

Democracy & Violence in Charlottesville: Deliberation, Feminist Ethics, and Embodied Confrontation Against White Supremacy

Brittany Leach

Abstract This essay explores the implications of far-Right violence for democratic theory and feminist ethics by analyzing deliberative forums and violent confrontations over Charlottesville's Confederate monuments. The forums exemplified deliberation's best participatory qualities, but failed to prevent white supremacist violence at Unite the Right. I develop the concept of Embodied Confrontation—or assembling in public space to contest attempted construction of a neo-fascist people—to theorize one radically democratic practice that remains available when far-Right violence interrupts democratic processes. Complicating feminist theories of nonviolence, I critique binary violence/nonviolence distinctions and create space for self/community defense.

Keywords democratic theory, feminist ethics, deliberation, violence, Embodied Confrontation, Unite the Right

For six months in 2016, residents of Charlottesville, Virginia, peacefully deliberated over what should be done about the town's Confederate monuments. A year later, these monuments sparked violence during the Unite the Right (UTR) rally, catapulting the once-placid college town to global infamy. Photographs rapidly circulated worldwide: A tiki torch-wielding mob screaming at students huddled beneath a Thomas Jefferson statue; a shirtless Black man, shooting flames at a Confederate flag; a car bursting through the crowd of counter-protestors, human bodies frozen in mid-air. "Charlottesville" became a metonym for liberal democracy's contemporary crises, including the far-Right's transnational ascendance as well as the fragility of democratic norms and institutions. How did deliberation become democratic breakdown? How should political theorists and communities respond, and which democratic practices remain viable, when neo-fascist violence interrupts democratic processes? These questions have only grown more urgent after far-Right conspirators stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and as President Trump inaugurates his second term by attacking perceived enemies.

This essay contemplates democracy and violence from below and within democratic crisis. For distant spectators, August 12 appeared suddenly, imperiling democracy because Trump falsely equated white supremacists with anti-racists. For locals, it was one eruption in a longer sequence of events. I analyze UTR alongside the Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) convened by the city council to study the monuments issue, invite citizen deliberation, and produce policy recommendations.¹ To position the reader alongside counter-protestors “in the streets,” I offer a personal narrative of the counter-protest, contextualized by other survivors’ narratives, news coverage, and the independent investigative report.²

Although Charlottesville’s community fora adhered to deliberative democratic standards, their shortcomings—including powerlessness against anti-democratic violence—reflect liberal democracy’s. Since deliberative democracy is already beleaguered, I look to Judith Butler’s feminist ethics of nonviolence and performative theory of assembly³ to theorize democratic resistance to neo-fascist violence. Embracing the embodied and prefigurative aspects of their work while developing an internal critique of their opposition to self-defense, I argue that self-defense is compatible with relational feminist ethics and reframe assembly as encompassing a radical democratic practice I call “Embodied Confrontation” (EC). EC entails collectively appearing in public spaces to interrupt an anti-democratic people’s nascent construction, especially by staging counter-performances of solidarity. EC unsettles public debates over the justifiability of counter-protestors’ violence by blurring binary violence/nonviolence distinctions, which conceal structural conditions that ignite interpersonal violence. Thus, I contribute to democratic theory by identifying an under-theorized radically democratic practice that remains available even when neo-fascists violently subvert democratic processes.

This high-context account of community defense disputes armchair moral condemnations of “violence on both sides” that abstract away embodied experiences and deracinate spectacular disruptions from the structural grounds that nourished them. UTR counter-protestors decided between nonviolence and self-defense in a chaotic situation where immediate far-Right and anti-fascist violence comingled with structural racism and state neglect. In such circumstances, I argue, defensive violence by counter-protestors may be justifiable as a survival strategy even though it does not propel political transformation. This argument complicates feminist theories of violence in two ways. First, it challenges feminist nonviolence, contending that external condemnations of counter-protestors’ defensive violence functionally collaborate with state and structural violence. Second, I critique theories of feminist violence by arguing that Leftist violence—even if necessary or

justified—interferes with prefiguration of more just, less violent, radically democratic futures.

Theorizing democracy: From deliberation to embodied confrontation

Deliberative democracy refers to theories of popular self-government that valorize discussion, reason-giving, and seeking mutual understanding in decision-making processes.⁴ These theories share a core belief that deliberation enriches democracy, either epistemically (by improving decision-making) or morally (by treating fellow citizens as equals).⁵ Though oft-critiqued, deliberative democracy remains prominent.⁶ In response to critics, deliberativists have deepened their engagement with disagreement, listening, and accountability.⁷ Deliberation's continued appeal lies in its participatory⁸ character—like social movements,⁹ community forums provide a rare opportunity for ordinary citizens to substantively discuss matters of public concern with strangers—and its adherence to a democratic ethos of openness to dialogue across difference.¹⁰ Nonetheless, deliberation is exclusionary¹¹ and—as UTR demonstrates—relatively powerless against white supremacy or anti-democratic violence. To theorize the events in Charlottesville beyond the deliberative horizon, my account of EC turns to radical democratic theories that offer Left alternatives to liberal and deliberative democracy. Specifically, I affirm movement-oriented approaches that understand political agency as embodied and think democracy “in the streets.”

One of radical democracy's key insights is that democratic agency is not merely intellectual, verbal, or individual, but also embodied, visceral, and relational. As Diana Coole argues, subjects' experiences of political action are shaped by their corporeality and situation within structural power relations.¹² Likewise, for Sharon Krause, corporeal agency is evident in bodily movements that reflect “concrete manifestations of the agent's subjectivity in the deed.”¹³ Chiara Bottici contends that “every individual is constantly composed and decomposed by other individuals,” interactively producing “the infra-individual” and “supra-individual” domains. Thus, individuals are “never atoms... given once and for all” but “processes” resulting from “constant movements of association and repulsion” that (un)make individual and collective bodies.¹⁴ Similarly, for Butler, bodies in struggle—bodies put “on the line” in political demonstrations—exhibit their “value...and freedom in the demonstration itself, enacting, by the embodied form of the gathering, a claim to the political.”¹⁵ My analysis of Charlottesville and theory of EC begin from this premise of embodied democratic agency. For this reason, I analyze UTR from my own bodily position

amidst the tumult in the streets. Through storytelling, I try to convey the visceral terror, vulnerability, and uncertainty that shaped activists' responses to far-Right violence.

Second, the radical democratic tradition refuses the terms of the hegemonic political order because it assumes action can inaugurate new realms of possibility. Rather than accepting the constraints of established norms, frameworks, or institutions, radical democracy takes its direction from creative political practices and visionary modes of thought nurtured in activist spaces. For Kathy Ferguson, political theory's role is translating ideas and events from unconventional political spaces to expand their possibilities.¹⁶ For Erin Pineda, the task is to cease seeing like a white state—that is, “taking for granted the legitimacy of the constitutional order,” assuming order and stability are politics' primary ends, “centering the white citizen as the normative ideal, and figuring the problem of racial injustice as limited, exceptional, and all-but-already-solved.”¹⁷ Instead, seeing like an activist means evaluating protest ethics and strategy as “part of an ongoing, contested discourse about how to build a new world,” not a question of “the boundaries of legitimate lawbreaking.”¹⁸ My account of EC theorizes the democratic action counter-protestors performed on August 12 in order to unsettle the white state's narrative that defending oneself against neo-fascist violence constitutes “violence on both sides” or even terrorism.

Finally, radical democrats valorize mobilization and transformative, bottom-up participation. Deva Woodly argues that social movements renew democracy by countering feelings of powerlessness and transforming participants through collective struggle.¹⁹ Theories of fugitive or abolition democracy laud quotidian counter-practices that challenge structural racism, state violence, and state-sanctioned violence in ways that prefigure just and egalitarian futures.²⁰ In Butler's theory of assembly, gathering bodies in public space stages a performance of democratic peoplehood that demands “more real and substantive democracy,” inciting “an open battle over the meaning of democracy” that need not take deliberative form.²¹ This aspect of radical democracy explains the sense that, though deeply inadequate, there was still *something* genuinely democratic about Charlottesville's participatory decision to remove the monuments—and, even moreso, in the crowd that gathered to oppose UTR. As I will argue, EC describes a specific type of performative assembly defined by its opposition to neo-fascism and anti-democratic violence.

Democracy and violence in Charlottesville

Deliberative forums

Charlottesville's Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) on the Confederate monuments conformed to deliberative democratic ideals. To ensure transparency, all commission communications were open to the public and audio recordings of the four community fora were uploaded to their website.²² Consistent with deliberative best practices,²³ the commission sought to cultivate citizens' informed judgments upon due reflection, not merely to collate raw public opinion. The forums were as well-executed, substantive, and egalitarian as possible, given unavoidable practical limitations—and that is the problem. No matter how well-designed, deliberative fora cannot overcome structural inequalities, much less quell anti-democratic violence.

