

“It’s here, it’s that time:” Race, queer futurity, and the temporality of violence in *Born in Flames*

Stephen Dillon*

University of Minnesota, MN, USA

This paper uses the film *Born in Flames* to engage questions around hope and the future that have been central to queer studies in the last decade. As the author understands it, the film’s critique of the time of reform and progress holds profound implications for how we think about the future. By demonstrating the repetitions of racialized and gendered violence over time, the film produces a theory of the future where the continuation of the present as it is means the future will not come. If the state organizes populations, institutions, and forms of knowledge through a regulatory imagination and disciplined vision, it also determines the future in the same manner. The state ensures that the future can be extrapolated from the present by managing, contorting, and eradicating the future before it arrives. It uses preemptive action (war, assassination, incarceration, policing, administrative violence, and surveillance) to make its “imagined future come to pass.” The author argues that by showing the continuity between the racialized and gendered violence of the past, present, and future, the film constructs an anticipatory queer politics of urgency and presentism.

Keywords: queer studies; race; critical prison studies; futurity

“But those enemies (who we felt in our nightmares), came to life, afterwards, in the future of no future we are inhabiting now.”

– Franco Berardi (2011)

Born in Flames is a film about the futures imagined within the no future of state utopia. The film begins on the tenth anniversary of the “Social Democratic War of Liberation,” the “most peaceful revolution the world has known,” which created a socialist-democratic government in the United States. While labor celebrates its victory with parties and parades, an army of women (“dominated by blacks and lesbians”) is organizing against the “ethical humanism” of a “system that names itself falsely.”¹ As the Women’s Army makes clear through its actions, the state utopia inaugurated by the non-violent “War of Liberation” reformulates and reproduces pre-revolutionary racialized and gendered forms of regulation,

*Email: Stevedil@gmail.com

management, and violence. The revolutionary state replicates the past through discourses of reform, progress, and patience. By tracing the debates, tactics, and theories of aboveground and underground feminist revolutionaries organizing for a revolution against *the* revolution, *Born in Flames* challenges the imagination and fantasies of the state and labor, and the future such visions instantiate. It also critically intervenes in futures imagined by the national liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s: futures often normalized and restrained by the heterosexist and patriarchal regulation of gender and sexuality. To the extent that it builds off of the insights and theories of women-of-color feminism, *Born in Flames* produces a politics of futurity that exceeds the imagination of the state, labor, and the revolutionary Left.

Critically, the film produces a theory of the future and time where the continuation of the present as it is means that the future will not come. A critique of the state is central to this politics. If the state organizes populations, institutions, and forms of knowledge through a regulatory imagination and disciplined vision, it also determines the future in the same manner. The state ensures that the future can be extrapolated from the present by managing, contorting, and eradicating the future before it arrives. It uses preemptive action (war, assassination, incarceration, policing, administrative violence, and surveillance) to make its “imagined future come to pass” (Martin 2007, 63). For the Women’s Army, in the future that is no future – when “things are better now” but state and non-state violence continue to target racialized and gendered populations in the same way but under a new name – the only way to usher in a future that is not an end is to make the present expire. Hope means that tomorrow (as it is, as it has been, and as it will be) cannot come.

As I understand it, the film’s critique of the time of reform and progress holds profound implications for how we think about the future. Unlike traditional dystopic science-fiction films that are often set decades (if not centuries) in the future and that attempt to paint a picture of what will be if an aspect of the present is not undone, the dystopia of *Born in Flames* – one marked by surveillance, assassination, incarceration, state racism and heterosexism, and sexual violence – is the truth of our past and present. In other words, the future within the film is not the future that awaits us, but the present and past we are and have been living. *Born in Flames* does not show us what is coming, but what is here – what has always been here. This is evident in the ways that the film undoes the fabricated division between fact and fiction. In an interview, director Lizzie Borden describes the film as inhabiting a “border line between what is present and therefore documentary and what would be fiction, and therefore science fiction” (Borden and Sussler 1983, 27). The film is an ostensible documentary of the near future, but also uses fiction to produce forms of knowledge that exceed the epistemological boundaries of the state, the non-profit, the university, and the social order. Indeed, the film was conceived, filmed, and released at *the* moment when new modes of governance based on the prison, the market, and the non-profit emerged.² In particular, the urgency and impatience of the Women’s Army produces a politics and epistemology that undermines the temporalities of progress and reform central to the state and the heterosexist and patriarchal regulations of revolutionary nationalisms (Ferguson 2004). The film’s critique of the forms of knowledge central to the state, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy is evident in its engagement with the relationship between time and violence – what I call the temporality of violence.

