in the first place. To riff on Sithole’s observations about white liberals, reformist antiracism “is out of sync with the existential reality that confronts the black. . .” (Jung and Vargas 2021, p. 192).

In this sense, liberal antiracism reveals a philosophical misunderstanding that has traversed the history of modern political theory and politics through the current period: a misunderstanding of antiblackness. Liberal reformist antiracism falls victim to “the conceptual crisis” that collapses antiblackness with racism and in doing so fails to distinguish “antiblackness as an ontological condition of possibility of modern world sociality, whereas racism is an aspect of that sociality” (Jung and Vargas 2021, p. 7). In their robust delineation between racism and antiblackness, Tommy and Gwenetta Curry suggest that “To speak of impending death and sub-personhood and explain the experiences of violence and dehumanization that accompany this position [of being black] to white individuals who *only think* of their existence in terms of *always being* human and persons is ineffable” (Curry and Curry 2018, p. 669. Emphasis in the original). For instance, race is central to liberal antiracist discourse, but only insofar as blackness is eventually displaced or understood only as a marker for identity or identification. In this way, our analysis exposes the often-unacknowledged ways that liberal antiracism perpetuates antiblackness by concentrating and focusing on experience rather than existence. That is, the onto-epistemic structure of humanity, which we identify as the false universal, haunts how we understand and by extension limits the conditions of possibility that liberal antiracism may present. This discordance is further illustrated through liberal antiracism’s denial of black self-defense as a necessary philo-praxis birthed by its condition of existence. In other words, black self-defense is both enunciative and emerging out of the reality it reflects. Liberal antiracism, then, is a form of structural adjustment more than anything else and has little tolerance for counterviolence.

Shannon Sullivan echoes something similar with regard to the salience and goodness of antiracism as a rallying concept for social justice. Put briefly, Sullivan defines the good white antiracist as someone invested above all in a tolerance of the status quo. While she acknowledges the distinction between white supremacy and white privilege, she adds that “But white liberals and white supremacists are not as different as white liberals would like to believe and would like others to believe. They grow from the same tree of white domination” (Sullivan 2014, p. 4). To put it another way, white liberalism is complicit with white domination in that it does not try to end it but to just make it more tolerable to everyone involved.<sup>5</sup>

This accurate configuration of antiracism, however, carries with it an additional problem. As a result, while Sullivan, on the one hand, shrewdly diagnoses and analyzes the white bourgeois impulse to center itself at all costs she also, on the other hand, makes the conversation about antiracism solely about whiteness. Her reconstruction of white liberal racism, which comes into focus through white class hierarchies, is insightful. On that point, Sullivan explains that “Intra-white class biases might seem to have nothing to do with



people of color, but as I will argue, they are one of the central ways by which middle-class white people avoid taking responsibility for and fighting against white privilege" (Sullivan 2014, p. 5).

Striving for white middle class moral goodness is how so-called good white people distance themselves from *those* other white people. The former are driven not by the desire to undo centuries of white domination but rather by the desire to simply be recognized as "not racist". This is the core of antiracist discourse for Sullivan, wherein white middle class strivers seek to drive a wedge between themselves, as the good white people, and those other white people—being poor, trashy, uncouth, and *racist*—who are the real problem. "Class hierarchies, racial oppression, and moral sanctimoniousness are intertwined in much of white liberal anti-racism" (Sullivan 2014, p. 6). Responsibility for racism is therefore forcefully shifted onto the white lower classes in an attempt to cleanse those seeking to escape the sins of their ancestors. Yet, just as we want to critique antiracism as shying away from black self-defense, we also want to critique attempts to make it a white problem more specifically and an individual pathology more generally. Doing so turns it into an example of subjective violence rather than a consequence of the structural position of black people in the modern world.