By modeling civic-minded attitudes and behaviors—such as equal respect for participants, active listening, and critical self-reflection—commissioners encouraged participants to view themselves as “citizens searching for common ground...reconstructing a thin but precious civic bond.”²⁴ Forum participants, including monuments supporters *and* detractors, echoed this sentiment. Ahmed Hamdi told the crowd that there were no good or bad people, just people who disagreed, and encouraged an attitude of love, not hate.²⁵ Louis Levy observed, “the fight is against anger...we are fighting for common ground. Let's try not to lose.”²⁶ Yet, in seeking to respect everyone, the commission avoided the mistake of attributing all opinions equal truth or normative value. As commissioner Frank Dukes explained, “everybody deserves to be heard. Not all ideas are equal, but everybody's equal, so whether somebody wants to add more statues of Lee or put them at the bottom of the ocean, I think we need to pay attention to everybody that has an idea.”²⁷

Deliberativists evaluate forums on the quality of input as well as the range and representativeness of participants and opinions.²⁸ BRC forum speakers were diverse in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and more. They expressed heterogeneous viewpoints, sometimes surprisingly insightful ones. While most focused on the monuments, many drew attention to other local problems, including homelessness, police violence, mass incarceration, education, and settler-colonialism. Some called the process itself into question, decrying the commission's focus on the monuments as emblematic of unjust racial, colonial, and class hierarchies. The hearings drew on wide-ranging epistemic resources, including personal experience, oral tradition, expert testimony, and popular non-fiction. Speakers exhibited varied rhetorical styles. The forums fostered wider conversations through newspapers, religious congregations, historical societies, activist groups, and the university.

A few examples suffice to illustrate the deliberations' scope and richness. Henry Franklin III supported retaining the statues in their original locations while contextualizing them "to the maximum degree possible." For people like him — lifelong residents with five generations of family ties to the area — he explained, "these statues are landmarks on the landscapes of our lives." He remembered "walking through Jackson Park with [his] father" as a child, proud that Charlottesville had "one of the three finest equestrian statues in the world."²⁹ Some shared his opinion, emphasizing the statues' personal, historical, or artistic value. Others refuted it, citing competing experts on Civil War history, the monuments' history, and their artistic significance. One noted that the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) burned a cross to commemorate the statues' placement in the 1920s.³⁰ Others explained that they lacked childhood memories of the park because it was still segregated at the time, prohibiting them from entering.

Race was central to interpretations of history. Dan McGary identified himself as a veteran, declaring the statues offended him as an American because Lee and Jackson were traitors who "fought to tear this country apart" and to oppress Native Americans, Black people, women, and "all minorities except white men!"³¹ Another veteran, Zachariah Hill, shared memories of segregated busses and fighting for his right to vote, explaining that the Civil Rights Movement's goal was not to "preserve the past" but to "transform and change things." He observed that "any African American, regardless to where he lives, is in Charlottesville, when it comes to these kinds of issues" and reflected, "let us not look to the past, to experts, let historians speak for us, because it depends on who writes the history."³² Martha Adams recalled: I was born in Charlottesville 70 years ago...so I know pretty much about Charlottesville history, Black history, most history...I have not seen a statue of any of my Black heroes, so you wouldn't be a committee if it was, because if they had to come to a decision like they are coming to with Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, they would just take a crane in there and pull him up out of the ground, take him over to the dump, and break him up into little pieces, and tomorrow, nobody would think any more about it... Give it back to the people who started this mess, the city council. If you have to decide on where the money's going to come from to either keep or discard these statues, don't take it out of our city taxes... if a private citizen wanna get rid of it... let them donate some money to remove it, or keep it... Everything that was Black history in this town is a plaque! You've gotta get on your knees to read the Vinegar Hill plaque.³³

For Adams, the entire process was jeopardized from its inception by the city council's prioritization of symbolic issues over substantive problems like the housing crisis and destruction of historically Black neighborhoods like Vinegar Hill.³⁴ By deliberating rather than summarily removing the statues, Adams argued, the council was once again treating white people's concerns as meriting more serious consideration than Black people's. Adams and others linked their critiques of the city council's priorities to economic inequalities among residents, expressing their sad lack of surprise that it was the monuments, not gentrification or poverty, that received the forums' attention. Furthermore, Adams criticized the idea of "transforming the statues in place" by adding a plaque as a perfunctory gesture that failed to meaningfully correct historical injustices.

Charlottesville's forums challenge deliberative democracy in two ways. First, they illustrate the difficulty of achieving deliberation's full benefits or avoiding its harms in polities riven by systemic racism. It is easy to say deliberation *ought* to occur within egalitarian background conditions, but difficult to explain how deliberation could foster those conditions given profoundly unjust starting points. The BRC fora occurred under conditions of structural violence—defined by Iris Marion Young as social processes that expose "large groups of persons" to "systematic threat[s] of domination or deprivation" while providing privileges and opportunities to others³⁵—that deliberation is not well-equipped to address. Segregation is within deliberators' living memory. Racial disparities in wealth, power, health, and education persist. On affordable housing, unlike the monuments, the city sought only minimal input.³⁶ For the first time in 2017, two Black officials simultaneously held city council seats, but far-Right extremists repeatedly sought to impeach one of them.³⁷ The events in Charlottesville suggest deliberative forums may fail to promote democracy if they mask inequality or displace other matters of concern.

Second, Charlottesville illustrates deliberation's mixed record on anti-racism and impotence against far-Right violence. Arguments for retaining the monuments were fully aired during deliberations, but open, inclusive debate did not dissuade UTR attendees. Their unprovoked violence and rejection of core democratic values blatantly violated deliberative ground rules. Even when white supremacists appear to accede to deliberative norms, they rarely do so in good faith. Richard Spencer denied endorsing violence and proclaimed his intention to foster deliberation.³⁸ He lied.³⁹ Regardless, white nationalism is inherently violent because creating a white ethno-state implies ethnic cleansing. Addressing such views deliberatively is unlikely to change Spencer's mind and risks normalizing extremism. Indeed, Spencer's recent attempts to rebrand himself as a moderate by endorsing Kamala Harris illustrate the importance of refusing normalization.

Charlottesville's forums thus exemplify deliberative democracy's normative strengths and weaknesses. Their biggest problems arose from so-called "background inequalities,"⁴⁰ not the deliberative procedure's design or implementation. The deliberations failed to resolve the monuments issue, given UTR's violence and subsequent litigation. The statues were not removed until 2021, after a state legislative amendment and a favorable ruling by the state Supreme Court.⁴¹ That these deliberations occurred under manifestly unjust—not merely non-ideal—circumstances may be grounds for rejecting the deliberative approach altogether. Still, some residents felt that this was *our* flawed attempt at meaningful local democracy. *We decided* to remove the monuments, and something of value *was* lost when white supremacists tried to obliterate our decision.

Unite the Right

Here, I present an autoethnography of UTR, corroborated by other evidence and contextualized by the stories of Black counter-protestors. I offer this narrative not because it is unique—indeed, it is partial but more-or-less typical—but because it forms an exemplary scene that grounds my theorizing. This first-person account aims to performatively enact the embodied dimension of EC, inviting readers to accompany me and imagine what it felt like to be there on August 12.

I first noticed signs of trouble six months after the BRC's final report, when a North Carolina chapter of the KKK travelled to Charlottesville to protest the Confederate statues' ostensibly impending removal. Nearly a thousand counter-protested, but the town remained on edge. The night before UTR, two incidents of violent intimidation occurred. At UVA, a procession of white supremacists marched around the university's grounds carrying tiki torches and shouting "blood and soil!" Students quickly responded, confronting the mob with a make-shift sign reading "VA Students Act Against White Supremacy." They were taunted, spat upon, threatened with rape, and hit with torches.⁴² That same evening, community-members gathered at a nearby church for an interfaith vigil and preparation for the nonviolent civil disobedience planned for the following morning. White supremacists surrounded the church, terrifying worshippers and trapping them inside, until a few anti-fascist activists chased them away.⁴³

Amidst this news, I (a white woman) decided to attend the counter-protest with four friends. When we arrived around 10:30 a.m., little was happening. We joined a small crowd of counter-protestors, primarily other locals carrying protest signs and wearing street clothes. Slowly, more people filtered into the area. I was wearing a tie-dye T-shirt and flip-flops, sartorial choices I would come to regret as the danger mounted. Experienced anti-fascist activists—who arrived

carrying sticks and shields, wearing combat boots, helmets, bandanas, long sleeves, and pants—were better prepared than us locals, who had scant idea what we had gotten ourselves into. UTR participants milled around Emancipation (formerly Lee) Park, where the statue of Robert E. Lee on horseback still loomed. The park was surrounded by militiamen in fatigues, who I initially mistook for the National Guard. UTR attendees' attire ranged from leather vests to T-shirts with Hitler quotes, hoodless Klan regalia to khakis with white polo shirts. Some carried sticks, shields, or flags. While Confederate flags are not uncommon in Virginia, I was startled and appalled to see the bright red-and-black swastika flag of the Third Reich waving overhead.

