Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 2013
Vol. 23, No. 1, 1–5, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2013.786305

INTRODUCTION

We are *Born in Flames*

Craig Willse[a]* and Dean Spade[b]*

[a]*George Mason University, Fairfax, VA, USA;* [b]*Seattle University School of Law, Seattle, WA, USA*

This essay introduces the dossier, situating Lizzie Borden's 1983 film *Born in Flames* in the contemporary political context. After offering a brief synopsis of the film, the essay argues that *Born in Flames* serves as both a document of feminist, anti-racist social movements and as inspiration for modeling future political work. The essay then briefly introduces the pieces that comprise the dossier.

Keywords: *Born in Flames*; feminism; queerness; race; social movements; political tactics

The plans for this special dossier on Lizzie Borden's 1983 film *Born in Flames* first emerged following a screening of the film organized in April 2010 by the Queer/Film/Art series in New York.[1] We attended the screening together – it was Craig's first viewing, and Dean's first in many years – and afterward, we talked about the movie as we slowly wound around West Village streets, through neighborhoods that Borden's utopic-dystopic story imagined populated with feminist bicycle gangs that chase down would-be rapists. We were in a shared and combined state of awe and confusion: *How does this film exist?* At that moment, we were almost nine years into the latest phase of increasing criminalization of dissent and expanding militarization of domestic police forces: the war on terror. The radical vision of the film felt truly shocking: lesbian feminists building multi-strategy responses to heteropatriarchy through an analysis of racism and poverty, debating connections and disjunctions between community organizing, working inside systems, cross-gender and cross-race alliances, and armed resistance. While all that work and conversation persists, the screening was a powerful reminder of the existence and tenuousness of political struggle, especially anti-racist/queer/feminist struggle, in the twenty-first century.

In our wandering conversation about this gem of still radical, transformative inspiration, we realized that *Born in Flames*, filmed over many years starting in the late 1970s and released in 1983, would soon be having its 30th anniversary, and we decided immediately and impulsively (a certain kind of politics that in our shared activist trajectories we've both tempered and embraced) that we needed to do something to commemorate the occasion. As we talked it out, we fantasized about a collection of conversations that would bring new audiences to the film and give it both its proper due and the engagement of serious political critique it demands and deserves. We wanted as well to express our enthusiasm, adoration, and excitement for the film in its continued lives. So this dossier attempts to offer a little of

*Corresponding authors. Email: cwillse@gmu.edu; spaded@seattleu.edu

all that, but it starts really as a love letter, to the film, to the activists who collaborated with Borden in its making, to the social movements that gave it its fiery birth.

For those unfamiliar with the film: first of all, go watch it. It will blow your mind. But if you want to keep reading first, here we offer a bit of synopsis and context for the essays that follow. *Born in Flames* is set in a near-future New York City, 10 years after a peaceful socialist revolution. While broadcast media and the ruling party commemorate the anniversary, the viewer is quickly introduced to the fact that not all is well in utopia: sexism and racism persist. In this sense, the film is an intervention into Marxist debates, suggesting that far from secondary effects of a capitalist system, gender and race hierarchies organize life and population and do not just fall away as economic arrangements are transformed. Rather than simply document these oppressions, the film chooses the vantage point of various women and groups of women – diverse in terms of race, age, and political commitments – who are resisting, organizing, and agitating. The visual politics of the film are just one of the many ways it surprises; though we get glimpses of those oppressions, they are not gratuitously offered up for our viewing pleasure, but rather the film assumes the perspective of an already politicized viewer. At one point, the film jumps between a variety of routine tasks performed by women's hands – feeding an infant with a bottle, paperwork at an office desk – and then cuts from plastic-wrapping chickens in a meat-packing factory to unrolling a condom on a dick. And so it turns out neither routinization nor a gendered division of labor have been left behind in the supposedly peaceful revolution.

This montage on "women's work" brings to mind the 1980 white feminist classic *Nine to Five* which similarly employs montage to portray the hierarchized monotony of the gendered labor force. However, in *Nine to Five* liberal feminism's focus on office sexual harassment and the glass ceiling form a tight container around the explosive potential of gender-role resistance. The contrast between the two films traces the deep divides emergent in second-wave feminism, and still with us today, between the white (purportedly universal) feminist understandings of what and where "women's" problems are and the challenges that women-of-color feminisms make to those limited framings. This tension is introduced early in *Born in Flames* when the charismatic radio host Honey tells her audience: "We will continue to fight … against the system that names itself falsely. For we have stood on the promises far too long now that we can all be equal under the cover of a social democracy where the rich get richer and the poor just wait on their dreams." Honey's critique of equality politics and state declarations of progress resonates in the context of the "post-civil rights" U.S., where a particularly powerful technology of state violence is the insistence that existing systems and conditions are no longer racist, sexist, and ableist. Members of the "Women's Army" challenge state frameworks of multiculturalism that declare their problems addressed and call them selfish for naming and framing women's problems and resistance. This critique remains insightful today, as feminists and queers are told that the police and military are here to protect domestic populations from "hate criminals" and to spread democracy and human rights around the world (and are ready to hire us).