In this essay, I consider the different temporalities in the film and their relation to state, non-state, and revolutionary forms of violence in order to think through the debate in queer studies concerning hope and the future. This debate has centered on psychoanalysis, popular culture, and the aesthetics of art and literature, yet what is often missing are the theories and histories of radical and revolutionary activists who contested the unbearable weight of the present in the hope of creating something else. While much of this debate has centered on the ideological and libidinal labor of the concept of the future, here I am concerned with theories of time and violence and their relation to the future.³ Even after 30 years, *Born in Flames* raises pressing questions about the relationship between time, violence, race, sexuality, and gender. I situate the film's engagement with the politics of temporality within the writings of 1970s activists who theorized the relationship between race, time, and violence. In particular, I argue that by showing the continuity between the racialized and gendered violence of the past, present, and future, the film constructs an anticipatory queer politics of urgency and presentism.

Additionally, the film gestures toward an anti-social politics that arise out of, not despite, the constitutive violence that produces and regulates race, gender, and sexuality. In other words, the Women's Army does not deny the future and hope for its end because they miscalculated the power of racialized and gendered subjection. Rather, they hope for the end of the future precisely *because* they understand the power of anti-blackness, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy.

The accumulation of time and the end of the future

In one of the first lines of the film, a state newscaster covering the celebration of the revolution's tenth anniversary says that the news program will look "at the progress of the last ten years, and will look forward to the future."⁴ Progress is central to the discourses produced by the revolutionary state and is the liberal conception of time that the Women's Army attempts to undo. Progress is named as a time that is cyclical and forcefully forgetful (Söderbäck 2012, 303). Indeed, progress, patience, and reform are the temporalities used by the state to justify and erase the violence that continues under the names of justice, equality, and democracy. The state describes the future as a space of safety and security in order to maintain the violence of the present, and to temper the rage of those who refuse to wait for the future's warm embrace to arrive. According to the state media, the Women's Army is not "interested in the progress of all of us" because their actions and demands contradict the teleology of state development and reform.⁵ The state declares change will come, to be patient, to trust in the progress of time. Critically, this narrative is not just produced by the state, but also by the white feminist editors of the *Socialist Youth Review*. When asked about the actions of the Women's Army, and more specifically about the continuation of sexual violence in the revolution, they respond:

Well, I think statistics will show you that the percentage of rape and prostitution at this point is lower than it was in pre-revolutionary society and that obviously it's an advancement, it's a step forward. It's impossible to talk about the complete, you know, abolition [of sexual violence], because this is not the nature of this government, they don't abolish ... it's a question of a gradual move toward something, and I think everything is leading up to the point where those things will no longer exist.⁶

Here, white feminism aligns itself with the state through its adherence to liberal Western notions of time and history. This is a notion of history where the passage of time washes away the violence of then and now so that the future is free from the horrors of the past. In this way, the past is constructed as a space of radical alterity, an aberration to the progress of the future. Sexual violence will be left behind by the progress of the revolution. Time will temper terror. Yet, the very ability of the editors to believe in the progress of time is tied to the immunity of whiteness from structural forms of racial violence, regulation, and social death. For instance, when Adelaide Norris, the black lesbian leader of the Women's Army, goes to the editors of the *Socialist Youth Review* to ask for their support, their conversation highlights the divergent temporalities of black feminism and white feminism. When Norris tells the editors, "You're oppressed too and it's pathetic that you can't even see it!" they respond, "There are problems, we know. But things are so much better than they were before. Things are not going to happen overnight. It's important that the party remains strong so progress can be made."⁷ Norris's response sutures gender and race to a different theorization of time:

You know the way my mom brought us up; there were eight of us and she took care of the domestic work all by herself. And abortions; she couldn't even think of abortions. And daycare – hmp – we took care of ourselves, no one took care of us. And there are plenty of women who are living now in the same manner: Black women, Latin women, young women living in that same lifestyle.⁸

For the editors, the future of the revolution will be free from state and non-state forms of racialized and gendered violence because the reforms sutured to time's progression will undo the horrors of the present. But for Norris, gendered racism built into the banality of everyday life undoes the imagined progress of time, so that time's passage is merely the modification and intensification of older modes of subjection and subjugation. For those bearing the brunt of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, the past, present, and future are not distinct temporal spaces. In other words, *Born in Flames* documents the amplification, modification, and protraction of the past in the present, where the past is not an isolated aberration of what is here, but, rather, is an anticipation of the present and future. The past is an image of the future because the future will be a repetition of the past. In this way, the film critiques normative notions of time and a liberal conception of history.

In *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*, Ian Baucom argues for a conception of history that undoes liberal notions of progress, change, and time. Baucom's theory of history centers on the massacre of 132 slaves aboard the slave ship *The Zong* in 1781. Over three days, the slaves were handcuffed and thrown overboard in order to collect the insurance money that sealed their value even in death. For Baucom, the massacre is *the* paradigmatic event of modernity. It encompasses the racial, financial, and epistemological regimes that have not only failed to dissolve with the passage of time, but instead, have intensified so that our current moment finds itself anticipated and enveloped by this event. As Baucom argues: "Time does not pass, it accumulates" (Baucom 2005, 24). Time does not erase what has happened, dissolving terror and violence into the progress of the future, nor is the past passively sedimented in the present. Rather, the past returns to the present in expanded form so that the present "finds stored and

accumulated within itself a nonsynchronous array of past times” (29). The present is possessed by the logics and protocols of racial capitalism’s past – by a perfectly routine massacre that was and is repeated endlessly across space and time in the (post)colony, prison, frontier, torture room, plantation, reservation, riot zone, and on and on. Racial terror returns from a past that is not an end to take hold (of bodies, institutions, infrastructure, discourse, and libidinal life) and does not let go. In this way, the past and present are not ontologically discrete categories, but are, rather, complex human constructs. The present is not a quarantined, autonomous thing. What was begun does not end but instead intensifies so that the past and present become indistinguishable.

Hortense Spillers provides a powerful theorization of time as accumulation in her classic essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book:”

Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated,” and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography or its topics, show movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise.

(Spillers 1987, 68)

According to Spillers, the anti-blackness inaugurated under chattel slavery is a death sentence enacted across generations, one that changes name and shape across time and space even as its continuity endures. Yet, for Spillers, time not only accumulates, it also captures. Her conception of temporality means that time is a form of captivity: one that makes her a “marked woman” (65). She is marked by a history of violence, trauma, and terror that alters normative conceptions of temporality. In other words, anti-blackness and racial terror are epistemological and bodily forces, but they are also temporal intensities that structure subjectivity and life chances.

Baucom and Spillers’s theorizations of time as accumulation and capture have profound implications for how we understand the future. Traditionally, the future is a space and time we do not know, a place of possibility and hope. The emptiness of the future is imagined as a space of seamless progress: a myth of Marxist teleology; a capitalist dream; a fantasy of nationalism and colonialism. When we imagine the future as the outcome of the passage of time, the past falls away and the present disappears so that the future becomes relief from the devastating weight of everything that has come before. For example, José Esteban Muñoz argues that the way out of the crushing weight of today is to hold on to the future because now is not enough. According to Muñoz, the future is the domain of queerness, a “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” that allows us to think “then and there” when here and now is not enough (2009, 1). For Muñoz, the call for no future is only available to those who have a future to deny. He worries that abandoning the future to a heteronormative white world will only lead to the deaths of more queer people of color. Yet, if time does not pass but accumulates, then the future is not the triumph of a tendency inscribed in the present. It is not the dissolution of the past or the undoing of the present. If time does not pass but accumulates, then the future is not liberated from the constraints of yesterday, but, rather, is the place where the wreckage of then and now lives on. When we think of time against the temporal regimes of the state,

