

# **A Democratic Theory of Life**

## **Living Democracy with Black Lives Matter**

*Hans Asenbaum, in collaboration with Reece Chenault, Christopher Harris, Akram Hassan, Curtis Hierro, Stephen Houldsworth, Brandon Mack, Shauntrice Martin, Chivona Newsome, Kayla Reed, Tony Rice, Shevone Torres, and Terry J. Wilson II*

*Abstract:* In response to its current crisis, scholars call for the revitalisation of democracy through democratic innovations. While they make ample use of life metaphors describing democracy as a living organism, no comprehensive understanding of ‘life’ has been established within democratic theory. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement articulates the urgency of refocusing on life and its meaning through radical democratic practice. This article employs a grounded theory approach, enriched with participatory methods, to develop a radical democratic concept of life in conversation with BLM. It conceptualises life as the existence of a perspective that constantly transforms through its fundamental interconnectedness. Building on this concept, the article outlines four principles of a living democracy that go beyond the revitalisation discourse. A living democracy (1) safeguards the existence of all humans and nonhumans, (2) nurtures a diversity of perspectives, (3) fosters social and planetary connectivity, and (4) enables self- and collective transformation.

*Keywords:* Black Lives Matter, democratic innovations, democratic theory, grounded theory, life, participatory methods



Democracy, today, is in a dire state. This is what most democratic theorists and researchers agree on. In the biography, *Democracy: A Life*, Paul Cartledge (2016: 275) sees ‘democracy in the sense of popular power . . . on a life-support machine’. Similarly, in *The Life and Death of Democracy*, John Keane (2009: xxxiii) fears that democracy could ‘quietly take its own life in an act of “democide”’. While the diagnosis of the crisis of democracy may be less of a revelation as it contributes to a long established line of critique (Crozier et al. 1975; Ercan and Gagnon 2014), what is interesting here is that both accounts of democracy depict their subject in lively terms. What their implicit normative claim appears to be is that democracy should *live*.

The advancement of democracy’s vitality is also central to the calls for democratic reform in response to this crisis. Democratic innovations such as citizens’ assemblies, which bring together randomly selected citizens to develop policy proposals, or participatory budgets, which invite citizens to decide on governmental spending, are proposed to *revitalise* democracy. James Fishkin (2018) advocates deliberative polls to ‘revitalise politics’ and Brigitte Geissel (2022) suggests an array of democratic innovations for ‘thriving democracies’. Graham Smith, finally, claims that ‘a strategy of embedding democratic innovations promises one way to revitalise politics’ (Smith 2009b: 263).

What the discourse on the revitalisation of democracy through democratic innovations misjudges, however, is the gravity of the current crises. From the perspective of the traditional political sciences this discourse is rooted in, the problem is institutional design. While democracy scholars lose themselves in endless debates about random selection stratification and facilitation techniques, the planet is quite literally on fire. From bushfires to water shortages, from the human-made COVID-19 pandemic to right-wing extremism and erupting wars, it appears that democracy scholars have lost sight of the bigger picture.

Despite this myopia, it is exactly their rhetoric of life, of revitalised and thriving democracies, that leads the way out of this crisis. Democracy, indeed, needs to live. We need to take this claim seriously, however, and substantiate hollow metaphors by developing a profound sensitivity for and deep understanding of a living democracy.

Rather than in expert analysis of institutional design, I believe that answers can be found in the lived experiences of radical democratic practice, and in particular, in democratic contestations around life. The mass mobilisation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement<sup>1</sup> has laid bare the fact that life is a central concern of democracy. A BLM supporter tweets: ‘This is the Revolution to Breathe. For the right to breathe: breath=life’.<sup>2</sup> This mass movement for life was amplified in response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic. Life, as a subject of public contention, crystallises at the intersection of the killing of Black and Brown people, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the looming climate disaster. In the words of one BLM supporter on Twitter: “‘I can’t breathe’”, George Floyd’s last words. “‘I can’t breathe’”, every Covid patient’s last words. “‘I can’t breathe’”, Mother Earth’s decades old cry. So now we are down to it. The essence of life’.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will delve into the meaning of life together with BLM activists. The purpose of this undertaking is twofold: first, to generate a concept of life that is rooted in the lived experiences of radical democratic practice, and second, to develop a normative ideal of a living democracy. When BLM activists say: ‘democracy can’t breathe’,<sup>4</sup> their language not only diagnoses a crisis of democracy but goes further to describe democracy as a living organism. So what does it mean for democracy to be alive, or in other words: What does a living democracy look like? By generating a concept of life rooted in the lived experiences of radical democratic practice, I will contribute to the debate on revitalising democracy. Rather than tinkering with reform, as we will see, the current crises call for profound economic, social, and environmental transformations.

The goal of infusing democratic theory with lived experiences of radical democratic practice calls for methodological sensibility. Instead of embarking upon the traditional route of normative theorising by studying academic literature, this article develops normative theory inductively, through an interactive conversation with BLM. What I call ‘democratic theorizing’ (Asenbaum 2022), builds on Indigenous, Black, feminist, and decolonial approaches to activist theorising that centre on marginalised lived experiences (Ackerly et al. 2021; Brettschneider 2007; Nwakanma 2022). Democratic theorising appears as particularly suitable for research not *on* but rather *with* BLM, as ‘the movement insists on theorizing and

practicing politics “from the margins to center”, attempting to foreground the needs of those most reviled and written off in dominant society’ (Woodly 2022: 112).

Through a participatory grounded theory-driven inquiry, the article develops a democratic theory of life. It needs to be emphasised that the purpose of this article is not the *analysis* of BLM content; rather the purpose is the co-creation of *normative theory* in conversation with BLM. I will first outline the methodological approach and then present the theory of life that is generated through this theorising process. The article will, finally, contribute to the debate on revitalising democracy by introducing four elements of a living democracy. A living democracy (1) safeguards the existence of all humans and nonhumans, (2) nurtures a diversity of perspectives, (3) fosters social and planetary connectivity, and (4) enables self- and collective transformation.

