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Reference

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THE RADICAL POTENTIAL OF QUEER?**Twenty Years Later****Cathy Cohen**

As those who write for a living or for pleasure or for both know, the things we write are never created in isolation, but often speak to and reflect the issues, conditions, and hopes that are most prevalent in our time and space. For me, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens" was shaped by numerous factors. Let me mention three. First was the HIV/AIDS crisis that took root on the coasts and across the country, overwhelming many communities, including especially Black communities (Cohen 1999). Second was the devastation of poor communities and communities of color that resulted from Ronald Reagan's implementation and Bill Clinton's enforcement of neoliberal policies and ideologies (Duggan 2012). The third factor was one of hope and stood in contrast to the loss generated by HIV/AIDS and neoliberalism. Here I am referring to the emergence and solidification of both Black feminist and Black gay and lesbian communities during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Springer 2005).

It is this third factor that I want to spend some space and time reflecting

on, because I am worried about a process of erasure. Specifically, I am concerned with the erasure that happens through the rewriting of histories, where the politics of Black feminist and Black lesbians and gay men of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s are framed not as a radical attack on the politics of respectability in Black communities or a radical attack on the state violence perpetrated through Reagan's neoliberalism, or a radical articulation of Black gay life in all its fullness and idealism, and ordinariness, but instead the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s become only a gay movement in response to HIV/AIDS, leading to a path-dependent result of professional organizations and assimilation.

This process of erasure or rewriting can be deadly because it inhibits our ability to know what happened before us, to know that there were radical Black queers who fought similar fights for liberation to those being waged today, who insisted on reimagining what liberation might look like, when it includes and makes central those on the margins of Black communities. We must remember that it was in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that critical texts and documentaries were created from individuals such as Audre Lorde (1984), Barbara Smith (1983), Cheryl Clarke (1983), Pat Parker (1978), Marlon Riggs (1989), Joseph Beam (1986, 1991), and Essex Hemphill (1992)—to mention but a few. It is also during this period that organizations like the Combahee River Collective, the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Kitchen Table Women of Color Press, Other Countries, Blackheart Collective, Blackout Magazine, Salsa Soul Sisters, Gay Men of African Descent, and eventually The Audre Lorde Project would all emerge to provide organizational structure to communities of Black gay folk committed to pursuing a radical agenda of Black liberation.

It was in many ways the intersection of the rich ways of thinking, imagining, and connecting, provided by Black feminist knowledge production, in and largely out of the academy, and the urgency of Black death confronting us through both HIV/AIDS and neoliberalism that produced the environment in which "Punks" was written. "Punks" was an articulation of longing for a radical formation that would not only save our lives but also see us—punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens—as full members of Black communities, connected in struggle and helping produce a new era in the Black radical tradition.

The Radical Potential of Queer Today

While "Punks" was a long-form articulation of longing for a radical collective formation, the choice of queer, as a framework or identity that could serve as a foundation for collaborative struggle or at least make visible our shared location on the

outskirts of traditional power, was offered up because it felt like an unresolved question about positionality and identity in Black communities. What I mean is that queer was not overidentified in Black gay and lesbian communities. Thus, while significant segments of white LGBT communities in the 1990s seemed to embrace the sexual fluidity and flattening of their power associated with being queer, many in Black LGBT communities approached the idea and term of *queer* with greater skepticism and reluctance (Battle et al. 2002). And because the idea of queer was not overdetermined as a personal/sexual identity, at least in Black communities, it left some space to use the idea of queer as a *provocation* to imagine how we might organize across varied communities defined as “the other” by the state and/or racial capitalism.

What is interesting about the current moment in relation to the use of queer is the space for provocation seems to be quickly closing. What I mean is that queer as a unifying framework for mobilization and action or that space available for interrogation and imagining of who could be included in a or the queer political project and what might be the political basis of queer unity is less available as more people adopt queer as a personal politicized identity, embodying a radical identitarian personal politics, as opposed to a collective position relative to state and capitalist power.

As I wrote in 1997, I was using the transformed idea of queer to “envision a politics where one’s relation to power and not some homogenized identity is privileged in determining one’s political comrades. I’m talking about a politics where the nonnormative and marginal position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive, transformative coalition work. Thus, if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.” In the vision of queer politics that motivated me in “Punks,” individuals like Michael Brown and Rekia Boyd are important queer subjects not because of their sexual practice, identity, or performance but because they, as well as other young and poor folks of color, operate in the world as queer subjects: the targets of racial normalizing projects intent on pathologizing them across the dimensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, simultaneously making them into deviants while normalizing their degradation and marginalization until it becomes what we expect—the norm—until it becomes something that we no longer pay attention to.

And while increasingly I see some of the most radical social movements today taking on the nomenclature of queer, I am also confronted by its adoption

as a personal, politicized identity. Thus, I worry that as more individuals take on the identity of queer as an embodiment of sexual positionality, queer becomes less effective—if it ever was effective—as a unifying framework for solidarity work across domains of struggle and across identities. What I see now is a queer politics defined by bodies and practices and less about collaborative politics: what I might crudely call the queer politics of identity over the queer politics of positionality.

This adoption of queer as a personal, politicized identity is radical in the sense that those who embrace the identity of queer also often articulate an anti-capitalist, feminist, and nonnormative politics, committed to fighting with and struggling for those who are most marginal in our communities and the larger society. The personal politics of queer, as currently articulated, is also collectivized through the mobilization and identification of queer people. For example, the Movement for Black Lives is different from anything we have seen before in the Black radical tradition because so many of the organizations are led by Black queer feminists. But at the same time, through this formation, the radical potential of queer is reduced to an identity that is largely attached to sexual desire, practice, and performance. Thus, it becomes easier for us to identify the “queers” leading the movement—a good thing—than to detail what we mean by the queer politics of the movement.

Let me be clear: despite my reservations about queer as the basis for collective struggle on the left, the framework still animates my hopes and dreams about what is possible in this current moment of organizing. Many of the organizers in the Movement for Black Lives embrace a *Black feminist and queer analysis* independent of who their intimate and sexual partners are. For them, being queer can be both an identity and a position relative to oppressive state power. These folks refuse to conform to a politics of respectability and instead practice a Black feminist intersectional approach to organizing, highlighting the many identities that Black communities and Black bodies encompass, but with an eye on centering their work on those most marginal, Black women, Black poor people, Black trans and gender-nonconforming folk, and Black gay, lesbian, and queer folks. These organizations, like the Black LGBT organizations of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, are led by young Black people, often on the margins, but demanding both recognition and an expansion of blackness. This may not be the radical potential of queer that I envisioned twenty years ago, but this combination of Black feminism and a commitment to queer as a continuation of the Black radical tradition may be our best hope for the radical movements and queer futures we all deserve.

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