heteronormativity, the nation, and capital, time drags, reverses, compresses, and accumulates. Engaging queerness as a force that distorts and undermines normative logics of sequence is to know that the conditions of possibility for the atrocities of the past have not faded, but, rather, have intensified (Freeman 2010, 27). It is to deploy what Jasbir Puar calls an “antecedent temporality” where one can see, feel, and engage the ghosts that are not yet here, but will be tomorrow and the next day and the next (Puar 2007, xx). Muñoz writes that the past tells us something about the present: “It tells us that something is missing, or something is not yet here” (2009, 86). Baucom and Spillers extend this assertion by arguing that past forms of racial terror are a lesson about the present, but also a vision of what is to come. If time does not pass but accumulates, then the past is where the future is anticipated, recollected, and demonstrated (Baucom 2005, 213). If there is no progress, but instead repetition, modification, intensification, reversals, and suspensions, then we know what the future will be. The future will be what was before.

The actions of the Women’s Army work against a notion of history as progress, and in its place, engage the repetitions, accumulations, and intensifications of time as it circulates, suspends, and speeds up. For them, the progress of the revolution means “cutbacks in daycare centers, ending of free abortions, forced sterilization of minority women, discrimination against single women and lesbians in housing, and firing of single women in favor of men with families.”⁹ The revolution is a new formation that reproduces and expands past forms of white supremacist and heteropatriarchal regulation and subjection. Isabel from Radio Regazza describes the revolutionary state as such:

Angry unemployed people are rioting in the streets and the city is on fire with their rage. Now what do you think the government plans to do about this situation besides beating them over the head with billy clubs? Do they plan to supply them with jobs, with training programs, or with decent housing? Nah, uh uh. You know what they’re going to do? The same bloody tactic they pulled before the revolution, remember, and I’m here to warn you, *it’s going to happen again*. They’re already starting a shuffle board, an act on a grand scale where all the poor and the unemployed will be shoved economically into the ghetto.¹⁰ [my emphasis]

Isabel’s declaration that “it’s going to happen again” deploys an anticipatory logic that theorizes the past and present as a “preemption of future possibilities” (Clough and Willse 2011, 2). The future and the present compress and collide because the temporality of state violence is a time of repetition, intensification, and accumulation.

Franz Fanon’s concept of “historicity” is instructive here. For Fanon, the past is ontologically sutured to race so that when “I discovered my blackness . . . I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: ‘Sho’ good eatin’” (Fanon 1967, 112). For Fanon, white supremacy functions as a type of temporal prison where black liberation is delayed and destroyed by the capacity of past traumas, rooted in colonization and slavery, to affect, shape, and possess the present. Fanon looks to the past of European colonization and sees a mirror of the future, an “endless past/present of colonial domination” (Scott 2010, 76). In other words, white supremacy is not just a spatial technology that inhabits infrastructure and institutionality; it is also a temporal regime that refuses to abide by the progress of the law, language, or the passage of time. As Kara Keeling writes: “The past constricts the present so that the present is simply the reappearance of the past” (2007, 26). And as Isabel makes clear, state

violence limits the possibilities of the present and future by binding both in a closed circuit of reverberation and magnification. When time accumulates, it possesses, detains, and immobilizes: this is time as a form of capture. In short, Isabel knows what is coming because it has already happened – in the past that is the future that has already arrived. There is not relief from knowing the past is gone because the past is a warning of what is coming. *It's going to happen again.*