Caught up in the counterproductive zeitgeist, liberal antiracism, in short, sees its problem in terms of the punitive ways that the state and its various actors disproportionately punish black people for breaking the law in addition to more insidious killing of "innocent" and "unarmed" black people. In brief, the antiracist sees democracy as being out of joint. And as part of their racial reckoning, antiracists advocate, to name one example, greater acknowledgement of the militarization of the police in the hope of transforming society for the better. While this is undoubtedly an encouraging development, such a focus again ignores the structural logic of the world that allows for the untroubled operation of *this* world. Part of the problem in discussing antiracism is the elision of its connection to racial blackness, which prevents us from seeing the *long duree* of racial slavery.

Contemporary antiracism as we understand it is centered on the individual in a way that obscures an accurate diagnosis of society. Self-defense stemming from such a view leads, on the one hand, to the over-reliance on an emphasis above all on cognitive biases, consciousness raising, and self-care. The language of implicit bias, for example, seems to ground the diagnosis of every problem and every solution.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, even when it countenances forceful or even violent self-defense, liberal antiracism ultimately appeals to the law and its proper application. The latter also exists at the individual level since it focuses on an individual's equal treatment before the law. King is exemplary here and states that "the right to defend *one's home* and *one's person* when attacked has been guaranteed through the ages by common law."<sup>7</sup> Against such individualism, we aim to emphasize the difference between individual- and communal-minded self-defense. Reformist antiracism is not communal or political, and the liberal black self-defense authorized by antiracism is not either. However, we should note that King's communalism and structural analysis is often made oblique due to the hegemony of individualism that undergirds liberal antiracism.

Because concerns about racial oppression and violence often animate antiracists, there is a hegemonic assumption that antiracism operates for and is in support of black freedom. It is our contention, however, that antiracism, often read politically as an act of refusal, must always be calibrated to the ontological coherence of society. With this canvassing of contemporary discourses of antiracism in mind, we can shift to an analysis of how different conceptions of self-defense sit atop different diagnoses of the world and those within it.

### 3. Liberal and Political Black Self-Defense

With our interpretation of liberal antiracism and its limits in view, we shift in this section to theoretical and practical approaches to considering political contestation and self-defense. We outline some important strands of each approach in order to synthesize them into a theoretical intervention constructed from the concrete material practices of black resistance. There are three steps to this process. The first entails outlining how

some of the recent literature in non-ideal analytic political philosophy has understood resistance. The second shifts from the broadly democratic context of that literature to a context characterized by more straightforwardly authoritarian political contexts. There, we find a different literature within non-ideal analytic political philosophy, this one stemming from the just war tradition rather than democratic theory. Taking these alongside one another, from the perspective of our interest in the possibilities for black self-defense, we can diagnose how the limits of antiracism with regard to self-defense manifest themselves within the contours of political theorizing about self-defense more broadly.<sup>8</sup>

There is of course an extensive literature on self-defense in the analytic tradition, although here we want to focus on two ways that philosophers have recently conceptualized contestation more broadly. We do so because our own argument on the import of political self-defense is grounded in the idea of communal resistance and counterviolence. Both understandings of contestation that we look at here are grounded in the communal, and even if we critique their presuppositions, they recognize the necessity of contestation as being communal even if they do not use the language of self-defense, such as uncivil disobedience on the one hand and just revolutionary war on the other hand. Alternatively, the literature on self-defense remains very much couched in the individualistic and moralistic terms that we want to avoid. To wit, considerations of individual blameworthiness, innocence or guilt, culpability, luck, and moral responsibility, largely in cases where single individuals are faced with other single individuals. Not only are many of the paradigm cases considered by the literature based on individuals encountering one another but they are also constructed in ways that render them ineffective when thinking about the realities and necessities of real world self-defense.<sup>9</sup> We find this literature less relevant to our interest in black political self-defense. Broader issues of contestation, even if they are not framed by the language of self-defense, relate more closely to and make for a better foil for our claims, so that is where we turn.