### **Generating Normative Theory Through Empirical Engagement**

Over the past few centuries, academic normative theory, and in particular radical democratic thinking, has led sophisticated debates about inclusion and equality. Spearheaded by feminist democratic theorists, debates focused on structural exclusions and gendered inequalities (Young 2000). This body of work is today deepened by democratic theory rooted in queer (Asenbaum 2023a ch. 4; Lloyd 2005), disability (Clifford 2012), and intersectionality studies (Wojciechowska 2019). Despite an occasional discussion of race (Mansbridge 1999), these debates have yet to devote their full attention to the particular perspectives of those marginalised because of their racialised identity (Rogers and Turner 2021).

In response to the problem of exclusion of particular perspectives, normative democratic theorists have called for the principles of equality and inclusion to be applied in every sphere of life. Carole Pateman (1989: 222) famously contended that ‘democratic ideals and politics have to be put into practice in the kitchen, the nursery and the bedroom’. Participatory democrats call for a democratisation of the work environment, including educational facilities. It is surprising, then, that democratic principles have, to date, not been

applied to academia, to the research process and, in particular, to the development of democratic theory.

This omission is even more surprising given that democratic theorists have repeatedly pointed to the inconsistency between democratic principles and the highly exclusive process of academic theorising. James Bohman (1999: 474) calls for a form of social inquiry that ‘addresses the subjects of inquiry as equal reflective participants’. More recently, Albert Dzur (2019: 146) advocates the need ‘to practice democratic theory as a catalytic rather than traditionally academic discipline – meaning that research is done with and for the people being studied’.

This emphatic call for applying democratic principles to the theorising process has, however, remained inconsequential. This is despite decades of activist theorising advanced through feminist, decolonial, Indigenous, and intersectional perspectives. Through an intersectional lens, Adaugo Pamela Nwakanma (2022), for example, proposes Black feminist theorising to centre on the lived experience of marginalisation. Deva Woodly’s study of BLM (2022) puts forward radical Black feminist pragmatism both as the substantive philosophy and the method of inquiry of the movement. Decolonial scholars stress the need for participatory and inductive ways of theorising that disrupt established epistemologies (Thambiathan and Kinsella 2021). And activist research highlights the role of social movements in collaborating with academic researchers to produce normative theory (Gobby 2019). Democratic theorists have, to date, hardly taken notice of these developments, which are driven by arguments that so deeply resonate with their own.

Building on this work, I introduce ‘democratic theorizing’, a method I have detailed elsewhere (Asenbaum 2022). This method repurposes grounded theory for the production of normative, instead of analytical, theory and infuses it with participatory research techniques. Democratic theorising builds on recent work on grounded normative theory, an agenda of developing normative theory through empirical engagement (Ackerly et al. 2021; Johnson 2022). Grounded normative theory argues that much of academic democratic theory is empirically driven and part of a movement towards democratisation. At the same time, activists produce normative theory in their own political debates and through their prefigurative politics (Wathne 2023). The line between activist and

academic theorising is, hence, always blurry. Academic normative theorists are by nature activists and activists are by nature normative theorists. What the present methodological approach offers is a concrete framework for collaboration between academic and activist theorists.

The approach begins with decolonial versions of the grounded theory method (Redman-McLaren and Mills 2015). The grounded theory method generates theory through an empirical engagement with data by abductively cycling between data collection and analysis, so that each new round of data collection is informed by previous insights. This process continues until saturation of the emerging theory is achieved. Originally developed as a method of *empirical analysis* (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I will employ the grounded theory method for developing *normative theory*. This purpose is ideally aligned with decolonial grounded theory, which is explicitly committed to the normative goal of societal transformation. Decolonial scholars use grounded theory as a tool for decolonisation, by amplifying the voices of Indigenous and marginalised people (see Tuhiwai Smith 1999). As a result, ‘Indigenous grounded theory inquiry necessarily becomes disruptive . . . and radically democratic’ (Denzin 2007: 460).

For engaging in democratic theorising, an explication and ongoing active reflection of the positionality of the professional lead researcher(s) is key. Professional researchers need to cultivate a critical awareness of their own privileges, histories, and societal embeddedness through continuous interrogation and contemplation. In practical terms, I kept a personal journal to reflect on my own biographical background, privileges, and vulnerabilities throughout the research process. Moreover, I introduced myself to each research participant with a personal positionality statement.

I am a gay, white, man, born into a middle-class family in Vienna, Austria, with both Jewish and Catholic roots. I am an ally of the BLM Movement and have closely followed the development of the movement from Europe. I realise that my life experiences and perspectives differ in many regards from those of the participants who contributed to this project. Allyship across national, cultural, and racial boundaries often comes along with painful realisations (Luttrell 2019). Elsewhere I wrote: ‘Positioning ourselves as allies may entail discovering our complicity. A

painful look at the world is a first step towards rebuilding it' (Asenbaum 2022: 9).

Most of the Jewish part of my family was persecuted and murdered by the Nazi regime in Austria. My half-Jewish grandparents, who passed as non-Jews, served in the resistance and sabotaged the Nazi regime from within. Both my Jewish heritage and my gay sexual identity have exposed me to exclusion, marginalisation, and oppression. The combination of these experiences with my whiteness, masculinity, and stable economic background positions me at the intersection between privilege and oppression. It is this intersection that shapes the normative direction of my work and I use my research activity as one way of reflecting on my white, masculine privileges (Asenbaum 2023b). As many of the participants I spoke to defined their participation in this project as part of their activism for Black lives, I see this text, and my academic work more generally, as part of a progressive movement for racial justice and radical democracy.

Guided by the principles of decolonial grounded theory, infused with elements of participatory research, the theorising process of this project consists of three phases. The first phase focuses on social media analysis. Although current approaches to grounded theory allow for the employment of academic sources (Thornberg 2012), the literature review was postponed, so as to allow for an open-minded engagement with the field. In total 323 social media posts with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter were collected: 199 from Twitter and 124 from Instagram. These two platforms were selected because of the central role they played in the movement (Ransby 2018: 102) and because they provide a multimodal combination of text-based and visual-based media. Each post was coded with the help of the qualitative research software NVivo before the next was collected. Posts were collected over a period of time spanning the date of George Floyd's death on May 25, 2020 to April 26, 2021. On Twitter, posts were collected that either contained the words 'life' (or related terms, e.g., 'living') and 'democracy' (or related terms). The process of coding was accompanied by memo writing to document first insights.