The protests intensified as people filled the ranks of both sides. UTR participants chanted "You will not replace us, Jews will not replace us!" and "Heil Trump!" Counter-protestors chanted, "No Nazis, No KKK, No Fascist USA!" and "This is what democracy looks like!" Sometimes, counter-protestors chanted either "Love Trumps Hate!" or "Any time, any place, punch a Nazi in the face!"—presumably depending on whether liberals or radical anti-fascists were leading the chorus. Regardless of the crowd's ambivalence about where on the Left it was collectively situated, the full range of the progressive/Left spectrum assembled in apparent unity, without formal organizing structures. In the moment, it seemed like unified opposition to neo-fascism and white supremacy erased intra-Left tensions. I felt a powerful sense of solidarity with everyone who fought off neo-Nazis or peacefully placed their bodies in danger, regardless of their ideological faction. Even now, my intuition is to refrain from condemning the means others employed to defend themselves or their compatriots, because I recall how difficult it was to judge others' tactics from an embodied position within pandemonium, confusion, and fear.

As tensions mounted, minor scuffles increasingly broke out. The crowd's movement undulated. Sometimes both sides swarmed inwards, reacting to a one-on-one spark. Occasionally, white supremacists charged the counter-protestors in unison, attacking with fists and sticks. At some point, UTR rioters started throwing cannisters that released noxious fumes (tear gas?). It burned my eyes and throat even from a distance. Some from both camps used pepper spray against their political antagonists. The injured sought out street medics (affiliated with the counter-protest, although I witnessed one medic treating a minor head wound on a man wearing a swastika-patched vest). At the time, I perceived *all* violence as instigated by the far-Right; counter-protestors simply defended themselves. Now, I am less certain, due to the difficulty of determining who threw the first punch or rock in unruly situations. Still, claims that "both sides" perpetrated violence are—at best—misleading partial truths that obscure the magnitude and purpose of disparate acts of violence.

I was frightened from the moment we arrived—or, more truthfully, for days in advance—but fear intensified into near-panic as the air filled with acrid smog and isolated fist fights escalated into melees. My entire body was saturated with terror and exhilaration, humming with adrenaline. I fled from the main knot of counter-protestors, who were engaging the proto-fascist mob in bodily combat. I felt useless, incapable of providing meaningful assistance like physical defense or medical care. Until that day, I had never considered the possibility that I could be a target of white supremacist violence. I had never been in a situation where I might need to physically defend myself, and I was pessimistic about my ability to do so. The problem of violence suddenly towered before me, not as an abstract question, but as an intensely practical dilemma. I experienced profound gratitude for the veteran activists who kept the neo-fascists largely at bay. I felt cowardly for hanging back, but I did not know what to do if someone hit me. Occasionally, I dove back into the mass of people to find my friends or look for opportunities to help, but I could not endure immersion in the crowd for long. When a state of emergency was declared, we decided to leave.

To return to our vehicle, we needed to cross the downtown pedestrian mall, but we quickly noticed far-Right militiamen had established a perimeter, posting men with large guns at each exit. (By now, it was clear they were *not* the National Guard.) Fearing that even polite requests to make way might be taken as provocation, we sought another route. While walking, I spotted police officers chatting idly in center of the mall. I should have known they would not help us. The police had stayed far from Emancipation Park, behind a wire fence, seemingly unconcerned about the violence. Besides, I was well-acquainted with problems like police abuse and neglect of communities of color. At the time, though, this knowledge existed only on an intellectual level for me; it was not encoded affectively or experientially. From my position within white privilege, I thought speaking to the police was worthwhile. I approached an officer and said, “Excuse me, sir. Did you know that there are men with guns blocking the exits?”

“Ma’am, open-carry is legal in Virginia,” he drawled.

I replied that I knew openly carrying firearms was legal, but explained that militiamen were standing shoulder-to-shoulder, physically blocking the exits. “Can you please ask them to step aside and clear a path for pedestrians, so people can obey your order to disperse?” I inquired.

The officer responded, “There are other exits.”

Fury rose in my throat, but I said nothing further. We resumed walking until we found an exit unpatrolled by armed men. After collecting ourselves at a nearby “safe space,” we returned home, only

to discover that a far-Right extremist had plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protestors. For days afterwards, I was consumed, reading endlessly about these events, trying to understand what happened and what it meant. Eventually, I gained (what I thought was) a sense of perspective and began writing. But the fear lingered. Finding my name on a list of counter-protestors circulating in far-Right internet spaces paralyzed me with terror for months. Even now, I hesitate.

But this story is not just mine; it resonates with other survivors' narratives.

The theme of police inaction recurs in nearly every account. On August 11, witnesses reported unprovoked attacks on unarmed students and faculty.⁴⁴ "Tiki torches became weapons," wrote a local journalist, "swung at people like clubs" or "hurled through the air like spears."⁴⁵ One legal observer "witnessed a group of close to 300 torch-wielding white supremacists—some with firearms visible—surround a few dozen students and community members, many of whom were people of color" while another described how UTR participants encircled individual counter-protestors, "hitting them with tiki torches, punching them, pushing them down."⁴⁶ Both claim police failed to respond to calls for help, including their own 911 calls.

On balance, the evidence shows "nonviolence" at UTR was illusory or at least elusive. As Pastor Logan Rimel wrote:

In Charlottesville, my 'nonviolent' stance was met with heavily armed men. They came with bats, clubs, plywood shields painted with swastikas, brass knuckles, tear gas canisters, and wooden sticks. Not to mention the guns. The heavily armed militia were everywhere...They came to hurt people, and they did...I do not advocate for violence....To me, it is a sin. I do not believe God requires us to sin. But it seems apparent to me that the world sometimes does.⁴⁷

Experienced practitioners of nonviolence echoed Rimel. Cornell West said, "we would have been crushed like cockroaches if it were not for the anarchists and the anti-fascists," explaining that interfaith demonstrators had planned to get arrested for civil disobedience, but "we couldn't even get arrested... because the police had pulled back... just allowing fellow citizens to go at each other."⁴⁸ Local pastor Seth Wispelwey said, "antifa saved my life twice," and "robust community defense standing up to white supremacist violence... saved many lives from psychological and physical violence."⁴⁹ Brandy, a postdoctoral researcher and counter-protestor, described how peaceful protestors were "knock[ed] over" by neo-Nazis with "shields and batons and bats."⁵⁰ She recounted how "anarchists and anti-fascist[s]...asked what they could do to help," agreed "not to provoke the Nazis," and

stood between the interfaith demonstrators and “a *much* larger group of Nazi alt-righters.” Five anti-fascists and twenty interfaith demonstrators faced “100-plus” UTR participants. Brandy was “focused on not bolting from the scene and/or not soiling [her]self,” “legitimately very worried for [her] well-being and safety.” When other anti-fascists joined the protective line, the far-Right became “enraged” and “responded violently.” Absent police response, faith leaders ended the demonstration because it became too dangerous.

Though witnesses overwhelmingly rejected the idea of a “violent Left” and expressed gratitude towards the counter-protestors’ self-appointed defenders,⁵¹ they described far-Right violence with nauseating clarity. A reporter witnessed “a battalion of white supremacists” attacking “an older group of counterprotesters” he described as “give-peace-a-chance, middle-aged and senior citizens” who were “absolutely pummeled” while “police were just watching it happen.”⁵² The event turned deadly when a white supremacist plowed his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, reversing “up the hill so he could come barreling down at a higher speed.”⁵³ Over thirty pedestrians were hospitalized; twelve required resuscitation and Heather Heyer died. Journalists, legal observers, students, faculty, and other bystanders agreed — the violence was overwhelmingly one-sided, with UTR participants attacking nonviolent counter-protestors while small numbers of anti-fascists used violence in self-defense or defense of others. Those without anti-fascist protection seemingly lacked recourse.

The independent Heaphy Report commissioned by the city government confirms the general beats of survivors’ narratives. Though not without errors or biases, the report is based on 150 interviews, 545,000 documents, 70 hours of audio (including police radio), and 300 hours of video.⁵⁴ It documents consistent law enforcement passivity, including interview testimony that police spurned residents’ requests for aid and “body camera footage show[ing] people attacking each other in plain view of the officers” while “officers stood behind the barricades and watched.”⁵⁵ Despite blaming the violence on ineffective policing, the report describes extensive, repeated mobilization by overt white supremacists, including police collaboration with KKK “Imperial Kommander” Amanda Barker.⁵⁶ It establishes that Police Chief Thomas lied repeatedly to investigators, the city, and the public as well as fabricating, withholding, and destroying evidence.⁵⁷ These facts, along with pre-existing structural inequalities, suggest a more accurate etiology would attribute the violence to white supremacy within and outside the police force, not “ineffective policing.”