First, there is the strand of contemporary analytic non-ideal political philosophy, which is rooted in democratic theory and places resistance front and center. This body of literature has been growing for a few decades now and recognizes the importance of building theory out of the real political machinations of society, including practices of resistance.<sup>10</sup> The scope of this work is largely confined to understanding the role of contestation in pursuing justice within a democratic society. Largely rooted in responses to Rawls' analysis of civil disobedience found in *A Theory of Justice*, these texts argue for various interpretations of civil or uncivil disobedience as well as the prospects for justifying certain types of violent or destructive acts within democratic theory.<sup>11</sup>

Candice Delmas, to take one example, argues that a duty to resist injustice—and therefore disobey the law—can be found within prominent theories of obedience to the law. Resistance can then be uncivil insofar as it is carried out in the name of justice.<sup>12</sup> Delmas' argument justifies a wide variety of uncivil and potentially destructive resistance, although she only endorses armed resistance in only one of her examples—Apartheid South Africa. The important central idea is that the very same ideals that are used to justify obedience to the law in contexts in which justice prevails actually also justify disobedience against the law when we are considering an unjust society and non-ideal circumstances. Importantly for our purposes, she understands the types of resistance that she finds within these theories as “radical reform” (Delmas 2018, p. 123).

When does the right to uncivil disobedience become the right to violent resistance, which we understand to be counterviolence? What is the line between uncivil resistance and outright violent resistance? Different political contexts demand different theoretical understandings of the stakes, possibilities, and justifications for resistance (Jubb 2019). Stepping outside of the context of a would-be democratic society and into a more straightforwardly authoritarian context, we can see one example of what happens when these questions are answered differently.

Christopher J. Finlay argues for justified violent resistance to unjust and illegitimate regimes. He expands the narrow view of proportionality in just war theory, and in doing

so endorses violence, even fatal violence, under certain conditions. In so doing, he pushes us to examine the limits of uncivil disobedience in our own context. Finlay undertakes this through adapting a scenario highlighted by Jeff McMahan involving a burglar and his victim.

If the victim attacks and kills a burglar to protect their possessions, we would say that this is a disproportionate response. If the victim tries to stop the burglar from stealing their possessions and the burglar responds by threatening to kill the victim, the character of the situation has changed and the victim has then been authorized to use lethal force, which is now proportionate, in response. The shift is due to the introduction of the burglar's conditional threat, which is what authorizes the violent response. Finlay replaces the individual burglar and victim with a regime and a people, which he characterizes in terms of a regime taking the following stance: "exercise free speech, organize politically, or criticize the regime, and you will suffer violence" (Finlay 2017, p. 63). The importance of emphasizing escalation is to see how successive decisions made by the actors change the context and affect all the subsequent available choices (Finlay 2017, p. 65). These are but two examples from within vast literatures and do not do justice to the richness of the argumentation therein. For our purposes here, however, we only hope that they convey well enough in broad outline, two distinct pathways of theorizing when it comes to contestation. In addition, they help us to bring into view some of the complexities and nuances that are constitutive of theories of resistance.

The lesson that we want to emphasize in juxtaposing these two differing contexts of contestation is that, despite the difference in the stakes, neither adequately captures the positionality of racial blackness and the necessary structure of black self-defense. The presumption of theorizing resistance from within democratic theory is that injustices within society, even deep institutional ones, can be corrected juridically. Alternatively, even though Finlay criticizes mainstream just war theory and widens the scope of proportionality in order to justify proactive violent resistance, in doing so he relies on an appeal to human and political rights (Finlay 2017, p. 57). Such an appeal runs into the same problem as the democratic appeal to the juridical, which is that black positionality remains unaccounted for. The demand then becomes as follows: what sort of resistance would not fall into that trap?

With such shortcomings in mind, we shift focus to the long tradition in black radical politics of theorizing armed self-defense. From slave insurrections to civil rights, armed self-defense, both in theory and in practice, has been central to black existence in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Central to such a tradition is self-defense as follows: (1) as self-evident, as a natural right, and (2) as a legal right granted to all citizens.<sup>14</sup> We take the former as undeniable, but the latter plays a central role in framing calls for social justice and situating black people within the narrative of citizenship.