This is our time: death and the future

Throughout *Born in Flames*, countless members of the Women's Army declare: "This is our time." The time of *the* revolution was not the time to abolish anti-blackness, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. It was a time that left behind and captured poor (queer) women of color through the progress of democracy and equality. In this way, "our time" and state time are two antagonistic temporalities of violence in the film. As James Scott argues, the modern state's utopian aim is to reduce the disorderly and chaotic social order under its purview into a mirror of the administrative knowledge central to its observations and governance. The state works to produce temporal and spatial intelligibility with the goal of manufacturing the orderly administration and regulation of the nation's population, resources, and infrastructure. By disrupting and dismantling spaces, populations, and epistemologies that are illegible to its regimes of knowing and governance, the modern state creates a utopia of visibility and legibility that is open to policing and control (Scott 1998, 82). The management of time is central to this process. "Our time" is what the state seeks to capture. In *Born in Flames*, state time extends and expands the violence of the past, while "our time" is a temporal regime that exceeds and undoes state time. Again, Fanon proves useful for understanding these differences.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon describes a "time lag, or a difference of rhythm, between the leaders of a nationalist party and the mass of the people" (Fanon 1963, 107). According to Fanon, the rank and file of anti-colonial rebellions demand the complete and utter *immediate* destruction of the forms of power that render them "more dead than alive," while both colonial and nationalist governments attempt to manage, temper, and restrain the demands of those who have no more time to give to the promises of a future that is always coming, but never arrives (51). For example, in the film, the state promises that "in the future" there will be jobs, an end to sexual violence, and racial and gender equality. But for Fanon, the "hopeless dregs of humanity" (or the wretched of the earth) are filled with an "uncontrollable rage" and thus exist in a temporal regime apart from that of the party or the nation. This is a time of intensity and immediacy ("the slaves of modern times are impatient"), where the future of the present as it is means no future at all (74). Like the financial, epistemological, and racialized legacies of slavery Baucom sees intensifying in our current moment, Fanon diagnoses the future of colonialism as the accumulation of the social, biological, and living death of the native. The native lives a death in life produced by the racism of slavery and colonialism. The future's horizon is the accumulation of past forms of racial terror and violence. In this way, Baucom and Fanon draw connections between race and time that are crucial to questions of queer futurity. The relationship between race, gender, death, and the future is central to the immediacy and spontaneity of the Women's Army and is foundational to the film's critique of the future. We can

turn to the Fanonian-inspired prison writings of George Jackson to further explore the relationship between death, race, and the future.

In his 1972 text *Blood in My Eye*, published shortly after he was shot and killed by guards at San Quentin prison, Jackson writes of racism, death, and revolution:

Their line is: "Ain't nobody but black folks gonna die in the revolution." This argument completely overlooks the fact that we have always done most of the dying, and still do: dying at the stake, through social neglect or in U.S. foreign wars. The point is now to construct a situation where someone else will join in the dying. If it fails and we have to do most of the dying anyway, we're certainly no worse off than before.

(Jackson 1972, 6)

Here, Jackson argues that the social order of the United States is saturated with an anti-blackness that produces, in the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2007, 28). Jackson's text is littered with a polemic that links race and death in a way that preemptively echoes Michel Foucault's declaration that racism is the process of "introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (Foucault 2003, 254). When Jackson, Gilmore, and Foucault define race as the production of premature death, they make a connection between race and the future. Race is the accumulation of premature death and dying. For Jackson, race fractures the future so that the future looks like incarceration or the premature death of malnutrition, disease, and exhaustion. The future was not the hopefulness of unknown possibilities. It was rather the devastating weight of knowing that death was coming cloaked in abandonment, neglect, incarceration, or murder. In other words, according to Jackson, death was always and already rushing towards the present of blackness.

