Neoliberalism Then and Now: Race, Sexuality, and the Black Radical Tradition

Chandan Reddy

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 25, Number 1, January 2019, pp. 150-155 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

Springer, Kimberly. 2005. *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Thuma, Emily. Forthcoming. *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-7275348

NEOLIBERALISM THEN AND NOW

Race, Sexuality, and the Black Radical Tradition

Chandan Reddy

(For Marcellus Blount)

It's impossible to enumerate in this short space all the different and crucial interventions Cathy Cohen's 1997 *GLQ* essay made not only to queer studies, black and ethnic studies, and feminist studies but also to left politics, social movement activism, and grassroots organizing. I will make two main points, then. First, in relation to the latter, we ought to read Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" as part of what Cedric Robinson (2000) termed the Black Radical Tradition, a tradition produced through "an accretion over generations of collective intelligence gathered from struggle" (xxx). For Robinson, this tradition could be transformed "into a radical force," the purpose of which, "in its most militant manifestation . . . [is] the overthrow of the whole race-based structure" (xxxi). Cohen's essay built on the collective intelligence gathered by women of color, black feminist, and queer of color struggles from the 1970s onward, a canniness that "grows from the lived experience of existing within and resisting multiple and connected practices of domination and normalization" (Cohen 1997: 441). In this way, Cohen's essay also marks a transformation and rearticulation of tenets of the Black Radical Tradition, by noting and making explicit that in late capitalist modernity, the "whole race-based structure" is a *heteronormative order* that masks the very "interlocking systems of domination" it articulates together and depends on (Ferguson 2004).

Reading Cohen's essay today, we note continuities and departures between our moment and its own. Written in the "twilight of equality," as Lisa Duggan (2003) characterized that moment, the context of Cohen's essay was an ascendant global political economy of transnational production, neoliberal financialization, austerity, privatization, and racial security, the US face of which was the Clinton-era Crime Bill of 1994; the Welfare Reform Act, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, and the Counterterrorism Act all passed in 1996, just months before the essay's publication (Reddy 2005). Yet, if Cohen's essay elicits a diagnostic power and analytic importance that feels as galvanizing now as it did in its moment of publication, that is because the material and ideological architecture of that era, which Cohen (1997: 438) sought to diagnose in the interest of constructing a "new politics," lives on in our own, not only as lasting effects but as the source today of a capitalized infrastructure of racial incapacitation and administrative gendering (Spade 2015) that has only grown since the publication of "Punks" twenty years ago. In our moment, Cohen's call for a "new politics" is being answered in diverse ways, through projects and groups such as #Say Her Name, Hands Up United, Black Lives Matter, BYP 100, the Silva Rivera Law Project, African American Policy Forum, Familia: TQLM, water protectors, detention center hunger strikers, and youth movements to end incarceration. That is, like Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality (1991), Angela Davis's (2003) and Ruth Wilson Gilmore's (2007) work on the prison-industrial complex, and the return and transformation of Black life itself as the violated bearer and immobilized source of value through confinement and repressive-state tactics of terror and death-dealing, the insights of "Punks" so infuse today's critical and activist discourses precisely because they were written from a black radical standpoint within the forming neoliberal order, a standpoint that exploits—for liberation, collective autonomy, communal survival, and economic redistribution—the structural contradictions immanent to the modes of accumulation that were becoming dominant twenty years ago. "Punks" doesn't just diagnose domination or unmask the complexity and cunning of power. It points a way forward, a way through. It focuses on contradictions that liberal, queer, and left critiques alike fail to see that point to modes and "subjects" of resistance otherwise foreclosed by power.