There is a tendency to conflate self-defense with the right to bear arms through the Second Amendment. More and more, scholars-activists have made an effort to assert the historicity of armed self-defense, drawing attention to what happens when black people tactically deploy their Second Amendment rights to claim the privileges and protections of full citizenship and defend themselves from state- and nonstate-sanctioned violence.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, those such as Second Amendment champion and founder of Black Guns Matter Maj Toure see the right to bear arms as the *sine qua non* of freedom. As such, when Toure states that "Historically, gun control was designed to prove black lives do not matter. The biggest way to show that you believe black lives matter is to support black gun ownership, that black people should have guns to protect their own lives", he is replicating a fetishistic and almost jingoistic preoccupation with the law, which consolidates and extends the idea that agency is birthed through the juridical (Staff 2021). Working from a different judicial angle, Tryon Woods, in his critique of the Fourth Amendment, exposes the limitations of suturing black freedom to legal reform. He states the following:



Since this practice of seizing black bodies predates the Fourth Amendment, policing *precedes* law and licenses the regulation of black self-determination as an unmitigated social threat. . . (Woods 2018a)

Black self-defense before the law falls within the basic principles that black people have “no rights which the white man is bound to respect” (*Dred Scott*) and that black and non-black societies are “separate but equal” (*Plessy*). A full review of the law on self-defense would need to re-evaluate Fourth Amendment case law in light of these principles. In other words, it would need to be done in real terms—meaning, within the context of the racial hierarchy in which law arises and to which it refers. (Woods 2018b)<sup>16</sup>

In the most basic sense, when black self-defense is only understood at the level of individual rights bequeathed by constitutional courts, it betrays true freedom. Within this tradition that conflates and collapses self-defense, we can discern two distinct modes of operation, one of which falls into the same logic diagnosed above and one of which does not, thereby pointing to a world imagined by self-defense that is beyond this one. The latter position builds its theorizing directly into contestation itself rather than being overlain upon it.

In bringing these different discourses together, we do not simply want to point out the reality of the specific history of black self-defense against a tendency to separate theory about contestation from its manifestations. We also want to emphasize the importance of disambiguating different conceptions of the concept of “self-defense” by distinguishing between two registers of black self-defense. We locate these two registers within the process of working backwards from the symptomatic and enunciative modes of resistance.

The first shows the limits of black self-defense when it is understood within a juridical framework, while the second underscores the stakes of a more robust political membership, which continues to be denied even at the juridical level. We call these two registers of black self-defense, liberal and political, respectively. Liberal black self-defense, on the one hand, is largely couched in the language of rights, as seen above, and is focused on survival and the juridical sphere. This liberal conception of self-defense is “symptomatic”. It is exemplified by the idea that was popularized by the Black Panther Party, for example, that of “policing the police” for the sake of survival. What emerges, to put it in slightly different terms, is what Chad Kautzer calls a “self-defensive subjectivity” where the “means and ends have collapsed into each other. . .” (Kautzer 2014, p. 748. See also Kautzer 2015) Citizenship, when read as freedom, is so-called granted for one has the right to bear arms.

On the other hand, political black self-defense is “enunciative”, bringing into being a new human subject that breaks from the shackles of western modernity. Such enunciative actions are exemplified in the measures taken by the likes of Nat Turner and many others within the black radical tradition, which is an ontological operation that is too often reframed by certain political registers. As Christopher Tomlins writes of Nat Turner’s rebellion, “Turner’s ‘work of death’ was death-work that he and his comrades performed in the service of their self-transformation, through a cancellation and destruction of the other, from bondsmen subordinated by fear, ‘consciousness repressed within itself,’ into willful actors possessed, however fleetingly, of ‘real and true independence’” (Tomlins 2022, p. 108). Or, as Frederick Douglass notes in his *Narrative* as he detailed his fight with Edward Covey, “you have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass 2017, p. 1038). To this Douglass adds enunciative power when he states that “the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (Douglass 2017, p. 1041). The remarkable repetition of self-defense as the upheaval of the self continues with George Jackson’s (1994) observation even in his liberal-vetted tome *Soledad Brother*. He states that “When I revolt, slavery dies with me. I refuse to pass it down again. The terms of my existence are founded on that”. It stands to reason that the purpose of political self-defense is the transformation of the structural position of black people. This is what we mean here by “political” in contrast with that which is merely juridical.