Joy James’s Black feminist account of structural violence, which centers racialized and sexualized state violence,⁵⁸ helps explain the police’s role at UTR. She shows how the far-Right aligns with “repressive

elements of the state apparatus," including police and the judiciary, to perpetrate racialized violence "through economic exploitation, police violence," prisons, and interventions abroad.⁵⁹ State and right-wing violence target Black bodies while "policing [who is allowed to use] violence based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and race."⁶⁰ Purportedly "antiviolence" deployments of police violence are "contradictory," James contends, because the state "facilitates political violence"—especially white supremacist violence—"while criminalizing and condemning it."⁶¹ This is evident in the state's anemic response to the KKK versus its often overwhelming force against left-wing militants (who resort to violence primarily because they "do not trust the state to wield violence on their behalf" or "fear the state's violence against them").⁶²

The stories of Corey Long and DeAndre Harris reveal the extreme interpersonal and disproportionate legal violence Black counter-protesters faced, casting further doubt on calls for more or better policing. Captured in the iconic flamethrower photograph, Long exemplified "the violent Left" in public discourse. The image circulated without the important context that Long devised and used this contraption in response to a neo-Nazi firing a gun at him and the elderly white man he was protecting.⁶³ Long, an elder-care worker and lifelong Charlottesville resident, said he was peacefully protesting "until someone pointed a gun at my head" and then "shot the ground." Unarmed, Long used "a can of spray paint that a white supremacist threw at him earlier" and a lighter to create the infamous "flamethrower." "I was trying to protect myself and others from these neo-Nazis," he explained.⁶⁴ Ample evidence supports Long's self-defense claim. The altercation was videotaped and highly credible bystanders like former mayor Frank Buck corroborate Long's account. Buck said he could hear people shouting "kill the n****r" as a Klansman hurled the n-word at Long while brandishing a gun. Nonetheless, Long was convicted of disorderly conduct.⁶⁵ During sentencing, supporters chanted "justice for all community defenders," "we refuse to be silenced by fascist violence," and "Corey Long did nothing wrong." Wrongly stereotyped a violent Black man or Left-wing outside agitator, Long was an otherwise peaceful local using a low-tech incendiary device in an improvised act of self-defense and interracial solidarity against potentially deadly racist violence.

Harris, a special education teacher's aide, faced similar injustices after he was beaten nearly to death in a parking garage next to a police station.⁶⁶ Security footage showing a brutal attack on Harris by "six men linked to militia or white-supremacist groups" went viral.⁶⁷ These well-armored attackers kicked and hit Harris with metal poles, knocking him down whenever he tried to run. Afterwards, Harris was

"hospitalized for a concussion, fractured wrist, bruises...and a head laceration."⁶⁸ It was, on any reasonable interpretation, an attempted lynching. But later, Harris was charged with felony unlawful wounding for defending himself.⁶⁹ Though acquitted, he was traumatized.⁷⁰

These stories disclose racist violence against Black Charlottesville residents on August 12 and in its aftermath. Both Black men were blamed for their own victimization and unfairly demonized for defending themselves or others. Neither Long's nor Harris's "violent" acts would exist without white supremacists' attacks. Their legal re-victimizations after-the-fact represent clear instances of structural racism. Their stories contradict racially-biased narratives about violence on "both sides." White supremacist violence was overwhelmingly more severe, frequent, unprovoked, and institutionally enabled. The question for democratic theory is not how to correct "background inequalities," but how to abolish racism and stop neo-fascism.

Feminist ethics and violence

This section questions theories of feminist violence and nonviolence. I argue that Butler's relational feminist ethics rightly identifies the cycle of violence as a central problematic and convincingly refutes the case for violence as a world-making tool. However, I depart from Butler over self-defense. Responding to scenes of state violence and peaceful protests mislabeled as "violent,"⁷¹ they persuasively critique legal violence and disingenuous excuses for pre-emption. However, in neglecting far-Right violence, Butler unfairly dismisses self-defense as mere rationalization. Situations like UTR, where the state perpetuates structural violence by enabling the far-Right's coextensive physical violence, demarcate the limits of prefigurative politics, which underpin Butler's case for nonviolence.⁷² While violence compromises prefiguration, prefigurative strategies become impossible or at least extremely costly when all paths are flooded with violence and injustice. Rejecting even the *possibility* of ethico-politically justifiable self-defense further exposes marginalized community defenders to juridical violence and public opprobrium.

Because feminist critique links interpersonal, institutional, and international violence to patriarchy, feminist theory is largely anti-violence. For instance, Catharine MacKinnon assails liberal legal theory for assuming litigants' abstract equality without accounting for gendered inequalities and uneven power dynamics. These unacknowledged forces, she contends, produce and obscure gendered/sexual violence, including "rape, battery, sexual harassment, forced prostitution, and the sexual abuse of children."⁷³ Without feminist critique to reveal this violence, victims are silenced.⁷⁴ Similarly, Chris

Cuomo argues that peace is more than “the absence of declared armed conflicts,” since war is just one manifestation of “enmeshed” “systems of domination and oppression,” including militarism, patriarchy, and environmental destruction.⁷⁵ Her ecofeminist vision requires continual peace-building, transforming socio-political relations, and sustained everyday struggle against all forms of violence.⁷⁶ Ann Tickner likewise contends that genuine human security demands “the diminution of all forms of violence, including physical, structural, and ecological.”⁷⁷ For these theorists, feminism is not just a critical tool but the antidote to violence.

This tendency towards nonviolence has led some to argue that feminist violence has been “overlooked,” indicating a “feminist allergy to violence.”⁷⁸ Feminist scholars have increasingly challenged the latent essentialism of equating women or feminism with nonviolence. For instance, Verónica Zebadúa-Yáñez argues that refusing to think feminist violence “pacif[ies] feminism” by coding violence as always-already heteropatriarchal.⁷⁹ In her view, understanding feminisms’ plural approaches to “transformation” and “world-(un)building” requires analyzing “violence as a strategic tool in the feminist arsenal” with a place in “the feminist archive.” Rose Owen’s work is also central to this reappraisal of feminist violence. She excavates Andrea Dworkin’s largely-forgotten evolution from nonviolent peacenik to self-defense advocate.⁸⁰ For Dworkin, self-defense prevents and politicizes sexual violence.⁸¹ More controversially, Owen reads Valerie Solanas as sincerely advocating that eliminating men will produce world-saving “political transformation,” abolishing exploitation, authoritarianism, war, etc.⁸² Because the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* portrays violence as restoring women’s agency and transforming their relationship to the public sphere, Owen interprets Solanas as advocating “feminist violence as a world-making project.”⁸³

However, world-making is distinguished from other forms of political action by its constructive and prefigurative elements. According to a prefigurative logic, means and ends are co-constitutive,⁸⁴ so violence generates only violent futures. Though violence may have short-term utility within rationalities that separate ends from means, it builds nothing. Absent a constructive dimension, feminist violence can defend the vulnerable, but it cannot create justice or undo structural violence. Proving this critique, Solanas does not envision ending oppression; she conjures a world that targets men for death and dehumanization instead of women. She advocates “kill[ing] all men” except “the Men’s Auxiliary,” who obtain their debilitated existence by agreeing they are “lowly, abject turd[s].”⁸⁵ Characterizing men as “garbage,” “easily subjected” to women’s “domination,” “incomplete” beings without selves, or “half dead, unresponsive lump[s]”⁸⁶ is

not liberation because it fails to transform oppressive power dynamics. Solanas's "feminism" does not even welcome all women. S.C.U.M.'s true enemies are not men but so-called "Daddy's Girls," "passive... subdued, dependent, scared, mindless, insecure, approval-seeking" "breeders" "who have cast their lot with the swine" and thus become essentially animals themselves.⁸⁷ Far from building a feminist world, Solanas's violence produces a topsy-turvy inversion of patriarchal oppression.

Emma Goldman provides a more compelling entry point into feminist violence. Kathy Ferguson solemnly contemplates Goldman's anarcho-feminist advocacy of violence, particularly the *attentat* (assassinations).⁸⁸ Yet, she does not view the binary violence/nonviolence distinction as "the central spindle around which Goldman's anarchism moved," nor does she interpret violence as a core component of Goldman's anarchist world-making.⁸⁹ Instead, Goldman's prefigurative politics were embodied most fully in anarchist beer halls and printing presses.⁹⁰ Ferguson explains prefiguration as holding that "develop[ing] a society without inequality" means "begin[ning] to live as equals" and that "foster[ing] freedom" requires people caring about "their own freedom as well as the freedom of others."⁹¹ Prefiguration demands world-making, or reconfiguring political space to germinate new ways of life within existing societies.⁹² By creating alternative political spaces and counter-publics, Goldman "opened possibilities for producing lifeworlds out of which radical publics could emerge."⁹³ These lifeworlds manifest more intensely in illicit birth control clinics or the pages of *Mother Earth* than in any bullet.