In the last line of *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman similarly connects the future to premature death when he references the murder of Matthew Shepard. He writes: "Somewhere, someone else will be savagely beaten and left to die – sacrificed to a future whose beat goes on, like a pulse or a heart – and another corpse will be left like a mangled scarecrow to frighten the birds who are gathering now, who are beating their wings, and who, like the death drive, keep on coming" (Edelman 2004, 154). For Edelman, the future will necessarily continue to produce a world that is unlivable for queer people. In this way, the polemics of black liberation and Edelman's anti-social thesis share an affinity around the theorization of the future as overdetermined by premature death, yet they diverge in how they imagine death's relationship to race and power. For Edelman, the future looks like repetition of the death of Matthew Shepard (a white gay man), while for Jackson, it looks like the premature death of incarceration, the ghetto, and chattel slavery's haunting contortion of the present. In other words, the state and anti-blackness were central to the anti-sociality of the black liberation movement. Within Jackson's analysis, the state is the primary mechanism for unevenly distributing racialized regimes of value and disposability. Following the writing of Fanon, Jackson argued that for this relationship to be abolished: "The government of the U.S.A and all that it stands for, all that it represents, must be destroyed. This is the starting point, and the end" (Jackson 1972, 54). Jackson's polemic crescendos when he describes the future he desires:

We must accept the eventuality of bringing the U.S.A to its knees; accept the closing off of critical sections of the city with barbed wire, armed pig carriers criss-crossing the city streets, soldiers everywhere, tommy guns pointed at stomach level, smoke curling black against the daylight sky, the smell of cordite, house-to-house searches, doors being kicked down, the commonness of death.

(Jackson 1972, 55)

If the past and present have produced the accumulation of the premature death of black people, then Jackson imagines the complete undoing of the social order as the way out of temporal capture. The future of the social order means no future, and so the future must come to an end. Fanon similarly imagines the relationship between the native and the future of the social order: “They won’t be reformed characters to please colonial society, fitting in with the morality of its rulers; quite on the contrary, they take for granted the impossibility of their entering the city save by hand grenades and revolvers” (Fanon 1963, 130). Here, the invitation to the safety and security of the city (or the social order as it is) is an offer to continue a life that is a half-life. Possibility comes from a starting point that is an end.

In her writing from captivity, Angela Davis articulates this logic in relationship to the prison. In the 1971 essay “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” Davis argues that the sole purpose of the police was to “intimidate blacks” and “to persuade us with their violence that we are powerless to alter the conditions of our lives” (39). Davis theorizes the violence of police and prisons as pervasive and unrelenting. Throughout the essay, Davis names the complicity between an anti-blackness as old as liberal freedom and new forms of penal and policing technologies that emerged in the 1970s in response to political upheaval and insurrection. Davis calls for the abolition of what she terms the “law-enforcement-judicial-penal network” in addition to arguing for the construction of a mass movement that could contest the “victory of fascism” (50). Yet, in line with the political imaginaries at the time – an imaginary articulated by *Born In Flames* – Davis wanted more than an end to the prison and the violence of the police. Like other early black feminist writing, Davis did not just call for the overthrow of one form of state power so that a new one may take its place. Instead, Davis implied that the social order itself must be undone. For Davis, the prison was not the primary problem. The prison was made possible by the libidinal, symbolic, and discursive regimes that actualized the uneven institutionalized distribution of value and disposability along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality. Davis called for the total epistemological and ontological undoing of the forms of knowledge and subjectivity that were produced by the racial state. In short, hope, for Davis, meant that the prison could not have a future, and more so, that a world that could have the prison would need to end as well.

Critically, Jackson did not understand the end of the future of the social order as particularly different from his present because “I’ve lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief” (1972, 7). Jackson’s understanding of the future arose from his critique of reform. Derived from his correspondence with Davis, Jackson argued that the essence of fascism was reform or more specifically “economic reform” (118).¹¹ Every reform that modified or improved the operations of global capitalism and white supremacy only extended the life of the

social order. And the life of the social order, according to Jackson and Fanon, is parasitic on the control, exploitation, incarceration, and premature death of black people. The creation of a new world could not rely on “long term politics” because patience, reform, and change meant nothing to “the person who expects to die tomorrow” (10). For Jackson, the future is a time those without a future cannot risk. The future was not coming and so the present could not wait.