In the second phase, qualitative online interviews and participatory analysis sessions with BLM activists and supporters were conducted. To locate twelve participants, open invitations were posted on social media, and a public project website was set up with an

open invitation to contribute to the project.<sup>5</sup> Various groups which are part of the movement were contacted directly. Participants contributed to the project without financial remuneration and understood their participation as part of their activism. They appreciated the opportunity for their political views to be carried into academic debates. Special care was taken to ensure an ongoing, caring, and non-exploitative relationship, inviting participants to contribute on their own terms as much or little as they saw fit (Bussu et al. 2020).

Participants include activists from local chapters of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, Dream Defenders, the Black Youth Project 100, the Organization for Black Struggle, Action St. Louis, and the Movement for Black Lives. They identify as Black, Latin American, and white; straight, gay, lesbian, trans, and queer; community organisers, academics, and working poor. They are located across the United States, including New York, New Jersey, Florida, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Texas, Oregon, and Idaho. They include national movement leaders, US congressional candidates, local activists, and supporters. In accordance with the democratic principle of inclusion that guides this project, and its methodological aim of normative theorising rather than of empirical analysis, no one who expressed an interest in participating was excluded. Following grounded theory principles, each interview was transcribed and coded before conducting the next. Through constant comparison, core categories emerged and consolidated. Both interviewing and social media analysis were continued until no new categories emerged and a state of saturation was reached, which explains the numbers of interviews and social media posts collected (Day 2007).

Online interviews were video recorded so that participants' body language and tone of voice could feed into the interpretation. The semi-structured interviews consisted of several questions regarding the participants' engagement in the movement and their personal understanding of the concepts of life and democracy. Interviews were held in a conversational manner to counter interview hierarchies. The process provided several opportunities for participant feedback. During the interviews, interpretations of what participants had said were summarised verbally to give participants an opportunity to correct them. After each interview, the complete interview transcript was sent to participants along with a one-page summary, asking for corrections and additions.

In addition to the interviews, seven participatory analysis sessions with participants were conducted. In each session a distinct set of social media posts was interpreted by participants, and their interpretations were fed into the coding process. During this phase, the process was enriched with non-academic sources regarding the movement, including journalistic and activist texts and YouTube documentaries. I kept a personal diary in which I documented insights and personal thoughts on each of these items. Moreover, a series of conversations was held with democratic practitioners, public servants, filmmakers, community organisers, PhD students, and scholars, who responded to the open call for participation via the project website. The phase was concluded with an online focus group that brought participants from previous interviews together. The focus group reflected on the categories that had come to light and invited corrections.

The final phase focused on reviewing the literature on BLM and existing notions of ‘life’ as they have appeared so far within democratic theory. Paper drafts were shared with participants, asking for a final round of feedback. Finally, journal proofs were shared and authorship discussed.

## **A Grounded Theory of Life**

What is life? When asked this question, the first reaction of many BLM activists was silence. Silence is not nothing. It is a response. In this case, it testifies to the complexity of the phenomenon under question. Shevone Torres, an activist of BLM New Jersey, a single mother, who lives, in her own words, ‘well below the poverty line’, was quick to respond:

Life is experience. Life is hardship. Life is confusion. And to be honest, in my opinion, life is indescribable. There are no words ever created to describe what life really is. Life is evolving. Life is interchangeable. I believe life is connecting. . . . Life is a feeling. It’s not just experiences. It’s the feeling, it’s the smells, it’s the memories. It’s good or bad, however it comes. It’s what makes you you and what connects you to everybody else on the planet.<sup>6</sup>

Torres’s answer is as beautiful as it is wise. Life is beyond comprehension because we can never attain the necessary distance from it

required to scrutinise and fully understand it. We are always entangled in life. Because of its complexity and multilayered character, there is no one valid definition of life. Life can only be understood in its varied nature by exploring its multiple components. Despite the evident challenges of articulating life, together with my conversation partners from BLM I will attempt to develop an understanding of what life is – in order to repurpose its transformative capacities for democratic theory.

Through democratic theorising with BLM, four concepts of life emerged: (1) Life is existence. (2) Life is perspective. (3) Life is connection. (4) Life is transformation.

Each of these four concepts may stand alone, and in so doing express life's multiplicity. Considered together, however, they generate a deeper understanding of life. Before elaborating upon each of them individually in the sections below, I will propose this comprehensive concept.

At its core, life is pure existence – a presence whose source is unspeakable, even unknowable. This existence manifests itself in an individual perspective. As humans, we come into being as corporeal creatures. Located in a specific physical and societal context – a country, a family, a class – we each look at the world in a particular way. We always perceive the world through our bodily senses and our socialised minds. This perception is shaped by our particular intersection of nationality, race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and bodily ability. We learn to live our lives through socialisation and identification.

Life as a perspective, then, is shaped through connections with others, both in a physical and in a social sense. Living is the process of connecting and disconnecting. From connecting in sexual intercourse to cutting the umbilical cord, from growing up in a family to leaving home, from joining political groups to moving on to new alliances, life is constituted through multiple forms of connectivity. Connections in societal and political spheres are forged through empathy, through attempts to understand and experience other perspectives.

These constant processes of connection and disconnection engender transformation. Life means evolving, which is enabled by associating and disassociating. We constantly grow and ever so slightly change from moment to moment. We exercise agency in the process self-transformation. To a certain extent, we have a

choice whom we associate with, which groups we join, the jobs we take, the books we read, the TV shows we watch, and the social media accounts we follow – a choice which is limited by unequally distributed resources. Life, then, is a process of life-making. We constantly produce our own perspective. Whether our life-making takes a linear or a disruptive, wayward form, it is always an active process of transformation.

In proposing this understanding of life, I do not make any claims to universality, nor do I aspire to do so. This concept of life is rooted in BLM, in experiences of oppression and in the agentic move towards liberation.

*(1) Life is Existence.*

In fundamental terms, life is existence. It is simply being. Kayla Reed, director of Action St. Louis and lead strategist in the Movement for Black Lives, elaborates: ‘The articulations “Movement for Black Lives”, “Black Lives Matter” and “I can’t breathe” express the simple mandate that what we are fighting for, is our existence’.<sup>7</sup> An Instagram image with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter of a father feeding his baby daughter bears the caption: ‘The week may not have been perfect and you are tired. But you’re here. You’re living. You’re breathing’.<sup>8</sup> The act of feeding epitomises the basic necessities of life and of pure survival. The articulation of life as existence within the movement opposes the ‘specter of Black death. So, the articulation of life is a demand against the vulnerability and precarity of Black people’.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Houldsworth, a BLM activist who has been at the forefront of the Ferguson uprising from day one, reflects on the parallels with his earlier HIV/AIDS activism. In both cases, the simple message is: ‘stop killing us’.<sup>10</sup> This foundational understanding of life is closely connected to the unspeakable (Curato 2019). Life’s existential nature renders it indescribable. Life simply is – or it is not.