The strongest argument for feminist nonviolence pairs this logic of prefiguration with relational feminist ethics, extending this conjuncture into a total critique of violence. Adrienne Cavarero envisions nonviolent futures emerging from her relational, embodied ethics of shared vulnerability and openness to difference.⁹⁴ Butler's commitment to nonviolence likewise follows from their relational ethics, which ground ethico-political responsibility in interdependence and differentiated precarity.⁹⁵ The self-rendering, world-unmaking experience of grief reveals subjects as deeply relationally constituted.⁹⁶ Understanding that everyone experiences attachment, loss, and corporeal vulnerability humanizes the Other and visibilizes the webs of grief that spiral outwards from every act of violence.⁹⁷ Recognizing the Other's precarity and each life's singularity creates an ethical compulsion to nonviolence by making self-sacrifice preferable to inflicting violence on the Other.⁹⁸ In this relational universe, negating the Other through violence also negates the self, because the altercation binds self and Other.⁹⁹ In short, violence "negate[s] the extended social ties that define the self and its world."¹⁰⁰

On these grounds, Butler argues that violent tactics are unnecessary and counterproductive to social change, because trying to stop violence with violence only amplifies the circulation of violence throughout society.¹⁰¹ If the self is relationally constituted, violence against others also does violence to the self and community. "Nonviolence would, then, be a way of acknowledging that social relation, however fraught it may be, and of affirming the normative aspirations that follow from that prior social relatedness," Butler reasons.¹⁰² Because even allegedly-justified violence tends to exceed its specified ends, nonviolence is preferable because it rejects the instrumental logic of means justifying ends in favor of seeing means as *enacting* ends.¹⁰³ For Butler, affirming all life as equally grievable asserts a universal, egalitarian commitment to safeguarding the Other's life.¹⁰⁴ Equal grievability requires remaking social, political, and economic institutions on nonviolent, egalitarian terms.¹⁰⁵ In doing so, it not only repairs historical violence but also "anticipate[s] and forestall[s] the damage that *is yet to come*."¹⁰⁶ Practicing nonviolent resistance to injustice, then, creates the conditions of possibility for undoing and preventing structural violence. Being surrounded by a field of violence is no excuse for Leftist violence, because nonviolence is most powerful when it sutures social wounds that bleed violence everywhere, "saturat[ing] the world and offer[ing] no way out."¹⁰⁷ In such moments, embodying nonviolence affirms relationality and opens less violent futures, while self-defense reinforces individualism and violence.

This account of nonviolence as a prefigurative ethico-political practice is compelling, but I think Butler errs in grouping self-defense with aggression.¹⁰⁸ They consistently portray self-defense as an excuse privileged actors wield against the marginalized, not as marginalized people's valid deflection of life-threatening danger.¹⁰⁹ For instance, they conjure images of police appealing to "self-defense" or "defense of society" after shooting unarmed, fleeing Black and queer folks.¹¹⁰ The only semi-positive reference to self-defense is "Marissa Alexander... sentenced to twenty years for attempting to defend herself against sexual assault," but this is mentioned in passing, to underline the racialized injustice of George Zimmerman's acquittal.¹¹¹ For Butler, structural violence (in general) and racially biased judgments about self-defense (in particular) reinforce the case for nonviolence, because racist and Eurocentric biases mean "certain selves are considered worth defending and others are not," creating inequalities in grievability and access to defensive violence.¹¹² Yet, cases like Alexander's, where marginalized people defend themselves against real threats—imminent, individualized manifestations of structural violence—deserve consideration as acts of self-defense in their own right.

Categorical ethical prohibitions against self-defense do not follow from uneven chances of winning self-defense claims in court or public

opinion. If anything, the opposite is true: The risk that racialized community defenders — denied grievability by a racist state — face conviction like Long, not acquittal like Harris, means *more* ethico-political latitude should be extended to targets of white supremacist violence acting in apparent self-defense. Indeed, compulsory nonviolence is the discursive context that made it possible for white supremacists to demand *and receive* an indictment against Harris.¹¹³ Concluding *a priori* against self-defense imposes what Juliet Hooker calls “democratic sacrifice” — it demands racially oppressed people enact only appropriate forms of politics, thus burdening them with disproportionate responsibility for maintaining liberal democratic norms despite democratic states’ failure to adequately address violence and injustice against them.¹¹⁴ Already characterized by structural violence, Charlottesville during UTR experienced what Lisa Miller calls “racialized state failure,”¹¹⁵ where the rule of law ostensibly remains operative despite the state’s temporary failure (or refusal) to maintain it, thus enabling legal and extra-legal violence against racialized people. In such circumstances, compulsory nonviolence obscures state violence while underestimating the sacrifices liberal proceduralism imposes on oppressed people.¹¹⁶

Though left unsaid, genuine self-defense by people of color or anti-racists seemingly passes Butler’s ethical tests. They argue that violence is unethical because it cannot be willed reciprocally; substituting ourselves into the Other’s place reveals that violence does unacceptable damage to individuals and social relations.¹¹⁷ Butler writes that “we cannot, or may not, take away the lives of those we would rather see gone” because “we cannot consistently live in a world in which everyone does the same.”¹¹⁸ But self-defense *can* be willed reciprocally, unlike pre-emption. I can affirm that people whose lives are endangered may violently defend against aggressors’ blows, precisely *because* I am confident that I will not cast the first blow. In this imaginary, my own violence only rebounds back on me *if I initiate violence*. While Butler rightly worries about reprisals against the Other for *imaginary* violence fabricated from paranoid fantasies,¹¹⁹ reluctantly permitting self-defense based on real encounters with past violence or plausible predictions of future violence (e.g., in domestic violence) differs sharply from fetishizing self-defense as a socially acceptable outlet for unleashing violent desires against ungrievable victims.

Still, Butler asks provocative questions about self-defense: “Who is this ‘self’” “who counts as such a self,” and “How is it delineated from other selves ... or other defining relations? Is the one to whom violence is done not also in some sense part of the ‘self’ who defends itself through an act of violence?”¹²⁰ Although difficult questions, on August 12, the answers were sharp and clear. The selves to be defended were Harris, Long, Heyer, Rimel, and other targets of white supremacist violence; the diverse Charlottesville community; and the broader community of

resistance against racism and neo-fascism. These selves are interconnected and imprecisely bounded, but also concrete and autonomously determined. At UTR, embodied subjects (dis)affiliated with the multi-racial *demos* by moving to one side of the barricades. Those whose inclusion within community defense was unclear—e.g., uninvolved locals at the Friendship Court housing project—were asked if they desired protection and left alone if they declined. Defensive violence in Emancipation Park or the parking garage repudiated community with neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and their fellow travelers, not community as such. In severing relationality, this defensive violence marked white supremacist attackers ungrievable. Given the severity of this measure, anti-fascists would do well to remember Chantal Mouffe's warning that democracy-preserving exclusions must remain contestable, lest democracy's self-appointed defenders overreach or become what they once opposed.¹²¹ Nonetheless, the self of self-defense need not be articulated in purely individualist terms at odds with relational feminist ethics, as Butler claims.¹²²

In their laudable concern for ungrievable lives, Butler overextends their analysis by assuming feminist ethics should *always* push towards more inclusive community, expanding grievability, and affirming relationality. This produces unsatisfying and inconclusive resolutions to relatively easy cases, like whether abortions constitute violence.¹²³ Such indeterminacy is even more problematic given Butler's amorphous but expansive interpretation of terms like "the human" or "life," their insistence on treating all lives as *equally* grievable, and their demanding imperative to "safeguard" all life. Butler praises hesitation and ambivalence as ethical prophylactics against violence,¹²⁴ but is uncertainty an adequate—much less praiseworthy—reaction to neo-Nazis attacking people of color? Sometimes, severing relationality may be necessary for resolute opposition, even at risk of inviting the temptation to counter violence with ever more violence. If nonviolent prefiguration is unavailable as a strategy because all remaining options perpetuate violence in some way, activists must consider better and worse forms of complicity. Additionally, Butler's emphasis on the Other's *life* implies self-defense is lethal, but Long and Harris reveal intermediate possibilities between martyrdom and murder. Even granting a minimalist presumption against intentionally lethal self-defense, Butler's ethics of universal "safeguarding"—securing and reproducing "the conditions of becoming, of living, of futurity" for all life, *without regard* for the "content" of how that life is lived¹²⁵—seems incompatible with anti-racism. Preserving neo-Nazi lives as bare life is one thing; protecting their flourishing and futurity is another. Anti-racist futures are impossible without abolishing racist beliefs, practices of racialized violence, and ways of life premised on exterminating or subordinating

racialized Others. Anti-racism requires dismantling racist subjectivities and lifeworlds, not safeguarding them.