The temporal break between those without a future who demand this is “our time” and the time of the state that declares your time is the future, is most striking in the final scenes of *Born in Flames*. Towards the end of the film, the president of the United States delivers a national televised address to announce a new reform that will pay women for housework. Simultaneous with the announcement, a cadre of the Women’s Army storms the state-run TV station and interrupts the president’s address with a video that exposes the imprisonment and murder of their leader, Adelaide Norris. Norris was murdered, in part, because of how she understood the relationship between time and violence. This is evident in internal discussions within the Women’s Army concerning the use of violence. When Hilary Hurst and Norris, the two leaders of the Women’s Army (according to the FBI), discuss the role of violence in the actions of the Women’s Army, they have competing visions of the relationship between time and violence. When Hurst tells Norris, “The reality of having to deal with taking up arms, Adelaide, is really heavy, I mean whether we can accept or be responsible for the potential violence thrust upon us, from our own violence thrust out ...” Norris simply replies, “*I’m telling you it’s already happening. It’s here. It’s that time.*”¹² Norris’s response invokes two forms of violence. First, she implies that the state violence Hurst is concerned will come if they take up arms has already arrived (indeed Norris will be imprisoned and murdered within a few days of this conversation). She also indicates that the time is right to intensify their efforts through the deployment of violence. The time is right for counter-violence, because state violence is already the past, present, and future. Norris mobilizes a black feminist analytic where there is no outside to the forms of violence, terror, and subjugation produced by white supremacy, anti-blackness, and heteropatriarchy. As a queer black woman, Norris does not encounter violence in isolated moments of exceptional transgression. Space nor time will bring relief because there is no contingent relationship between blackness and violence (Wilderson 2010, 88). This fact leads to a politics of impatience, immediacy, and spontaneity by the Women’s Army. When the future is not relief, but intensification and accumulation, then the present is all that is left. “Our time” is a time of the present, an anticipatory time that sees the no future of the future as it is.

This anticipatory urgency is described beautifully by James Baldwin in his 1970 letter to the then-imprisoned Davis, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Davis.” When Baldwin wrote to Davis, “For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night,” he argued that the present was a sign of what was to come (1971, 23). The dawn of a new day did not mean things would be better. Time’s passage was not relief from the violence of yesterday; rather, what was happening to Davis was a promise of what the future would bring. If Davis had been taken, then no one was safe. Baldwin argued that the past and present were lessons about the future. He began his letter with an example of temporality’s repetition and stasis: “Dear Sister: One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on Black flesh, or the very sight of

chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses” (19). For Baldwin, hope that the United States had progressed beyond the time of slavery was only a fantasy. The present told a different story. The horrors of slavery were not an “intolerable sight” nor an “unbearable memory” to the American people; instead, slavery’s visual economy and policing technologies composed a lesson about what was happening to Davis and countless others. The stillness of time meant the present and past were not aberrations to the radical alterity of the future, but, rather, were anticipatory reflections of what lay ahead.

After the murder of Norris, Isabel declares on the now underground Radio Regazza:

Wake up! We’re being murdered out there in the streets. And if you’re going to sit back and watch it happen, Sister, you better get it together and wake up. Because all your babies and yourself, you’re going to be cleaned out, we ain’t gonna be around no more, *there ain’t gonna be nothing*, a wasteland, a wasteland sister, now get it together, it’s time to fight.¹³

