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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Response to Critics

Ali Aslam[1], Joel Schlosser[2] and David McIvor[3]

[1]Department of Politics, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, USA; [2]Department of Political Science, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, PA, USA and [3]Department of Political Science, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA
Corresponding author: Ali Aslam; Email: aaslam@mtholyoke.edu

We are deeply gratified by the constructive and generous engagement with our book. We are especially moved to be in dialogue and company with this group of scholars, whose work has helped us develop and push our own thinking. In our response, we want to address some of the questions and provocations offered in the individual essays.

To begin, our goal was to write a romance. By this, we mean that we chose the genre of romance to carry our argument for democracy in a moment of seemingly incessant crises and doubts in and about the forms of democracy that are prevalent today. Although we do not explicitly identify this genre in the book, it informs our somewhat playful, suggestive, and purposefully unconventional approach to writing about democracy. Hence, our emphasis on myth, rituals, the collective unconscious, morphic fields, and—ultimately—our methodological choice of practicing what we refer to as visionary political theory. One of our key goals was to expand the archive beyond the one that democratic theorists typically invoke, by enlarging our imagination of democratic practices beyond the "West" and the modern timeline that sees Philadelphia and Paris as steps along the inevitable march to democracy's state today.

Every approach has its limits, so we are grateful to our reviewers for pointing some of these out. First, William Connolly illuminates a limitation of romancing democracy in his emphasis on bumpy temporalities and turbulence in political imaginaries. These forms of disorder challenge the assumption of smooth, progressive, or linear developments that might be implied by terms like the collective unconscious, species resonance, and, as we argue following Sheldon Wolin, the "recurrent aspiration" for democratic power in the life of the human species. We believe that the myth of *Earthborn Democracy* (EBD) can include less pacific stories and archetypes, like the Windigo story. As retold by Robin Wall Kimmerer in her *Braiding Sweetgrass*, the Windigo represents the ever-present possibility of greed and hunger coming to corrupt and overtake patterns of mutuality and cooperation in a political community. Such examples in the long archive of democratic practice are legion and resonant very powerfully today.

And yet (and too often in our estimation), the emphasis on the frailties of democratic forms of life crowds out the abundance of strategies, possibilities, and stories of democratic survival and thriving. In the book, we seek to provide a structure of

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encouragement for democratic experimentation and collective agency through historical and contemporary examples of just such efforts. The final chapter is meant to constellate these examples for the reader and leave them with a sense of being surrounded by democratic abundance. Myth provides a framework that helps us comprehend temporally and geographically dispersed democratic practices. Myth also affords a vantage point for seeing these examples as rituals—as elements in an unfolding story that holds together democratic subjects and aspirations across time and space.

No doubt there is messiness and bumpiness across these examples. Connolly pushes us to have a more sophisticated understanding and nuanced approach to time. We do think our theory is capacious enough to include the kind of suggestions Connolly offers. In particular, our discussion of ritual and *kairotic* time refers to a period of significant transformation that is distinguished from mundane, chronological time. That said, our choice to pitch our argument in the register of romance emphasizes continuity despite disruption in order to strengthen the confidence and resolve for democratic action. We are drowning in defeatism and doubt about our democratic capacities. This book attempts to surface the ground(ed experiments) from which to act.

On the topic of democratic experimentation, we appreciate Vicki Hsueh's questions and attention to how the book cultivates what Kevin Quashie refers to as a "sense of aliveness": an affirmative enactment of another way of being and world-making. We appreciate the language of aliveness since it includes more than just pleasure; aliveness must also include the losses, grief, and conflict that comprise individual and collective identity. On the question of the size and scale of democratic experimentation, we emphasize the inherent unpredictability of action, which implies that we can never know the scope and scale any action can attain. Additionally, we believe that the question of scale is the covert language of the state and is frequently summoned in order to dismiss democratic experiments on the basis of their local or smaller size. For us, size is less important than influence. The fact that Cooperation Jackson has inspired similar efforts in Tulsa, OK, and Humboldt, CA, just as it was inspired by the example of People's Assemblies in the Global South, is a better metric than size. Again, the framework and language of myth allow us to recognize these examples as part of a much larger story of democratic aspiration and power in progress.

Building off this last point on myth, the emphasis is less on invention than attunement to what is already present and ongoing. Hsueh asks us for more details about the practices of attunement. Responsiveness and relational, attentive care are central to our understanding of attunement. There is more work to be done on attunement to address Hsueh's questions about better and worse forms. For our part, we attempt to model a theory of attunement in our engagement with Indigenous authors and stories. Because we are wary of reproducing a longstanding pattern of romanticizing and appropriating Indigenous voices, in the book, our attunement involves letting these authors speak directly when possible and positioning ourselves as attentive listeners.

And while we do not emphasize the evaluative dimension so much as the relationship between attunement and emergence, our goal is to show the relationship between listening and creativity. This duality is also reflected in our understanding of being earthborn(e), a condition of interdependence and natality that is common to all earthly creatures.