At times, Butler equates relationships *per se* with ethical relations, but relationality is the condition of possibility for ethics *and violence*.¹²⁶ As Bonnie Honig explains in a parallel critique of Cavarero, encounters with others are undecidable because “with the capacity to care comes always the possibility of wounding.”¹²⁷ For Honig, political violence is inescapable; denying this fantasizes of complete separation from the world or an end to politics.¹²⁸ Thus, “agonism and even violent self-defense may be needed” to protect “experiments in living,” even though this “risks mimicking what we oppose,” because *not* taking that risk “court[s] others, like reabsorption or exile.”¹²⁹ Whether or not nonviolent futures are possible, feminist ethics’ promise to end the circulation of violence has a long time horizon — it does not come soon enough for anti-racist demonstrators being pummeled in the present-tense.

Still, I agree with Butler and Honig that violence (even if defensive) harms the self (individual and collective). The far-Right’s Thrasymachian vision of might-makes-right is realized in and through inflicting violence, but violence is antithetical to the worlds radical democrats desire. When the Left resorts to violent means, we implicitly concede that democracy and nonviolence have failed — that peaceful dialogue was insufficient, transformation faltered, and democratic processes could not deliver justice. The more frequently this concession is made, the less plausible radically democratic futures will seem. Fighting back violently thereby defers futures where violence is no longer necessary. Because defensive violence cuts in both directions even when justified, I do not *advocate* violence. Rather, I contend that political theorists, feminists, and radical democrats should hold open the possibility that self-defense may sometimes be worth its cost. Concluding otherwise is unfair to targets of white supremacist violence, especially when institutions abandon them and flight is impossible. Selecting self-defense, flight, or willful vulnerability to the violence of others is a difficult judgment rendered quickly, with limited information, amidst pervasive turmoil. Armchair condemnations under-appreciate the dilemmas faced in the streets.

Embodied confrontation as a radically democratic practice

Embodied Confrontation (EC) complicates Butler’s relational ethics by challenging the violence/nonviolence binary and modifies their theory of the people as assembly by distinguishing between democratic and anti-democratic assemblies.¹³⁰ Centering scenes like UTR, I conceptualize EC as a mode of political participation that enacts contestation primarily by assembling bodies in physical spaces to perform a

democratic people in opposition to the attempted construction of an anti-democratic people. EC's interpretive lens prioritizes symbolically-rich physical actions over discussion.

As an embodied form of political agency, EC exceeds mere democratic expression; it *enacts* democracy, egalitarianism, and racial justice. In EC, collective action's political meanings are constituted foremost through bodies' collective movements in public spaces. This does not mean it lacks any communicative dimension. Rather, it conveys political commitments more by *doing* than by *saying*, through contextually-specific ways of acting, not solely through speech. What makes EC a *democratic* form of agency is that it disrupts anti-democratic visions of peoplehood by performing alternatives. While any ideological group can engage in embodied *contestation*, or assembling in public spaces to perform their vision of community and demonstrate its power, Embodied *Confrontation* refers more narrowly to instances of embodied contestation that perform a democratic people *in opposition* to anti-democratic assemblies, structures, or events. In Charlottesville in 2017, this confrontation was literal, as racial justice activists physically faced violent white supremacists seeking to undo the outcomes of a democratic process. Because racism can be structural,¹³¹ movements like Black Lives Matter that confront instances of police brutality and structurally racist policing also constitute EC.

The content of protest speech is relevant insofar as it enables judgment about whether activists' visions, and therefore their embodied contestation, are democratic. Marching under the Third Reich's flag performs a neo-fascist people, while carrying anti-racist or anti-fascist banners performs a democratic alternative. UTR's chants expressed anti-Semitism and affirmed racist "Great Replacement" conspiracy theories, while a racially integrated crowd chanting "this is what democracy looks like" performs multiracial democracy. "Blood and soil" evokes neo-Nazism, while "No Nazis, No KKK, No Fascist USA!" affiliates with long histories of struggle against fascism, racism, homophobia, and ableism. "Love trumps hate" echoes gay rights messaging and civil rights advocates' radical love. Based on signs, chants, speeches, and testimony, I interpret the collective act of embodied contestation by UTR's opponents as an instance of EC because counter-protestors confronted white supremacists with the dream of remaking American democracy on racially egalitarian terms. Interpreting these counter-protestors as anti-racist democratic practitioners adds substance to radical democracy.

Driven by concerns over "antifa," public discourse construed the question of counter-protestors' violence as a binary forced judgment rendered after-the-fact by spectators. This framing is misleading. First, decontextualizing August 12 minimizes white supremacy's threat to

democracy. Understanding the full sequence of events and the structural conditions that produced UTR reveals the pitfalls of addressing racism and anti-democratic violence through deliberation alone. Although Charlottesville *does* challenge ethico-political theories that abjure even limited violence in self-defense, the simplistic violence-versus-nonviolence framing that dominated public debate papers over structurally violent conditions that kindle spectacular violence like UTR. Second, the rational distance implicit in this framing is remarkably inapposite to the urgent, disorienting, physically dangerous situation counter-protestors navigated. In the context of anti-racist organizing, insisting on universal nonviolence demands others accept bodily harm or avoid confronting white supremacy. This disrespects the autonomy of racialized people organizing against racism and downplays the ethical aporias all anti-racist activists confront in undecidable moments of bodily confrontation with far-Right violence. Even restricting self-defense to non-white activists implies white activists erred in saving the lives of racialized demonstrators. Heyer's death shows that anyone who resists white supremacy can become a target of white supremacist violence and state neglect—even as the attacks on Long and Harris show that people of color are targets by default, simply for existing.

Although EC deliberately blurs boundaries between nonviolence and defensive violence, it does not require *abandoning* strategic or ethical commitments to nonviolence. I leave that open, viewing ethical commitments to nonviolence as supererogatory rather than obligatory. While EC includes proportionate violence used in self-defense or defense of others, it also encompasses nonviolent physical confrontations like occupations or blockades. For instance, Charlottesville's interfaith demonstrators maintained their personal and collective commitments to nonviolence while performing EC by peacefully blocking Emancipation Park's entrance—though, notably, principled proponents of nonviolence who survived August 12 caution against criticizing counter-protesters who defended themselves or others that day.¹³² Assembling unarmed bodies in inconvenient places while expressing peaceful intent through posture and song is classic nonviolent direct action, but it was also EC because activists' bodies were positioned to prevent the far-Right from assembling. Still, Rimel's analysis shows how even this nonviolent action became entangled with violence, as targets of neo-Nazi violence and objects of anti-fascist community defense. Even if their bodies had been cleared away through arrest, as they planned, their nonviolent action would have become entangled with state violence. In a purely nonviolent approach, undefended bodies confronting neo-fascist violence are exposed to death. Some may accept this risk, but rendering nonviolence mandatory strips its

radicalism by devaluing nonviolent activists' sacrifices and obscuring their vulnerability. While EC does not require inflicting violence, it does involve acting in contexts where multiple violences overlap and the boundaries between nonviolence and self-defense or community defense blend.

Blurring nonviolence and defensive violence counters binary violence/nonviolence distinctions that oversimplify the contexts of social movement action and wrongly attribute sole responsibility for violence to individual decision-makers, rather than structurally violent institutions or processes. From EC's *en media res* perspective, all options are marred by violence: the violence of silence and passivity, the violence of escaping while others are unable or unwilling to flee, the violence of relying on state violence to maintain order, the violence of self-defense or community defense, the violence white supremacists inflict on vulnerable bodies, and the structural violence of post-hoc judgments in the media or courtroom. *All* violence jeopardizes democracy by interrupting the prefiguration of nonviolent worlds, delaying their enactment. By de-centering the decision to perform or pointedly refuse to perform acts of defensive violence, EC emphasizes structural violence while highlighting the substantive values and aspirational futures that gather bodies in democratic or anti-democratic assembly.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing deliberation *and* conflict over Charlottesville's Confederate monuments, I identify Embodied Confrontation as a democratic counter-practice that remains viable amidst anti-democratic violence. It offers three resources for radical democratic praxis. First, EC recommends disrupting neo-fascist assemblies by embodying alternatives, helping explain activists' use of controversial tactics like community defense or no-platforming. "What are you going to do, not defend yourself? Let them march through town?" asked activist Emily Gorcenski.¹³³ Ignoring the far-Right only works if they are powerless. UTR was massive and high-profile. International and domestic far-Right groups and individuals flocked to Charlottesville, as did reporters and famous counter-protestors. Restaurants and bars closed or joined coordinated campaigns to refuse service. Packs of neo-fascists roved the relatively small town, threatening to swallow it, attacking bystanders outside dorms and libraries. UTR did not *allow* us to ignore them; they came to our doorsteps to bludgeon our students, our elders, and our neighbors. UVA alumnus Spencer and Albermarle County resident Kessler did this violence in our name; silence meant letting them speak for us. They sought to delegitimize and reverse our hard-won mostly-democratic decision. Doing nothing, in this context,

risked giving the impression that UTR had our approval or at least compliance. Whether or not activists defend themselves, EC holds that inclusive democratic communities cannot countenance neo-Nazi marching in force and unopposed.