In the dystopian future of *Born in Flames*, the violence of the past will endlessly repeat so that the future will be death and nothingness. Isabel knows there is no brighter future to hope for or better day to move towards. She understands the future (and the present) as what Denise Desilva calls a “horizon of death” (De Silva 2007). Yet, she also implies that the murder of Norris indicates something about the relationship between anti-blackness and the future. In “People of Color Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery,” Jared Sexton writes, “Black existence does not represent the total reality of racial formation – it is not the beginning and the end of the story – but it does relate to the totality; it indicates the repressed truth of the political and economic system” (2010, 48). For Sexton, to understand anti-blackness is to understand power in its totality; it is to confront the truth of our present moment and the (no) future that is already here. It is to see the paradigm even as we also confront “the example, the incident, the antidote” (2011, 34). Norris’s death is the paradigmatic event of the film (and of the social order represented in the film). It is an event that speaks the truth of the revolutionary state – a truth that drives the Women’s Army deeper into the “wasteland,” towards the impossibility of “no more,” closer to the unthinkability of “nothing.”¹⁴ Like Baldwin’s plea that Davis’s imprisonment was a sign of what the night would bring, Isabel warns that Norris’s death is the future’s promise: it is all that the future holds.

The Women’s Army not only understood themselves as inhabiting their future deaths – expecting to be killed or captured at any moment – they also argued that if the present had a future, the future would never come. A future under the colluding rule of anti-blackness, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy was a future the Women’s Army attempted undo by trying to bring an end to the present. If there was to be a future there could be no present. And so, they pursued the destruction of the present in order to usher in the future. *Born in Flames* argues for a confrontation with the future as a horizon of death through a politics of urgency and presentism, but it deploys multiplicity and difference to challenge time as accumulation and capture.

Within the feminist and queer politics of *Born in Flames*, if the present is not enough, the future won’t be either. In this way, the critique of progress and reform was also a critique

of dominant conceptions of time based on passage not accumulation. Under the passing of time, the future will be better because time undoes the brutality of power. The time of hope constructs the past as an aberration of irrationality, lawlessness, cruelty, and backwardness, while the future is the past's constitutive opposite. The future is where hope resides. Yet, the critique of reform, revolution, and progress in *Born in Flames* understands time not as a passing, but as modification, mutation, and transformation. Power does not get better, friendlier, or less brutal; it just changes name and shape. The wreckage of the past keeps piling up, so that what the liberal imagination hopes it has left behind, is actually what makes the present and the future unlivable. In the end, for Fanon, Jackson, and the Women's Army the future may not come. And if it does, it will be not be the warm illumination of queerness as it leads us to a more livable day; it will be the horrors of the past amplified by the names equality, justice, and freedom. We might consider that queerness is not the futurity of an always-moving horizon; rather, it is all we have now.

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Notes on contributor

Stephen Dillon is a PhD candidate in American Studies at the University of Minnesota. His writing appears in the journals *Radical History Review* and *Darkmatter: In the Ruins of Imperial Culture* and in the edited collection *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison-Industrial Complex*. He is currently finishing his dissertation, "Fugitive Life: Race, Sexuality, and the Rise of the Neoliberal-Carceral State."

Notes

1. *Born in Flames*, DVD, directed by Lizzie Borden (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2006).
2. For analyses of the rise of the prison and the market in the 1970s, see: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Globalisation and US Prison Growth: From Military Keynesianism to Post-Keynesian Militarism." *Race & Class* 40 (2/3) (1998/99): 171–188; Loïc Wacquant, "The Penalization of Poverty and the Rise of Neoliberalism." *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 9 (2001): 401–412; Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Prisons and Policing in an Age of Crises* (London: Verso, 1999); Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
3. Some of the keys texts of this debate include: Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Sara Ahmed, *Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future." *GLQ* 15 (4) (2009): 565–582; Lisa Duggan and José Esteban Muñoz, "Hope and Hopelessness: A Dialogue." *Women and Performance*:

- A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19 (2) (2009): 275–283; Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future.” *GLQ* 17 (2) (2011): 243–263; Jordana Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo, “Queerness, Norms, Utopia.” *GLQ* 18 (1) (2011): 1–17; Andrea Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism.” *GLQ* 16 (1–2) (2010): 41–68.
4. *Born in Flames*.
 5. *Born in Flames*.
 6. *Ibid.*
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. *Born in Flames*.
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. *Ibid.*, 118.
 12. *Born in Flames*.
 13. *Born in Flames*.
 14. Frank Wilderson describes this dilemma when he writes, “To say that we must be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here” (2010, 338).

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