For example, as neoliberalism dismantled the gains of the civil rights welfare state, it formulated discourses of social efficiency, and increased personal autonomy and equal rights of privacy. These public discourses were crucial to the incorporation of homosexuality within the neoliberal state that the marriage equality movement produced and exploited for its own ends. Yet austerity, privatization, joblessness, and the wealth stripping of poor, working-class, and lower-middle-

class Black and racialized immigrant families and neighborhoods in urban areas throughout the 1990s contradict these discourses of efficiency, personal autonomy, and universal privacy on which gay and lesbian rights projects depended. To seize on these contradictions from the standpoint of black radicalism is, according to Cohen, to find alternative coherencies and still-undisclosed relationalities that can constitute a "new" and radical political formation and fulcrum of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens that neoliberal and heteronormative logics of sexuality otherwise divide, alienate, distance, or figure as inhuman or unpolitical in their togetherness.

Second, I would like to suggest that Cohen's essay builds on Robinson's insight in *Black Marxism* that Western capitalism strives toward a racial totality, and as such, "racial antagonisms . . . [are] arrayed along a continuum from the casual insult to the most ruthless and lethal rules of law" (Robinson 2000: xxxi). For W. E. B. DuBois (2007), Western capital's reliance upon a racial totality accounted not only for the extra "psychological" wage demanded by the white working class in US society but also for the failure of contemporary historians and nearly all US citizens to see the "general strike" of four million enslaved workers that occurred right before their eyes. Likewise, following the works of Angela Davis (1983), the Combahee River Collective (1986), and Crenshaw (1989), who critiqued the various ways Black women's resistant agencies—as workers, women, racialized subjects—went unaccounted for, their standpoint made invisible, Black feminist and "queer" radical intellectuals such as Cohen (1997), Gilmore (1999), Joy James (1996), and Saidiya Hartman (1997) revealed the importance of gender and sexuality for the racial totality of neoliberal capitalism. Roderick Ferguson argued in *Aberrations in Black* (2004) that these queer/feminist rearticulations of the Black radical tradition disclosed the centrality of gender and sexual norms to the shaping and sustaining of violent racial capitalist orders both "within" the nation-state and across its practices of colonial and neocolonial empire. Furthermore, Jodi Melamed (2011) termed the US experience of neoliberalism detailed by the above scholars, neoliberal multiculturalism, the transformation of Western capitalism from a white supremacist and white liberal totality to a multicultural racial totality. Multiculturalism as a material edifice of US neoliberal capitalism is marked by the substantive inclusion of racialized elites into the promised multicultural capitalist totality through gender, sexual, and other bodily norms that paradoxically deepen and advance the violent racialization of nonelite and poor people of color. As Cohen brilliantly demonstrated in *The Boundaries of Blackness* (1999), in highly advanced US capitalism, or US neoliberalism, where Black elites are "solidly integrated at multiple levels into the state apparatus" (27), multicultural

capitalism is a material phenomenon that works through gendered, sexual, and bodily norms (from the feminization of work to the criminalization of the "welfare queen"), such that the limited mobility offered to some marginal group member is often convergent with "the direct management of other, less privileged marginal group members to individuals who share the same group identity" (27). For Cohen, heteronormativity is crucial to the racial multicultural totality of neoliberal capitalism, sorting, dividing, and more finely partitioning marginalized sectors and communities for capitalist enrichment in unprecedented ways: "Heteronormativity interacts with institutional racism, patriarchy and class exploitation to define us in numerous ways as marginal and oppressed subjects . . . allowing our sisters and brothers to be used either as surplus labor in an advanced capitalist structure and/or seen as expendable, denied resources, and thus locked in correctional institutions across the country" (446). Yet, like DuBois's sense that his contemporaries were blinded to a slave general strike, Cohen brilliantly argues that under neoliberal multiculturalism, it is the ensemble of agents partitioned from each other—those "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens," cast as distinct objects of nonprofit management—whose self-activity is always in jeopardy of being missed, divided from one another by labor, feminism, antiracism, and queer politics.

What seemed elusive for Cohen at the time she wrote "Punks" was a queer politics whose charge came from engaging, living, and negotiating with the self-activity of those whose most powerful strength might be their ability to achieve concrete political alliance that defies the ordering principles of the hegemonic political order. These are formations created not through an identity, a coalition of interests, or even a shared position as "outsiders" to the heterosexual order. Rather, Cohen argued for the *active* creation of a different politics and political space in which the multicultural heteronormative order is made vulnerable precisely by its dependence on uneven, and historically distinct, interlocking systems of oppression.