A second resource is the transformation of consciousness. For me, August 12 compelled a visceral consciousness of white supremacy and bone-deep yearning for racial justice. The difference between allyship and solidarity—between the desire to help others and the conviction that one's own liberation is bound up with the liberation of others—became physically palpable. I realized that although I am white, I could be murdered by white supremacists. In my flesh, I felt that I would not be free until everyone is free. Interacting with police and trying to make sense of the harm inflicted on my neighbors allowed me to affectively internalize what I had previously only intellectually known: that the safety and freedom of white privilege are not just fragile but false, because this protection is not extended universally; and that without racial justice, democracy loses all meaning or simply cannot survive. However, even profound moments of individual revelation fall short of structural transformation. If whiteness can be undone in the crucible of interracial solidarity during collective action against white supremacy, that interruption is partial and fleeting. White privilege faltered; it did not disappear. The police declined my request for aid, rather than responding aggressively. Unlike others, I went unharmed. Still, this experience shows EC can elevate consciousness of white supremacy among whites on levels that study or discussion rarely touch. *I should have* already known, but EC enriched my comprehension of human beings' shared but uneven vulnerability. EC affectively augments anti-racist consciousness and democratic solidarity in ways that intellectual activities like deliberation cannot.

Third, EC offers an in-the-streets perspective for re-evaluating justifications of individual and collective self-defense at protests. The question of violence is irreducible to a straw-activist's choice to peacefully carry signs or punch Nazis. Binary violence/nonviolence distinctions wrongly assume "violence" has clear meaning and boundaries, and that violence is always avoidable or martyrdom sometimes obligatory. If "violence" encompasses more than episodic spectacles, then even "nonviolent" action is inescapably entangled in the world's violence. Counter-protestors acted from an embodied position within their opponents' violence, structural violence, and policing's state-sanctioned violence or malign neglect. Imposing nonviolence as a universal ethic or condition of legitimate activism scapegoats Long and Harris, effectively blaming them for the white supremacists' attacks they defended themselves against. EC weakens distinctions between nonviolence and self-defense, highlighting nonviolent action's breathtaking

courageousness while creating space for tactical pluralism, despite solemn awareness that even defensive violence undercuts nonviolent futures. Ultimately, the omnipresence of violence is a troubling sign that we are far from achieving deliberative democracy, radical democracy, or perhaps any kind of democracy at all.

NOTES

1. BRC reports, recordings, etc. were available at <http://www.charlottesville.org/departments-and-services/boards-and-commissions/blue-ribbon-commission-on-race-memorials-and-public-spaces> during deliberations and my initial research, but later removed.
2. Timothy Heaphy, "Final Report: Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events in Charlottesville, Virginia," Hunton & Williams, LLC (2017), previously (03/06/2018) <https://www.charlottesvilleindependentreview.com/>; now (11/14/2022) <https://www.policinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Charlottesville-Critical-Incident-Review-2017.pdf>.
3. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (Verso, 2021); Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Zone Books, 2015).
4. Simone Chambers, "Deliberative Democratic Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 6, no. 1(2003): 307–326.; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, "Deliberative democracy beyond process," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2(2002): 153–174.
5. Helene Landemore, "Why the many are smarter than the few and why it matters," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 8, no. 1 (2012); Dominique Leydet, "Which conception of political equality do deliberative mini-publics promote?" *European Journal of Political Theory* 18, no. 3 (2019): 349–370.
6. E.g. James Fishkin, Alice Siu, Larry Diamond, and Norman Bradburn, "Is deliberation an antidote to extreme partisan polarization? Reflections on "America in one room,"" *American Political Science Review* 115, no. 4 (2021): 1464–1481; Simon Niemeyer, Francesco Veri, John Dryzek, and André Bächtiger, "How deliberation happens: enabling deliberative reason." *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 1(2024): 345–362.
7. Stephen K. White and Evan Farr, "No-Saying in Habermas." *Political Theory* 40, no. 1(2012): 32–57; Molly Scudder, "Beyond Empathy: Strategies and Ideals of Democratic Deliberation," *Polity* 48, no. 4 (2016): 524–550; Rachel Wahl and Stephen K. White, "Deliberation, accountability, and legitimacy: A case study of police-community forums," *Polity* 49, no. 4 (2017): 489–517.
8. Carole Pateman, "Participatory democracy revisited," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 1 (2012): 7–19.
9. Deva Woodly, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements* (Oxford University Press, 2021).
10. Stephen K. White, *A Democratic Bearing: Admirable Citizens, Uneven Injustice, and Critical Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); White & Wahl, "Deliberation, accountability, and legitimacy"; Fishkin et. al. "Is deliberation an antidote to extreme partisan polarization?"

11. Lynn Sanders, "Against deliberation," *Political Theory* 25, no. 3 (1997): 347–376.
12. Diana Coole, "Experiencing discourse: Corporeal communicators and the embodiment of power," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9, no. 3(2007): 413–433; Diana Coole, "Rethinking agency: A phenomenological approach to embodiment and agentic capacities." *Political Studies* 53, no. 1(2005): 124–142.
13. Sharon Krause, "Bodies in action: Corporeal agency and democratic politics," *Political Theory* 39, no. 3 (2011): 307.
14. Chiara Bottici, "Bodies in plural: Towards an anarcha-feminist manifesto," *Thesis Eleven* 142, no. 1 (2017): 97.
15. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 18.
16. Kathy Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets* (2011), Rowman & Littlefield, 7.
17. Erin Pineda, *Seeing Like An Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (2021), Oxford University Press, 4.
18. Pineda, *Seeing Like An Activist*, 15.
19. Woodly, *Reckoning*.
20. Dylan Rodríguez, "Abolition as praxis of human being: A foreword," *Harv. L. Rev.* 132 (2018): 1575; Lia Haro and Romand Coles, "Reimagining fugitive democracy and transformative sanctuary with black frontline communities in the underground railroad," *Political Theory* 47, no. 5(2019): 646–673.
21. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2.
22. BRC Hearing 06/16/2016 [01:46:30 – 01:47:58]
23. Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin, "Deliberation Day," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2(2002): 129–152.
24. Ackerman and Fishkin, "Deliberation Day," 144.
25. Comments are public record; the names have been changed for privacy. Community Forum 07/27/2016 [00:04:55 – 00:08:19]
26. Community Forum 07/27/2016 [00:12:40 – 00:13:20]
27. BRC Meeting 06/16/2016 [00:14:54 – 00:15:17]
28. Archon Fung, "Continuous Institutional Innovation and the Pragmatic Conception of Democracy," *Polity* 44, no. 4(2012).
29. Community Forum 09/22/2016 [00:33:20 – 00:39:18]
30. Community Forum 09/22/2016 [00:12:20 – 00:15:15]
31. Community Forum 09/22/2016 [00:41:22 – 00:44:23]
32. Community Forum 09/22/2016 [01:06:30 – 01:11:00]
33. Community Forum 09/22/2016 [00:18:10 – 00:21:00]
34. James Robert Saunders and Renae Nadine Shackelford, *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia: An Oral History of Vinegar Hill* (McFarland & Company, 2005).
35. Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 52.