As we understand it, the purpose of liberal self-defense is recognition and by extension inclusion within some version of the existing juridical sphere. This purpose is compatible with expressions of self-defense that alter the judicial contours of American society as long as it remains within the same overarching constitutional boundaries as outlined by the founding fathers. The liberal position does not admit an expression of black self-defense that aims toward the affirmation of life beyond survival, while political black self-defense is couched in a broader language of politics and focuses on exceeding, in the words of David Marriott, “a fatal way of *being* alive”.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the goal is to work toward a conception of self-defense that undoes, invents, and remakes anew the structural relations of society.<sup>18</sup>

In light of these distinctions, we argue for the need to see self-defense as political and to therefore understand black political self-defense as an ontological insurrection from within racial blackness itself as it is socially positioned rather than a liberal claim of an already existing yet perpetually denied juridical belonging. Political self-defense is not about, for example, the Second Amendment being properly applied, loopholes being closed, or legislative language being clarified to be more inclusive.<sup>19</sup> To state the obvious, the ethical issue at hand is the structure of social positions as they *really* exist.

From the liberal perspective, racial blackness remains unable to defend and enunciate itself even through self-defense and remains pathological in the face of juridical alterations, whatever they may be—even when those alterations are self-evidently positive. For example, consider the cases of Cyntoia Brown and Bresha Meadows. Brown, a teenage sex worker at the time, shot a client, Johnny Allen, in self-defense, after which she was tried as an adult and found guilty of first-degree murder. Similarly, teenager Bresha Meadows, who was originally charged with aggravated assault for shooting her abusive father in 2016, eventually pleaded “true” to a reduced charge of involuntary manslaughter. In both cases, the redemptive human, again predicated on a false universal, is still operative in that both of their actions are only able to be justified conditionally through the lens of a narrative that nonetheless attempts to ensure that they make up for their transgression by seeing them make good on their humanity. In other words, these black women are made to prove their humanity in order to retroactively justify their acts of self-defense. In any justification of their acts of self-defense, that is, their pathology needs to be shed. Theirs is the sort of self-defense that is absorbed into the discourse of antiracism as we have outlined it here.

Our goal is to demarcate the limits of self-defense as authorized by reformist antiracism discourse while also outlining an alternative tradition with an alternative path forward. Ultimately, liberal black self-defense is the limit of antiracism; it is the absolute most that antiracism can countenance in terms of self-defense.

#### 4. Threat and Freedom

We close by rearticulating the primary claims that we have made so far by drawing them together to more fully illuminate their force. We do so by outlining three ideas that shape to our overall argument when taken together.

The first is the necessity of self-defense. Not only do any and all theoretical conceptions of contestation, resistance, or revolution need to seriously grapple with the necessity of theorizing self-defense, but any conception of the political and its attendant understanding of the subjects therein must contend with self-defense. Whether from within an imagined democratic society of free and equal persons or any of the varieties of unjust societies in which we currently exist, the very idea of self-defense is necessary to articulate the limits of society’s prevailing structural organization. Self-defense is a conceptual as well as a practical necessity within political thought and action. It functions as the counterweight to the operational conception of the human subject within society. It is this function that the liberal conception of self-defense suppresses but that the political conception embraces and operationalizes.

Second is the notion of a perpetual conditional existential threat. We arrive at the identification of this condition through the connection of three different ideas that we

have canvassed throughout this essay. First is the distinction between the two registers of black self-defense, liberal and political. The second is found within Finlay's justification of violence against conditional threats that are made by an oppressive regime. And the third is the history of black organizing around armed self-defense and the ways that it has been responded to.

