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THE TEMPORALITY OF RADICAL POTENTIAL?

C. Riley Snorton

This essay is an inquiry into the question that is the subtitle of Cathy Cohen's noted 1997 essay, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" As both a question and a fragment, "The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" provides key insights into the temporality of queer's potential for radical politics. It is, in one sense, an invitation to read the conditional modality of *might* into this question: when and under what conditions might queer politics be radical? Or what are the temporalities of emergence for radical queer politics? These questions, and the occasion to reflect on them on the twentieth anniversary of the essay's publication, precipitates additional considerations about the potential of queer politics at the time of the essay's emergence, in the elapsed time, and in the tense of the future conditional.

As readers may note, Cohen's essay begins by situating the author in time. The first sentence reads: "On the eve of finishing this essay my attention is focused not on how to rework the conclusion (as it should be) but instead on news stories of alleged racism at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC)" (Cohen 1997: 437). One might argue that there are, in fact, at least two temporalities being offered here—one experienced in the register of deadlines and scholarly time, and another in the register of contemporaneous politics. That these times are brought to bear on each other is an incitement to take time to listen and prioritize the lessons of the Left, as a proclamation that it is time to re/think what queer is becoming/might mean in terms of power.

This double gesture of time in the first paragraph provides context for the essay's title and the use of racially pejorative terms, such as "punks," a seemingly evergreen epithet for gay men that took root in the nineteenth century, "bulldaggers"—most frequently deployed in the early twentieth century to refer to masculine black women—and welfare queens, as a term that became particularly politically resonant in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a conservative catchphrase to explain and rationalize the decrease of federal social aid and increase in regulation for poor and working-class families in racist and sexist terms. The potential for queer politics to become intersubjective with the Black Radical Tradition is at least one of the essay's concerns, as it frames and discusses how misogyny

nist, homophobic, and sexually restrictive policies are materialized in and through racial capitalism.

Kara Keeling provides a provocative genealogy for thinking about temporalities of emergence—one that brings the works of Karl Marx and Frantz Fanon into relation with each other—and draws our attention to the epigraph of the conclusion of *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon (1967: 174) quotes *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “The social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped itself of all its superstitions concerning the past. Earlier revolutions relied on memories out of world history in order to drug themselves against their own content. . . . Before, the expression exceeded the content; now, the content exceeds the expression.”

Keeling (2009: 565) explains that Fanon’s interest in Marx indicates his concern about time as a psychopathology of colonialism: “As an epigraph to that conclusion, Marx’s well-known formulation of the organization of time within the proletarian movement of the nineteenth century calls attention to Fanon’s own interest in exploding the temporality of the colonial mode of representation of otherness and in revealing a temporality that raises the possibility of the impossible within colonial reality, black liberation.” If, for Fanon, the notion of black liberation might be found in relation to an “organization of time within the proletarian movement of the nineteenth century,” so one might ask how black liberation bears on the radical potential of queer politics as a question of temporality.

In *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*, I describe Cohen’s analysis in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” as “an echo from the future” that explains how there is no necessary distinction between black lives mattering and trans lives mattering in our current formation of racialized gender (Snorton 2017: ix), particularly in a moment of spectacularized black and trans death as well as other modes of antiblack and antitrans violence, the rhythms of which Keeling (2009: 579) refers to as the “intolerable yet quotidian . . . historical index of belonging to our time.” Perhaps this is what Cohen’s double gesture of time helps make clear for organizers, critics, and teachers: of how political time might set the clock for scholarship in a model that enacts—not with definitiveness but as a question—how black feminist, queer, leftist thought disrupts the myth of linear temporality, of singular selves, of the insufferable identity politics of the unmarked.

As such, one might read Cohen’s subtitled question alongside Fanon’s final prayer—“oh my body, make of me always a man who questions”—to imagine a collective future of engaging in the political without guarantees and with prin-

cipled uncertainty, as well as with a tenacity to do what Fanon (1967: 181, 179) espouses as a reminder to himself: to take “the *real* leap” of “introducing invention into existence.” That is, and to return to the notion of potential, the future conditional of radical queer politics may have already occurred, for example, in the form of the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977); is occurring, arguably in the radical critiques offered from the Movement for Black Lives, the Black Youth Project, and Bailout Movements, among other groups led by self-identified queer and feminist leadership; and will emerge in unforeseeable ways as queer continues to be an asymptotic index of temporalities of radical black, feminist, and left politics. This, too, is what Cohen (1997: 482) suggests in the final lines: “The best I can do is offer this discussion as a starting point for reassessing the shape of queer/lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender politics as we approach the twenty-first century. . . . Such a project is important because it provides a framework from which the difficult work of coalition politics can begin.” In this, its twentieth year of circulation, I look forward to the many beginnings to have with Cohen’s analysis and for the radical potential of queer politics that (might) have and will (continue to?) emerge.

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