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Attunement and emergence also figure in our writing process. Our decision to coauthor led us to commit to a voice and perspective that none of us could come to on our own. The sum swiftly exceeded the parts. Our collaborative process involved the twinned labor of attunement and emergence, listening to each other and valuing each of our contributions while not being tied to the logic of possession. Coauthorship also emerged only after more than a decade of shared study, during which time we practiced attunement, careful listening, and learned where each of us was coming from, building up friendship and professional relationships rooted in mutual respect and love.

Despite our commitments to mutual respect for all the earthborn(e), human and nonhuman, we admit, in response to Katherine Young's criticism, to a lingering anthropocentrism in our composition and thinking. Many, if not all, of the stories in *Earthborn Democracy*, we tell from the perspectives of human communities. The literature we draw upon from democratic and political theory also largely excludes nonhuman perspectives. We also concede Young's point about the cruelty toward animals displayed in examples like the Harvard rats study and Joel Salatin's Polyface Farms, where cows and other animals are raised for the purpose of human consumption.

We do not mean to claim nature to be inherently democratic. As Young rightly points out, domination, predation, and violence are just as much a part of nonhuman worlds as they are in human societies; however, we claim in the book that the story of democracy is not an exclusively human one. For instance, our discussion of Leanne Simpson's and Robin Wall Kimmerer's work suggests how careful attention to the creative agency and mutualism within the more-than-human world can educate and inspire a less anthropocentric democratic politics. Kimmerer's suggestion that we think of our political membership and belonging in terms of bioregions, such as Maple or Salmon Nation, opens the door to seeing mutualistic relations across species barriers. This is not the same as Marcuse's utopian image of nature as nonviolent reciprocal relations. Instead, it is an embrace of the messiness of democratic life, which a less anthropocentric perspective on democracy reveals.

We understand the archetypes as chthonic, or earthly realities; they are not exclusively human but are forms of action observable in many species. Leanne Simpson's example of flight, as embodied in the retreat of the eels, offers a potent reminder that freedom is an earthly aspiration, not one that exists only within the human species. While not a cure for anthropocentrism, we see the earthliness of archetypes as a check against its hubris. While we recognize the strong associations among myth, ritual, and animal sacrifice, we reject this as a necessary connection. Contra Horkheimer and Adorno, who were deeply conflicted about both myth and Enlightenment, but could not articulate a position outside of myth and Enlightenment for their own argument, we insist that we cannot choose to live outside myth. There is no choice. We always live in myth, whether or not we are conscious of it as such.

David Schlosberg raises a concern about whether our emphasis on storytelling downplays or ignores arrangements of economic and political power that shape and influence the possibility set for democratic resistance in ways we do not fully acknowledge. In other words, Schlosberg prompts us to ask: are these democratic rituals and myths so many impotent and evanescent flashes in a world structured by the medium of economic power and machinations of powerful fossil fuel corporations, financial institutions, and technology companies, as well as the governments with which they

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are entangled? It is true that we do not directly provide a solution to problems associated with concentrated power. We do, however, acknowledge how these concentrations have intensified democratic crises and also weakened identification with democracy as defined by formal institutions and procedures since those institutions and procedures have been hollowed out from the inside. We see conscious myth-making as a way to organize otherwise disparate democratic practices—and to ritualize them in the process—such that they can act in concert, building power in the process. Nevertheless, we find that an overemphasis on these concentrations of power can generate a static image of impasse that is belied by all of the ongoing democratic experimentation that we try to lift in *Earthborn Democracy*.

In his own writing, Schlosberg lifts up many examples that contradict and challenge the static image of power and powerlessness that often undergirds a counsel of realism. The examples that Schlosberg mentions in his response are, of course, as real as anything. For us, the value of myth is how it holds together and, in doing so, amplifies these examples: allowing us to see them as blossoms on the same rhizome. An archetypal theory of politics strengthens the continuity across the many examples of—in our language, politicality—that Schlosberg writes about in his response and broader scholarship.

From our perspective, the work of democratic politics is both practical experimentation and incessant storytelling, a role in which we see Schlosberg as an exemplar. Like him, we believe that stories are more powerful than the concentrations of power that are celebrated in the larger society dominated by these institutions, if unevenly and imperfectly. To believe otherwise is a measure of how successful the stories of modern capitalism—in which money rules all—have become.

These four critics help us to recognize dimensions of the argument in *EBD* that we had missed; we take this as suggesting the expansiveness of *Earthborn Democracy* as a paradigm or approach to democratic theory. We both urgently need examples of democratic experimentation, as Schlosberg shows; at the same time, we require stories that can link and amplify these examples for the benefit of all the earthborn(e). Moreover, these stories themselves can become more differentiated and self-conscious about their assumptions. Although we position ourselves as self-conscious myth makers as authors of *EBD*, we claim no exclusive authority over the myth. As Anne Norton puts it: "Here is something—a story, an image—make of it what you will." So many are already making something of this story—and have for the history of the human species. Writing *EBD*, we hoped to share this story even more broadly while also drawing out the urgency of its message, both for us and for the future.

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