However, this understanding of life as existence is not as binary as it appears. Existence is a matter of *degree*. The question, then, is not whether someone (or something) is alive, but the *extent* to which it lives: ‘we need to be able to just be and breathe as human beings. . . . And that means, *fully being all of yourself*’.<sup>11</sup> The threat of death through white supremacy and the carceral state diminishes life. In degrading life, it curtails self-fulfilment. ‘So, when we talk

about the fact that someone can't breathe, that's just played out physically, but we know as the Black people in America, there's been a chokehold on who we are – we're not allowed to express ourselves'.<sup>12</sup> Black death, then, does not only stand in opposition to life as existence. Its spectre also diminishes the lives of the living.

This point is crucial, as outside observers might think that the movement's central criticism is directed against police brutality *cases* or *instances* of killing. Yet in fact what the movement primarily opposes is the constant state of anxiety that these instances – as well as their much more mundane instantiations of everyday discrimination – entail. The core demand of the movement is: 'Just to be able to live and not have constant anxiety, not have the blood pressure raised constantly, to be able to be a Black mother and let your child go outside and not wonder if this will be last time I can see my child'.<sup>13</sup> Life, here, is therefore understood to be a question of what *kind* of life.

Life as existence, then, equates to more than a presence/absence dichotomy. It describes everyday living. An Instagram image shows the smiling face of twenty-year-old Elijah McClain, a twenty-three-year-old, who died after being attacked and put in a chokehold by police, while walking down the street unarmed. The post reads: 'Elijah McClain should be turning 25 years-old today. He should be celebrating his life with his family. Today he should be doing what he loved most – playing the violin, visiting animals at a local shelter and volunteering in his community'.<sup>14</sup> Life, as opposed to death, is an everyday existence. It is characterised by going about various, mundane activities. This is reflected in the many things people were doing when they were attacked: 'After all, Mike Brown was only walking down the street. Eric Garner was standing on the corner. Rekia Boyd was in a park with friends. Trayvon Martin was walking with a bag of Skittles and a can of iced tea' (Taylor 2016: 13). These people were simply living their lives.

The words 'Black Lives Matter' also point to the inherent, fundamental value of human life. In one of her first social media posts using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, Alicia Garza, one of the three co-founders of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, wrote: '#BlackLivesMatter . . . is a demand that our lives be cherished, respected and able to access our full dignity and determination' (Garza 2020: 120). The trope of the intrinsic value of human life,

which is at the centre of the movement's name, echoed throughout the conversations I had: 'Life, in this context, is a declaration of the truth of Black humanity in the face of a world and a country and a criminal legal system, that doesn't seem to honor it . . . it's about the sanctity of life'.<sup>15</sup> Life 'is sacred. . . . It is something that's fragile and can be precarious. But it should be preserved by any means necessary'.<sup>16</sup> 'Life is important because life is our only non-renewable resource. Life is precious. Life is rare, in the context of everything, the universe and everything, life is pretty rare'.<sup>17</sup>

Human life is not only precious; each life is *equally* valuable. In an image shared on Twitter, a Black and a white man stand next to one other, each holding up a sign with an arrow pointing at the other, which reads: 'Is his life worth more than mine?'<sup>18</sup> Life is inherently equal. In the words of a Twitter user: 'We are all just differently colored bags of freaking water. All humans are 99.9 percent identical in their genetic makeup and we still have to deal with . . . people killing each other over the color of their water bag'.<sup>19</sup>

## (2) *Life is Perspective.*

Humans, as all animals, come into existence as embodied beings – as amalgams of flesh, blood, bones, and hormones. 'We're these physical beings that are born and live and die. It's that in-between that's life. It's that everything from inception to death, and that process is made up of infinite experiences'.<sup>20</sup> These infinite experiences, which together comprise the totality we call life are, to a large extent, dependent on context. Bodies materialise in specific places, at specific times, in specific cultural and historical surroundings. As our lives develop, we learn a primary language; we learn moral values. We are socialised by our families, schools, and social media. Through socialisation we learn identification. Language itself depends on identification – the recognition of similarity of phenomena. In this manner, we learn about race, gender, sexuality, class. We are taught to identify the physical and societal attributes of others and associate them with or disassociate them from ourselves. Our identity establishes a certain perspective on the world. Life is like a movie watched through our socialised eyes.

This perspective is not predetermined by our body or context. Each perspective, even when rooted in the same physical or societal location, can never be wholly the same. Nevertheless, perspectives

are shaped by looking from a particular standpoint, situated in a particular experiential setting. When asked what life is, Shauntrice Martin, a food justice activist engaged in BLM Louisville, responds: ‘I think about what sets my experience apart from other people. And for me, life means being able to enjoy time with my son’.<sup>21</sup> Life, in Martin’s view, is defined by the particularity and difference of experiences. Having children makes for a different experience. In contrast to Martin’s recognition of her distinct situatedness, as children, we are usually not aware of the particularity of our lives – things simply are as they are. ‘When you grow up, you don’t know if you’re rich or poor. You just know your parents provided for you’.<sup>22</sup> Tony Rice is a local Portland activist, who, without any prior protesting experience, joined the Ferguson uprising spontaneously. He describes his own life as the only perspective he knew as a child:

I grew up on this cul-de-sac with friends that I went to grade school with all the way to high school, and I didn’t know life was any different for other people. I just had no idea because all of us that lived there, lived similar lives. Everybody had a house, had a refrigerator, had a car. They all had kids and brothers and sisters.<sup>23</sup>

Life as a perspective sometimes can therefore appear as total – our situatedness can make us feel as though our own reality is inescapable: ‘before slavery was abolished, when people were being beaten and raped and tortured, a lot of people thought that slavery would always exist’.<sup>24</sup> Particularly desperate situations often do not provide the resources one needs to imagine and pursue another life. People living in poor neighbourhoods, with high crime rates, for example, often do not have the resources to relocate. Rice explains: ‘It’s situational. Most people just can’t pack their family up and move to a better situation. . . . And you start to normalize this’.<sup>25</sup>