Taken together, these points bring to light a perpetual conditional threat of violence against any and all black freedom projects and their political organizing. That is, black political self-defense is by definition unjustifiable and incomprehensible according to the structural organization of society and the human subjects that exist within it. When it occurs, if it is to be brought into a narrative where it can be deemed justifiable by the status quo and if it is to be brought under control, it must be transformed into liberal black self-defense, such that it is placed within juridical or redemptive language. Through such transformation, it always requires some additional condition to be attached to it in order to render the act of self-defense excused, as when Cyntoia Brown is told that her clemency is conditioned upon her continued studies once she is released (Hauser 2019).

Finally, we come to Joy James's idea of the third rail of black politics. Finlay's account of justifiable violent resistance alongside accounts of self-defense given by black radicals show us the thematization of antiblack judicial and extrajudicial societal violence. One-time leader of the Black Liberation Army, Kuwasi Balagoon poetically replicates Finlay's account of counterviolence when he provides a ledger of antiblack violence as evidence that "murder was legal" (Balagoon 2019, p. 95).

Finlay's example illustrates the sort of conceptual move unavailable to black resistance insofar as it presupposes the potential for structural inclusion. His account remains juridical. Finlay outlines the conditional threat made by an oppressive regime and how it authorizes violent resistance on the part of an oppressed population. The shift that we make here is that such a conditional threat, when seen through the lens of antiblackness, can be seen as existential in character. That is, there is a perpetual existential conditional threat to blackness that exists within society. That means that the conditional threat is operative at every moment and in turn authorizes enunciative political self-defense in response. From here, we come to see why self-defense is considered to be the "third rail" of black politics as well as why, if it is looked at differently, we can comprehend its legitimacy rather than its prohibition.

With these three ideas in view, we can importantly see how either register of black self-defense signals the criminalization of and treasonous charges brought against black people defending themselves and at times inventing a different way of being against racist violence. Neither is ever conceptually available from within the status quo. The liberal conception is not available because the underlying juridical subject of rights that it assumes is absent when black resistance is confronted. The political conception is not available because the prospect of black existence forcing itself into the social structure on its own terms is inconceivable from the perspective of that structure. Yet, as we argue, through its very incomprehensibility, black political self-defense is a necessity that must be *made* available for the creation of a new world.

The discourse of liberal antiracism has been embraced by so many sectors of contemporary society precisely because it is the opposite of a third rail. That is, it does not offer any corrective to the structural positionality that defines contemporary society. In contrast, we argue that the necessity of political black self-defense is borne out of our diagnosis of the problems and assumptions found within contemporary antiracism. Furthermore, these considerations articulate more clearly the justification of violence in the name of political self-defense.

What such enunciative self-defense looks like in practice is hard to say. But it certainly sits outside the boundaries of what is considered justifiable by the liberal juridical conception of self-defense. We have outlined how various forms of black self-defense have straddled that line, and there certainly are strategic or pragmatic reasons for at different times purposefully employing the liberal model. Our argument is not that it never has its

place or that it can never succeed. Rather, our argument is that its success has an upper limit, and that upper limit cannot account for the restructuring of society and of the positions of those within it.

Antiracism cannot countenance a conception of black self-defense that challenges the antiblack fabric of society. One of the reasons for this is certainly that liberal antiracism conflates racism and antiblackness and therefore is unable to diagnose the ills of the social structure accurately. In the face of those limitations, as we consider the possibilities of enunciative self-defense, we must ask the following: what forms might responses to a conditional existential threat take and how might they carry on the venerable tradition of black political self-defense?