Like other traditions of the oppressed, the Black Radical Tradition is a living tradition, keenly attuned to the calcifications, morphings, and resolidifications of sexualized racial orders, what Paul Gilroy (1995) called, using Amiri Baraka's words, the "changing same." In this way, as we return to Cohen's essay, we also note important discontinuities with the text in this moment, ones that, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, can fan the flames of resistance and the convictions of the oppressed that other worlds and worldings are possible. If Cohen's essay concludes by calling for a queer politics still too dim on the horizon for her to see at that moment, in her 2014 Kessler lecture Cohen turned her attention to the young Black activists of Ferguson, Missouri, discovering the "queer politics" she worried existed

most fully only as unrealizable potentiality. During the height of the uprising and activism for social justice against predatory policing and municipal killing triggered by the callous murder of Mike Brown, the Ferguson activist Tory Russell of Hands Up United was interviewed by Gwen Ifill of the *PBS Newshour*: "So, let me ask you this . . . does this feel different to you? These protests we're seeing, these coast-to-coast rolling die-ins, the roadblocks, does this feel like a different stage?"

Russell responded, "Yeah, I mean it's younger, it's fresher. I think we're more connected than most people think. I don't, this is not the Civil Rights movement, you can tell by how I got a hat on, I got my t-shirt, and how I rock my shoes. This is not the Civil Rights movement. This is an oppressed peoples' movement. So when you see us, you gonna see some gay folk, you gonna see some queer folk, you gonna see some poor Black folk, you gonna see some brown folk, you gonna see some white people and we all out here for the same reasons, we wanna be free. We believe that we have the right over laws." For Cohen, Russell's *relational politics*—of some gay folk, some queer folk, some poor Black folk, some brown folk, even some white *people*—marked precisely the kind of "queer politics" she sought. Russell's remarks point to the ways that the institutionalization of the civil rights movement within the capitalist state paradoxically contributed to a multicultural heteronormative order in which the dispossessive and life-extinguishing tactics of neoliberal accumulation operate through the interlocking systems of race, gender, sexuality, class, migration, and citizenship. Yet they also point to the definitive and powerful insight of Cohen's "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens": as neoliberal capitalism exploits multicultural heteronormativity, it creates the conditions for the very alliances and connections it makes invisible and nearly unthinkable within liberal and radical politics alike. Just as DuBois reminds us how invisible the ubiquity of four million enslaved workers enacting a general strike against racial capitalism was in its own time, Russell interrogates the national public sphere's surprise and confusion over the geographically dispersed "general" insurgency that became for many visible only for the first time, remarking simply, of these incongruously diverse, momentarily unified "oppressed people's" history yet to be written: "We're more connected than most people think."

References

Benjamin, Walter. 2003. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*. Edited by Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Cohen, Cathy J. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3, no. 4: 437–65.

———. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 2014. Kessler Lecture. www.racismreview.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Cohen_CLAGS_Transcript_121214.pdf.

Combahee River Collective. 1986. *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. Albany, NY: Kitchen Table.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 43, no. 1: 139–67.

———. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6: 1241–99.

Davis, Angela. 1983. *Woman, Race, Class*. New York: Vintage.

———. 2003. *Are Prisons Obsolete*. New York: Seven Stories.

DuBois, W. E. B. 2007. *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Duggan, Lisa. 2003. *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon.

Ferguson, Roderick A. 2004. *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. 1999. "Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism." *Race and Class* 40, no. 2–3: 171–88.

———. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gilroy, Paul. 1995. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hartman, Saidiya. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

James, Joy. 1996. *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Melamed, Jodi. 2011. *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Reddy, Chandan. 2005. "Asian Diasporas, Neoliberalism, and Family: Reviewing the Case for Homosexual Asylum in the Context of Family Rights." *Social Text*, nos. 84–85: 101–19.

Robinson, Cedric. 2000. *Black Marxism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Spade, Dean. 2015. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

DOI 10.1215/10642684-7275362