Chivona Newsome, a Democratic US congressional candidate and co-founder of BLM Greater New York, tells the story of how her life was shaped by the history of slavery, Jim Crow, and everyday discrimination. Her activist family had a crucial impact on her perspective, raising her as a devout Christian and teaching her political values: ‘My creation, my history, my culture is based on systemic oppression. . . . That’s a part of the fabric of who I am. . . . I think even if I wanted to be somebody else, I couldn’t’.<sup>26</sup>

While in many ways our identities and life perspectives are shaped by society, this does not mean we have no agency. We can forge our own identities, by actively making connections. Undertaken consciously, as a political endeavour, identification can be a source of empowerment. BLM is ‘a reclamation of Blackness and individuality and collectivity of the Black identity. So, Black Lives Matter developed from us a perspective of the Black experience’.<sup>27</sup>

Christopher Harris, a scholar of Black political thought and culture, had spent much of his time as a college student in white-dominated academic circles. In his twenties, he joined the Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100). ‘It was an incredible experience that I wasn’t expecting to have, to be around so many young Black folks that felt like me, that had a political analysis that was similar to mine’. This brought Harris to a realisation: ‘I had been quarantining a particular part of myself, my identification with my Blackness and Black culture and Black history, moving in predominantly white spaces for much of my life’.<sup>28</sup> By changing our social connections, we can transform our life perspectives. We then see things differently. Vitaly, however, Harris also stresses that racial identities, or group identities more generally, are not homogenous: ‘there is no one way of being or performing Blackness. There is no one singular life’.<sup>29</sup>

While identity – understood as a form of looking out into the world from a particular standpoint shared with others – can be a source of empowerment, identity can also function as a tool of oppression. Racism, misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia aim to oppress certain ways of life. A Twitter post shows a sticker on a car: ‘I don’t drink beer with racists’.<sup>30</sup> Sitting together in a common physical location and drinking beer, means empathising with one another; it means looking on the world from the same angle. A refusal of empathy is one way of realising agency in creating one’s own life perspective. It is an active crafting of what one chooses to see.

The own life perspective is not only crafted through the refusal but also the active practice of empathy. On social media, the expression of support by white people, in combination with an acknowledgement of the limitations of their own perspective, has become a widespread trope. An Instagram image shows a light- and a dark-skinned hand, with intertwined little fingers: ‘I understand that I

will never understand. However, I STAND’.<sup>31</sup> In the movement, empathy is not only entailing proclamation but active practice. A Twitter user writes: ‘I just did a nine minute moment of silence and got restless doing nothing for that long! Now imagine what it feels like to beg for your life because you can’t breathe for eight minutes and 46 seconds?’<sup>32</sup> One year after Ahmaud Arbery was shot dead by police when he was out for a run, many people posted images on social media of themselves running, under the hashtag #RunWithMaud. This is more than an expression of solidarity. It is an active assuming of the position of the victim, an exercise in perspective-taking.

This kind of perspective-taking does not mean that we simply switch into another reality. But through empathy and learning, our own perspectives slowly grow. Recall Rice’s account of how, as a child, his perspective appeared to be total. He then met many people with different perspectives over the course of his life, which caused his own perspective to widen. He became aware of how other people feel, of what their realities might look like. Through our engagement with other perspectives, our own perspective changes and evolves.

### (3) *Life is Connection.*

From the fertilisation of eggs by sperms to pollination, the emergence and sustenance of life depends upon connectivity. The etymologies of sexual *intercourse* ‘communication to and fro’, *coitus* ‘to come together’ or *copulation* ‘to join’, indicate that connectivity is at the beginning of every form of animal life. For humans, this connectivity is then extended into families, communities, and societal organisations. Like the cells in our bodies that constantly reproduce and form connections, societal and political life is constituted by connectivity.

Alicia Garza and Patrisse Khan-Cullors, two of the three co-founders of the Black Lives Matter Global Network, each published books about the emergence of the movement. Both books, which embed the history of the movement in the authors’ personal life stories, start with an explanation of life as connectivity. Garza tells of her childhood love for objects made of Satsuma porcelain in her parents’ antique business: ‘it looked like broken pieces that had fused together to make something new. I liked to imagine what

other lives those shards of pottery might have had, if they had been put together as something else. Or what future lives awaited them: a jewelry box, a teakettle, a dish – what might they become next?’ (Garza 2020: xii).

The notion of the lives of mosaic objects resonates with Khan-Cullors’ scientific explanation of life on earth, made of stardust: ‘not only are we in the universe, but that the universe is in us . . . we, human beings, are literally made out of stardust . . . I have seen it since I was a child, the magic, the stardust we are, in the lives of the people I come from’. (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017: 3–4).

Stories of porcelain shards and cosmic stardust forming life point to the fact that life’s fabric is connectivity. In the understanding of Terry J. Wilson II, well-known in the local Marxist and Antifa scene and the founder of BLM Boise, life depends on the interconnection of all humans and nonhumans. He explains that it was human impact on nature that led to the development of COVID-19 in nonhuman animals: ‘So, interconnectedness is life. Biodiversity is life’.<sup>33</sup> His own activism reflects this sense of interconnectedness through benefitting others: ‘the process for me has been about energy, about giving the universe, or those around me and my network’.<sup>34</sup>

The entire process of living consists of connectivity. Houldsworth, the Ferguson and anti-HIV/AIDS activist quoted earlier, elaborates: ‘I don’t know that there is life, but there’s living, being engaged, being in conversation, in dialogue, in community, in action. For me personally, trying to think about life as a static, is very confusing. It’s the engagement. It is an ongoing thing. It’s a verb, not a noun’.<sup>35</sup> Life, understood as living through social connectivity, is vividly experienced in protest. It is the combination of external threat and inner agency that makes life tangible. Houldsworth experienced this when he took part in shutting down a highway and was subsequently arrested: ‘then the comradery of being in this holding cell in jail with 200 other people who would have just done this action for justice; that was very much a moment of feeling very alive and feeling very engaged in the good work of what a life is’.<sup>36</sup>