36. Chris Suarez, "Affordable housing action urged; City plans to release report on Feb. 20," *The Daily Progress*, February 6, 2018, http://www.dailyprogress.com/affordable-housing-action-urged/article_a9a82bd0-7b9d-5d40-9d77-a5b4e5595449.html.
37. Chris Suarez, "Bellamy petition rejected: Judge rules Kessler, under Va. law, had too few signatures," *The Daily Progress*, March 9, 2017, https://dailyprogress.com/bellamy-petition-rejected/article_3b6178cc-df27-5474-8dd9-496214eb08e2.html.
38. Graeme Wood, "His Kampf," *The Atlantic*, June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/06/his-kampf/524505/>
39. Lois Beckett, "How Richard Spencer's home town weathered a neo-Nazi 'troll storm,'" *The Guardian*, February 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/05/richard-spencer-whitefish-neo-nazi-march>; Emily Pothast, "I Talked to the Alt-Right So You Don't Have to," *Medium*, August 14, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190607225152/https://medium.com/form-and-resonance/i-studied-the-alt-right-so-you-dont-have-to-e123aa6a3d20>.
40. Leydet, "Which conception of political equality do deliberative mini-publics promote?"
41. Allyson Waller, "Charlottesville Can Remove Confederate Statues, High Court Rules," *New York Times*, April 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/us/charlottesville-confederate-statues.html>
42. What UVA Students Saw in Charlottesville," *New York Times*, August 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/13/opinion/university-virginia-uva-protests-charlottesville.html>.
43. Amy Goodman, "Cornel West & Rev. Traci Blackmon: Clergy in Charlottesville Were Trapped by Torch-Wielding Nazis," *Democracy Now!* (2017) https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/14/cornel_west_rev_toni_blackmon_clergy; Dahlia Lithwick, "Yes, What About the 'Alt-Left'? What the counter-protesters Trump despises were actually doing in Charlottesville last weekend," *Slate*, August 16, 2017, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2017/08/what-the-alt-left-was-actually-doing-in-charlottesville.html>.
44. Michael Bragg, "UVA students who faced torch-bearers demand action on safety, culture: Witnesses irked by Trump's comments on rally," *The Daily Progress*, August 20, 2017, https://dailyprogress.com/uva-students-who-faced-torch-bearers-demand-action-on-safety-culture/article_7f18c074-f3bd-5673-b212-12485cceb5f5.html; Mary Wood, "Standing Up for Charlottesville," University of Virginia Law School, August 16, 2017, <https://www.law.virginia.edu/news/201708/standing-charlottesville>.
45. Bragg, "UVA students who faced torch-bearers demand action."
46. Wood, "Standing Up for Charlottesville."
47. Logan Rimel, "My 'Nonviolent' Stance Was Met With Heavily Armed Men," *Radical Discipleship Blog* August 23, 2017, <https://radicaldiscipleship.net/2017/08/23/my-nonviolent-stance-was-met-with-heavily-armed-men/>.

48. Goodman, "Clergy in Charlottesville Were Trapped by Torch-Wielding Nazis."
49. Lithwick, "What About the 'Alt-Left'?"
50. Lithwick, "What About the 'Alt-Left'?"
51. Jason Wilson, "I was in Charlottesville. Trump was wrong about violence on the left," *The Guardian*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/aug/16/charlottesville-violence-right-left-trump>.
52. Ned Oliver, K. Burnell Evans, Vanessa Remmers, and Robert Zullo, "How the disaster in Charlottesville unfolded, as told by the people who were there," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 18, 2017, http://www.richmond.com/news/virginia/how-the-disaster-in-charlottesville-unfolded-as-told-by-the/article_34838b2c-df44-5018-92e3-14e983ff00ee.html.
53. Oliver et. al, "How the disaster in Charlottesville unfolded."
54. Heaphy, "Final Report: Independent Review of the 2017 Protest Events," xi-xii, 10-12, 17-19, 55, 71.
55. Heaphy, "Final Report," 130-131, 160.
56. Heaphy, "Final Report," 31-33, 51-58, 63; 71-72, 96-97, 111, 124.
57. Heaphy, "Final Report," 12-14, 61-63, 82-84.
58. Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, & Race in US Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
59. James, *Resisting State Violence*, 5.
60. James, *Resisting State Violence*, 5 & 27-30.
61. James, *Resisting State Violence*, 18-19.
62. James, *Resisting State Violence*, 19-20.
63. Yesha Callahan, "How Corey Long Fought White Supremacy with Fire," *The Root*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.theroot.com/interview-how-corey-long-fought-white-supremacy-with-f-1797831277>.
64. Timothy Bella, "Every Day Is August 12 in Charlottesville," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/08/every-day-is-august-12-in-charlottesville/567176/>.
65. Lauren Berg, "Corey Long convicted of disorderly conduct, sentenced to 20 days," *The Daily Progress*, January 10, 2018, https://dailyprogress.com/news/local/corey-long-drops-appeal-of-rally-related-disorderly-conduct-conviction/article_2c7f1bb0-1529-11e9-a6d8-ebed47c50707.html.
66. Emily Shugerman, "DeAndre Harris: Black man beaten at Charlottesville rally cleared of assaulting white supremacist," *The Independent*, March 16, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/deandre-harris-charlottesville-counter-protester-white-supremacist-rally-acquitted-assault-charges-a8260241.html>; Jenny Jarvie, "A video of his beating by white nationalists in Charlottesville went viral. Now he is among those facing arrest," *Los Angeles Times*, October 11, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-charlottesville-deandre-harris-attack-20171011-story.html>; Ian Shapira, "The parking garage beating lasted 10 seconds. DeAndre Harris still lives with the damage," *The Washington*

- Post*, September 16, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-parking-garage-beating lasted-10-seconds-deandre-harris-still-lives-with-the-damage/2019/09/16/ca6daa48-cfbf-11e9-87fa-8501a456c003_story.html.
67. Jarvie, "A video of his beating in Charlottesville went viral"; Shapira, "The parking garage beating lasted 10 seconds."
 68. Jarvie, "A video of his beating in Charlottesville went viral."
 69. Jarvie, "A video of his beating in Charlottesville went viral."
 70. Shugerman, "DeAndre Harris: Black man beaten at Charlottesville rally"; Shapira, "The parking garage beating lasted 10 seconds."
 71. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 2-3, 23-24, 62, 117-118, 142, 144.
 72. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*.
 73. Catharine MacKinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech." *Harv. CR-CLL Rev.* 20, no. 1(1985), 12.
 74. MacKinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech," 14.
 75. Chris J. Cuomo, "War is not just an event: Reflections on the significance of everyday violence," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4(1996): 31.
 76. Cuomo, "War is not just an event," 31-33.
 77. J. Ann Tickner, "You Just Don't Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists," *International Studies Quarterly* 41 (1997): 624.
 78. Verónica Zebadúa-Yáñez and Rose Owen, "Sexualized violence and feminist counterviolence," *Contemporary Political Theory* 22(2023): 1; Rose Owen, "A World without Men: Valerie Solanas and the Feminist Uses of Violence," *New Political Science* 44, no. 1(2022): 16.
 79. Verónica Zebadúa-Yáñez, "¡Te prefiero violenta que violada y muerta! Notes on feminist violence," *Contemporary Political Theory* 22 (2023): 552-583.
 80. Rose Owen, "'A New Kind of Death': Rape, Sex, and Pornography as Violence in Andrea Dworkin's Thought," *Political Theory* 52, no. 5 (2024): 754-781.
 81. Owen, "A New Kind of Death," 19-24.
 82. Owen, "A World without Men," 9 & 4-6.
 83. Owen, "A World without Men," 2 & 10.
 84. Chiara Bottici, "Anarchafeminism: Towards an ontology of the transindividual," *Public Seminar* (2019) <https://publicseminar.org/2019/12/anarchafeminism/>; Paul Raekstad, "Revolutionary practice and prefigurative politics: A clarification and defense," *Constellations* 25(3)(2018): 359-372.
 85. Valrie Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (AK Press, 2013), 66-67.
 86. Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, 23-26, 32, 37, 63.
 87. Solanas, *The S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, 64.
 88. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, 41-44.
 89. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, 55.

90. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, Chapter 2.
91. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, 139.
92. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, 116.
93. Ferguson, *Emma Goldman: Political Thinking in the Streets*, 90.
94. Timothy Huzar and Clare Woodford (Eds.), *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence* (Fordham University Press, 2021), 7–23.
95. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004), xii–xiii, xvii–xix.
96. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22–24, 28.
97. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 20 & 30–33.
98. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 134–135, 137–140; Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (Columbia University Press, 2012).
99. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 9.
100. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 9.
101. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 7–8.
102. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 8.
103. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 135–136, 178, 125.
104. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 105–108.
105. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 101.
106. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 100.
107. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 7–10.
108. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 136–138.
109. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 3–5, 117–188.
110. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 118.
111. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 117.
112. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 11.
113. Jarvie, “A video of his beating in Charlottesville went viral.”
114. Juliet Hooker, “Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of US Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair,” *Political Theory* 44, no. 4(2016): 448–469.
115. Lisa Miller, “Racialized State Failure and the Violent Death of Michael Brown,” *Theory & Event* 17, no. 3 (2014).
116. Hooker, “Black Lives Matter.”
117. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 78–83.
118. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 82.
119. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 83.
120. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 8–9 & 11.
121. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (Verso, 2005), 8.
122. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 9.
123. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 57, 76–77, 109, 141.

124. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 98, 101.
125. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 94, 59, 100, & 146.
126. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Open Road Integrated Media, 2015).
127. Bonnie Honig, "How to do things with Inclination: Antigones, with Cavarero," in *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence* (Fordham University Press, 2021), 75.
128. Honig, "How to do things with Inclination," 63.
129. Honig, "How to do things with Inclination," 68.
130. Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*.
131. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*; James, *Resisting State Violence*.
132. Rimel, "My 'Nonviolent' Stance Was Met..."; Goodman, "Clergy in Charlottesville Were Trapped by Torch-Wielding Nazis"; Lithwick, "What About the 'Alt-Left'?"
133. Oliver et. al, "How the disaster in Charlottesville unfolded."