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (Kendi 2020). We acknowledge that Kendi explores more radical forms of antiracism in his 2016 National Book Award *Stamped from the Beginning* (Kendi 2016), but these earlier, nuanced and often robust, observations have fallen to the antiracist margins, only to be usurped by the redemptive insights found in *How to be an Antiracist*. Despite the seriousness of his previous scholarship, we are not interested in his entire oeuvre, for *Stamped From the Beginning* has had little, if any, impact on liberal reformist antiracism. If anything, the neglect of his earlier work at the expense of his more recent work, inclusive of children's books and an animated film, highlights the problem at hand, that is, the ease in which radical examples of antiracism, which include black self-defense, are emptied of their radical content and translated into liberal politics.
- <sup>2</sup> It should be clear that we concentrate here on a specific, bounded phenomenon, rather than make any claims about a transhistorical or generalized sense of being antiracist.
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" (Wynter 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Walcott; "The End of Diversity" (Walcott 2019, pp. 393–408).
- <sup>5</sup> This point is echoed in Curry and Kelleher, "Robert F. Williams and Militant Civil Rights" (Curry and Kelleher 2015).
- <sup>6</sup> See, for example, Woods, "The Implicit Bias of Implicit Bias Theory" (Woods 2018c).
- <sup>7</sup> King, *Where Do We Go from Here* (King 2010, p. 57, emphasis added).
- <sup>8</sup> We focus in this section on these philosophies of self-defense insofar as they are conceptual relatives and correlates to the specific antiracism discourse discussed in Section 1. There are certainly other histories of self-defense, both practical and theoretical, one of which we turn to in the next section (i.e., Finlay's philosophy of armed force), others of which we leave aside for reasons of space. See, for example, Kling and Mitchell, *The Philosophy of Protest: Fighting for Justice Without Going to War*; Pasternak, "Political rioting: A Moral Assessment"; Steinhoff, *Self-Defense, Necessity, and Punishment: A Philosophical Analysis* (Kling and Mitchell 2021; Pasternak 2018; Steinhoff 2019).
- <sup>9</sup> For a thorough overview of this literature that illustrates these characteristics, see Frowe and Parry, "Self-Defense" (Frowe and Parry 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> To name only a few, Brownlee, *Conscience and Conviction: The Case for Civil Disobedience*; Delmas, *A Duty to Resist*; Aitchison, "(Un)civil Disobedience"; Celikates, "Democratizing Civil Disobedience"; Celikates, "Rethinking Civil Disobedience" (Brownlee 2012; Delmas 2018; Aitchison 2018; Celikates 2016a, 2016b).
- <sup>11</sup> For an overview of this literature, see Burgos, "A Dialectical Taxonomy of Resistance" (Burgos 2021, pp. 29–36).
- <sup>12</sup> See, for example, Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting*. (Osterweil 2020)
- <sup>13</sup> Some notable examples include, but are not limited to, Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*; Barr, "The Black Militia of the New South"; Hill, *Deacons for Defense*; Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*; Johnson, *Negroes and the Gun*; Muntaqim, *On the Black Liberation Army*; Williams, *Negroes with Guns* (Aptheker 2006; Barr 1978; Hill 2006; Horne 2016; Johnson 2014; Muntaqim 2002; Williams 2013).
- <sup>14</sup> Kautzer makes a similar distinction, between legal and natural rights, albeit along a white/non-white binary, whereas we are situating our analysis along a black/non-black binary. See Kautzer, "Notes for a Critical Theory of Community Self-Defense" (Kautzer 2018).



- <sup>15</sup> While the literature is vast, Anderson, *The Second*; Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded*, typify such a fixation on the Second Amendment (Anderson 2021; Dunbar-Ortiz 2017).
- <sup>16</sup> Woods, "'Stand Your Ground': Siwatu-Salama Ra and Black Self-Defense, Part 2", emphasis in the original (Woods 2018b). For a further and more thorough account of black self-defense before the law see, Woods, *Blackhood Against the Police Power* (Woods 2019).
- <sup>17</sup> Marriott, *On Black Men* (Marriott 2000, p. 15, emphasis added).
- <sup>18</sup> Here we are thinking about Fanon's meditation on "invention" in Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008). For a critical and necessary understanding of Fanon's theory and politics of invention see, Marriott, "No Lords A-Leaping" (Marriott 2014).
- <sup>19</sup> For example, note the consistent language used in the popular documentary 13th, which emphasizes "closing the loophole" in the 13th Amendment so that it no longer allows enslavement. This would obviously be an unalloyed good, but to understand mass incarceration and its relation to black people as having such a fix is to look at the problem with a liberal eye rather than a political one.

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