Lively connections with others can be strengthened in these spectacular and highly mediatised moments, but they also have a more durable basis. They consist, in part, of love experienced from the

family to the political community. Curtis Hierro is a leading activist within Dream Defenders. Three days after George Zimmerman, the man who killed seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin, was acquitted, Dream Defenders held one of the longest sit-ins in US history at the Florida Capitol. Experiencing the comradery at the month-long occupation was one ‘of those moments where you feel like you’re touching Doctor King’s beloved community’.<sup>37</sup>

Martin Luther King’s beloved community, as a global order that is built on unconditional love (King 1990), is reflected in the movement as a whole. At the forefront of the movement is a love letter, posted on social media by Garza: ‘We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where black lives matter. Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter. Our lives matter’ (Garza 2020, 111). An image on Instagram shows a father embracing his young daughter. Cheek to cheek with closed eyes, they appear completely at peace. The image is subtitled by just one word: ‘L.O.V.E’.<sup>38</sup> When asked what ‘liveliness’ in the movement feels like, Torres says: ‘We are family, we love each other, we support each other’.<sup>39</sup> Like many queer people whose biological families reject them, Torres found a new home in the movement.<sup>40</sup> Hierro was raised as an only child and always longed for a bigger family.<sup>41</sup> Rice grew up in a big family and felt lonely moving into a single home as an adult.<sup>42</sup> All of them expand or revive family through loving connections within the movement.

Crucially loving connectivity in the movement is not limited to the living. Harris reflects on the role of cultural heritage in the Black Youth Project 100: ‘I felt most alive in the movement in the ritualistic experiences of chants and music and joy, that have always imbued movement space with energy . . . you see now in spaces beyond movement space, this repetition of an articulation of Black joy’.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on heritage extends bonds beyond the living. Elsewhere Harris writes together with Marisa Solomon: ‘moving while captive is an inherited form of subversion that conveys the future we want. Chanting, dancing, singing, and shouting . . . is a way to honor the dead . . . with revivals that celebrate black life’ (Harris and Solomon 2021: 5).

Connectivity through honouring the dead is also evident in the central trope of remembering victims. The hashtag #SayTheirNames features an endless list of the names of those killed. ‘We

say your name #GeorgeFloyd. We are outraged. We are grieving. We are numb. We are tired. But we say your name'.<sup>44</sup> In this post, the speaker does not only remember; she directly addresses Floyd as though he were alive. By making connections with the dead, they are brought back to life. Protesters embody the dead by wearing hoodies to represent Trayvon Martin or T-shirts that say: 'I am Mike Brown'. In constant repetition, they rearticulate the situation of Floyd's murder through his own words: 'His name was #GeorgeFloyd, he begged for his life. His stomach, neck, everything hurt, he couldn't breathe'.<sup>45</sup>

In contrast to Floyd, many other names are less known. The deaths of Black women, in particular, have been recognised less often. Sandra Bland, for example, was brutally arrested and threatened with murder by police for a minor traffic violation. The next day she was found hanged in her jail cell. Khan-Cullors contends that this could not have been suicide because 'Sandra Bland believed that her Black life, that all of our Black lives, mattered. She stood for us and she was us' (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017: 227).

Connections to the dead are generated within the movement through one of its most prominent features: storytelling. Just one day after Derek Chauvin, the murderer of George Floyd, was found guilty, thirteen-year-old Adam Toledo was shot dead by police. A post on Twitter reads: 'Adam Toledo was in seventh grade. He loved animals, riding his bike and zombies. He was a child. Say his name'.<sup>46</sup> This particular type of storytelling through short sentences, each of which weigh heavy because of their brevity, runs through the history of the movement. The entire movement appears as an assemblage of innumerable life stories, well-illustrated in Barbara Ransby's book (2018). Memorial practices circulate online via countless self-made portraits of the victims. Storytelling not only connects to victims, but also celebrates Black history and culture. Images, quotes, and life stories of Harriet Tubman, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, Ida Wells-Barnett, and Eartha Kitt connect under #BlackLivesMatter.

#### *(4) Life is Transformation.*

How can we determine whether something is alive? One crucial criterion for life is an intrinsic ability to transform: 'When something is living and breathing even down . . . to your skin cells, your hair,

your nails. Those things are constantly changing. So for something to be alive, it's constantly evolving'.<sup>47</sup> This biological process is reflected in personal growth through learning: 'We all change and grow. You have experiences . . . you have conversations and they change you'.<sup>48</sup> If life is transformation, life entails the constant evolution of how we see the world.

Reece Chenault is a community organiser who was trained, together with Garza and Opal Tometi, in a programme called Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity and is active in BLM Louisville. He also is a proud father. Chenault tells the story of how the birth of his son has profoundly changed his life: 'This experience of preparing for a person that I'd never met, really shaped and molded me. But it also kind of cracked a lot of things that I held on to, about weird concepts I had about manhood and deeper political commitment, emotional vulnerability. Those kinds of things just kind fell off . . . it's a real snapping in half'.<sup>49</sup>

The transformation of self in Chenault's recollection necessarily encompasses a simultaneous sense of loss. Perspective change means embracing the new and giving up the old ways of perceiving reality. Chenault explains this 'snapping in half' with an Arabic concept called 'fanaa', 'which is a kind of holy yet somehow righteous destruction, this falling apart, this breaking so the thing can be remade'.<sup>50</sup>

This sense of overcoming, of being reborn as a necessary component of self-evolution, is further reflected in the central role queer people play within the movement. Trans people 'question the origins under which they were born and get themselves into alignment to who they are'.<sup>51</sup> The changing of one's own body through hormone therapy and surgery requires immense courage and self-determination. It is an acute expression of agency. Reed, quoted earlier, defines life as 'the power of self-determination to design and execute a journey in a finite amount of time that makes one feel powerful'.<sup>52</sup>

Life as transformation is not an individual effort; it depends on mutual support. Brandon Mack, an educator and founding member of BLM Houston, describes how he feels alive when he empowers young people: What 'really makes it wonderful is the impact that you have on other people, especially in activating them to declare that their lives matter. . . . And seeing that is also very

empowering'.<sup>53</sup> Here it is not so much the power over others – or getting B to do what A wants, as it is an interdependency of one's own and others' empowerment. Changing one's own life and changing the life of others, then, go hand in hand. A central theme under the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter is self-empowerment as collective empowerment by reframing Blackness. Countless images on Instagram show dark-skinned models, self-made drawings and paintings of Black people, African kings and queens of the past, people wearing crowns, trans people, dark-skinned emojis, and multiracial children's colouring books.

This self-transformation with and through the transformation of others, extends beyond group identity. Life means embodying political change. A Twitter post states: 'Be the change that you want to see in the world'.<sup>54</sup> Societal transformation is pursued through BLM protests. However, while the movement is known for its spectacular mass protests and is often framed by the media in disruptive and violent terms (Banks 2018; Hooker 2016), a large amount of the energy of activists actually goes into creating a life-support network. Martin describes the everyday activities in her local chapter: 'a lot of what we do day to day is just giving people rides, getting them out of jail, giving them food, getting them childcare and housing when they're evicted . . . helping people to write resumes, helping people to start their own business'.<sup>55</sup>

When BLM activists engage in community gardening, voter registration drives, or the collection and distribution of donations through the Black Lives Matter Survival Fund, they both seek and actively enable more than the repair of a broken system. This everyday collective action, which changes life in the here and now, underpins a greater vision of a future life, in which everyone has economic security, healthcare, education, a home, resources to start a family and time for recreation (Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017: 200). It is a vision of a world in which 'all people, particularly those who have been historically marginalised, [are] able to live a life not just that is protected, and not just with dignity, but where people can thrive'.<sup>56</sup>

This section started by explaining life as transformation, as the growth that is intrinsic to the development of an organism. So how does this intrinsic, organic change relate to political change? The life force that drives political change is also intrinsic. As humans,

we carry within us an urge to affect our world. Newsome, the congressional candidate quoted previously, describes this process:

I just think that my anger, the hurt, the pain of what I experienced as a leader and as a Black woman in America, that's the fire that lights my candle, that keeps me going. . . . I take that anger and I channel it into strategy. I think, what laws can I change? How can I shame politicians into doing the right thing? How can I work to shut down police unions? How can we abolish the police?<sup>57</sup>

### **Towards a Living Democracy**

In conversation with BLM activists, through social media analysis and through the engagement with academic and non-academic sources, I developed an understanding of life as a process of life-making. Life is a pure existence that establishes a perspective of a corporeal being, situated at a specific, intersectional location. This perspective evolves over time as it engages with other perspectives. As agentic subjects, humans constantly produce, reproduce, and alter this perspective in a process of becoming. Life is a collection of instances that each harbour a transformative potential. This understanding of life is rooted in the lived experiences of a movement Ransby (2017) describes as 'radical democracy in action'. What can this concept of life contribute to debates on revitalising democracy?

Here I will outline a brief answer to this question and, in doing so, gesture towards a living democracy. Rather than presenting a final concept, I aim to provide a starting point for a debate about life and democracy, at a time of existential threat to life on this planet. If we built a living democracy informed by the concept of life developed above, we can understand democracy itself as a living organism. Democratic theorists such as Keane adopt this approach when they speak of *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009) – and echo the sentiment of BLM activists who claim that 'democracy can't breathe'.<sup>58</sup> My aim is to make a step towards substantiating this metaphoric claim by proposing four principles of a living democracy built on the four definitions of life as existence, perspective, connection, and transformation. A living democracy (1) safeguards the existence of all humans and nonhumans, (2) nurtures a diversity

of perspectives, (3) fosters social and planetary connectivity, and (4) enables self- and collective transformation.

*FIRST: A LIVING DEMOCRACY SAFEGUARDS THE  
EXISTENCE OF ALL HUMANS AND NONHUMANS.*

The discourse on revitalising democracy is focused on institutional design and has so far neglected the economic foundations of democratic participation. While some acknowledge the problem of exclusion of those with fewer economic resources (Geissel 2013; Smith 2009a) and advocate a certain level of equality as a precondition for participation (Fung and Wright 2001), these ideas only appear as peripheral and do not go far enough to meet today's challenges. The concept of life developed earlier opens a different perspective.

Since in its basic definition as pure existence life is inherently equal, all human and nonhuman lives must be nurtured. A living democracy provides the means to exist. This includes 'a blanket guarantee of economic rights, of sustainability for people, and that means healthcare, that means a home, that means strong work protections, a safety net for one's family'.<sup>59</sup> Beyond mere existence, 'a living democracy allows us to evolve',<sup>60</sup> by providing the means for self-realisation. In this sense, Woodly and Brown (2021) propose a politics of care, which breaks with the liberal-capitalist framework. They conceptualise 'care as an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive' (Woodly and Brown 2021: 891). A politics of care, realised through radical mothering outside of sexed and gendered roles, provides the nourishment for lives to flourish (Woodly 2022). Martin engages in radical mothering through her community organising when she knocks on neighbours' doors: 'just making sure that they're taken care of for their basic needs'.<sup>61</sup>

Under the current planetary conditions, the politics of care needs to be extended to nonhuman life. The discourse on revitalising democracy acknowledges the climate emergency, but suggestions regarding the representation of nonhumans and future generations in designed democratic fora (Smith 2021) only scratch the surface of the problem. The need for a more holistic approach to a living democracy becomes particularly pronounced through the current intersection of racially motivated violence, the COVID-19

pandemic, and the climate emergency: ‘police brutality and environmental politics would appear to be only tangentially related, but . . . they are in fact closely intertwined’ (Pellow 2016: 222). BLM activists stress that the pandemic is the result of a lack of care for nonhuman animals. Most likely emerging in animals sold alive for the consumption of their flesh in a market in China, animal mistreatment appears to be the source of a virus that would alter human history.<sup>62</sup> In the same vein, the climate emergency is the result of human carelessness. And both the climate emergency and the pandemic disproportionately affect racially marginalised groups. A politics of care, then, needs to extend radical mothering to the planet and include nonhumans into a living democracy (Asenbaum et al. 2023).

*SECOND: A LIVING DEMOCRACY NURTURES  
A DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES.*

Safeguarding human and nonhuman existence through care nourishes a diversity of perspectives. Diversity is also central in the discourse on revitalising democracy, which has developed a sophisticated array of democratic design features including quota sampling techniques that ensure the presence of marginalised groups as well as sensitive facilitation methods that enable inclusion (Asenbaum 2016; Wojciechowska 2019). However, the revitalising discourse implicitly understands diversity as an obstacle, which democratic innovations help to overcome. This is because democratic innovations are defined as decision-making mechanisms (Smith 2009a: 1). Diverse identities, positionalities, and experiences stand in the way of decision-making. They are issues that need to be resolved, rather than enablers of democratic pluralism.

A living democracy, in contrast, flourishes on the basis of diverse perspectives. When BLM protesters chant: ‘This is what democracy looks like’, they point to the internal heterogeneity of the movement. Mack elaborates: ‘When you go to a Black Lives Matter protest, it is very, very diverse. It is a cross section of different socioeconomic backgrounds, different genders, different sexual orientations, different races coming together’.<sup>63</sup> Martin argues that formal democratic institutions need to reflect this diversity because positionalities shape perspectives: ‘If you’ve grown up poor, if you’ve grown up being harassed by the police, chances are very

good that you're going to make policies that stop people from being poor and stop people from being harassed by the police'.<sup>64</sup>

The revitalising discourse's understanding of diversity as an obstacle to political decision-making forestalls the democratic potential of a pluralism of perspectives. The BLM activists contributing to this text, in contrast, see diversity as a strength of democracy. Cultural rootedness of identity provides belonging and the experience of a shared perspective. Rather than perceiving the failure to fully understand others as a weakness of democracy, it actually testifies to its functioning. A living democracy builds on the diversity of experiences and subjective viewpoints that cannot be fully shared. Reality is multiple and so is democracy.

*THIRD: A LIVING DEMOCRACY FOSTERS SOCIAL AND PLANETARY CONNECTIVITY.*

The revitalising discourse proposes insular fora in response to democratic erosion as exemplified by the current hype around deliberative minipublics (Curato et al. 2021). While the efforts to mend a broken system focusing on institutional fixes are laudable, they fail to see the bigger picture of how deeply societal, cultural, and economic challenges are connected. The technical solutions advanced lack the social fabric a living democracy requires which connects diverse spheres of life. A living democracy needs to be embedded and organically grow out of its members lived experiences (Bussu et al. 2022) who through their everyday practices engage in democratic mending (Hendriks et al. 2020). This social connectivity needs to start from the homes, communities, and workplaces and include nonhumans to expand to the planetary level.

From Dr. King's unconditional love to Garza's love letter, love and affection are the cohesive substance of democratic communities advanced by BLM. This informal enactment of democracy stands in contrast to the stale and hollow political institutions, as Harris stresses: 'If democracy is a living thing . . . then it would be how it is actualised in practice in space, not as an abstraction. It's living in its performance and practice'.<sup>65</sup> A Twitter post cites John Lewis: 'Democracy is not a state, it is an act'.<sup>66</sup> Democracy, then, is the practice of connecting, of doing, and communicating. In Ransby's (2018: 148) terms, this entails 'political quilting', as

generating connections between marginalised communities. Broken connections are regenerated like the cells of an organism.

This social connectivity goes beyond the inter-human level and connects to nonhumans and the planet. Recall that Torres defined life as ‘what makes you you and what connects you to everybody else on the planet’.<sup>67</sup> The perspectives we shape based on our identities, then, do not only facilitate diversity but also connection. Wilson extends the politics of care to the planetary level through the concept of sacrifice: ‘I see life as selflessness. Life should be about being selfless because of the interconnectedness of all of us’.<sup>68</sup> To live one’s own life, then, means to enable the life of others. Rather than meticulous institutional design of insular fora, a living democracy requires the lived experience of social and planetary connectivity.

*FOURTH: A LIVING DEMOCRACY ENABLES SELF- AND COLLECTIVE TRANSFORMATION.*

The revitalising discourse aims to reform the institutional structure of established political systems. It is, hence, oriented towards the past. Rather than advancing a new vision, democratic innovations serve a return to supposedly more democratic times by ‘curing the democratic malaise’ (Newton 2012a) or ‘saving democracy’ (della Porta 2020). This reformist orientation stands in the way of democratic transformations, both on the individual and the societal level. Regarding the self-transformation of the individual democratic subject, the revitalisation discourse conceptualises participatory fora as institutions designed to school participants and ‘make them better citizens’ (Andersen and Hansen 2007; Newton 2012b). Transformation is envisioned as a top-down process led by experts.

A living democracy, in contrast, is oriented towards democratic transformations. Rather than a revolutionary process, it enables steady growth and continuous evolution. A living democracy is in constant flux: ‘For democracy to reflect life, it has to continue to grow. It has to change’.<sup>69</sup> This change is enabled through the societal and planetary connections that are continuously crafted and emerge through democratic encounters. Transformation happens through connections with other humans and nonhumans. As we engage with the views of others and start to get a glimpse of different realities, our identities transform. Rather than a planned process

that designs the ideal citizen from above, self-transformation in a living democracy happens organically through the human and nonhuman connections we choose to engage in. Here, one's own becoming is an expression of democratic agency. This process of self-transformation is inherently linked to the transformation of the societal system. Democracy is the common perspective that emerges when the many perspectives within the demos join. In Rice's words: 'the perspective of democracy is really the perspective of the masses'.<sup>70</sup>

A living democracy, then, goes far beyond institutional reform and roots democracy in the everyday lived experiences of the diverse perspectives of the demos. By safeguarding the existence of all humans and nonhumans, it does not start from conceptualising institutions but instead raises questions of the distribution of economic, social, and cultural resources and in so doing advocates structural transformations. Facing the global challenges of our time, a living democracy connects individuals to societal and planetary transformations. Rather than an idealised past, a living democracy envisions alternative democratic futures.

If we understand both life and democracy as processes of making connections, we realise our own agency in living democracy. The democracy of tomorrow is the result of our actions today. When I asked Newsome how life and democracy relate to one other, she said: 'I think they're one and the same. . . . For us to have a true democracy, is to have a true life where we're able to breathe'.<sup>71</sup>

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**Hans Asenbaum** is a senior research fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. His research interests include radical democracy, queer and gender studies, digital politics, and participatory research methods. Hans is the author of *The Politics of Becoming: Anonymity and Democracy in the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and co-editor of *Research Methods in Deliberative Democracy* (with Ercan, Curato and Mendonça, Oxford University Press, 2022). E-mail: [hans.asenbaum@canberra.edu.au](mailto:hans.asenbaum@canberra.edu.au)

## Notes

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