While *Born in Flames* is a story of movements, key figures do emerge that represent types or possibilities of political positionality: Adelaide Norris, a young black leader of the Women's Army, who trains with armed rebels in the Sahara; Isabel, a young white performer and DJ who tends to work in radical isolation from larger movements; Zella Wylie (played by civil-rights activist Florynce "Flo" Kennedy), a black lawyer and elder to the

new movements who is dismissed from her job in the new socialist administration for bringing a suit against oil companies; the young white editors of the official party *Socialist Youth Review*, who debate the merits of separatist movements versus working in the system. (One of the editors is played by Kathryn Bigelow, who of course would go on to find much fame and wealth in promoting rather than opposing state violence.) As these various individuals and groups communicate, collaborate, and come into conflict, a range of political tactics and visions is mobilized: radio address as alternative media; door-to-door organizing; street protest; self-defense; armed resistance; sabotage. The persistent, and not always fruitful, attempts of the Women's Army to build coalitions across these groups animate some of the narrative. As such, the co-existence of different politics and their relationships to race and class privilege are highlighted rather than submerged to a universalized category of women. In one scene, Adelaide Norris, frustrated that the *Socialist Youth Review* editors will not endorse an upcoming march, chastises the editors: "Look, if you're not gonna write about it, at least come out of class guilt." The editors argue that it is a mistake to raise women's issues, that things have gotten better since the revolution: "It's important that the party remain strong so that progress can be made." Adelaide disagrees, arguing that black women, young women and Latina women have not seen these supposed gains. *Born in Flames* centers feminist analysis and the category "women" in ways that may feel dated given contemporary trans-feminist interventions. Yet it raises women-of-color feminist critiques of the category's false universalism, dramatizing and visualizing the controversies between white feminist and women-of-color feminists that remain central to feminist and queer organizing today.

Perhaps most surprising to us, as contemporary viewers, was the willingness of the film to portray political differences and debates among activists and its refusal to neatly resolve conflict. The film depicts social-movement formations that include a diversity of tactics, and significant disagreement, without suggesting that these must be flattened, ignored, or resolved for collective action to unfold. We struggled to think of other examples of films that could do this – that could portray the complexities of a diversity of tactics within movements without demanding that the audience pick a position in order to imagine a thrilling and conclusive transformation. This complexity and diversity of tactics is commented on both by the feminist revolutionaries and by the law-enforcement agents in the film. The former debate their differences. The latter discuss how the non-hierarchical organizing structure and rotating leadership model used by the Women's Army frustrates their ability to figure out who is in charge, and, presumably, neutralize her. Instead of providing a pat narrative of a unified movement advocating for a single clear demand, *Born in Flames* leaves us with the unexploded bomb – the possibility that we do not know, cannot know, where we are in the history of the transformations we seek, what impact our varying actions will have, and whether our divisions and splits will expand or dampen different forms of momentum. This film somehow shows us how no individual actor or group has a grasp of either the current conditions, the causes and effects of resistance or the ultimate destination. The film's plot and setting clearly and openly critique a dogmatic, statist Marxist socialism, and particularly vanguardism, but this portrayal of activist formations in their differences offers the more urgent, necessary critique of social-movement pitfalls.

And so *Born in Flames* turns out to be kind of sci-fi and also kind of a documentary, and that is very much the spirit with which we have approached it in putting together this

dossier. What futures does the film help us envision, and what actually existing political and social conditions does it document, including forms of activism and debates within activist communities? Thus, the pieces that follow address the film in terms of what it records and what it provokes. By the first we mean the film not only anticipates future experiments of pseudo-documentarian aesthetics and narratives, but is itself also a document of the moment in which it was made. While of course any text reflects its material historical conditions, this film does so in ways that are both compelling and intentional. For anyone who has spent time in New York City, it would be hard not to be moved by the footage from the late 1970s and early 1980s of a financially collapsed, white-flighted New York pre-Giuliani's 1990s retrenchment. In its use of non-professional actors involved in protest movements, and the improvisation of the script, the film also archives political conversations of the moment. In his beautifully articulated framing essay, Lucas Hilderbrand takes up this historicizing task, pointing to the ways the film enters debates in theory and activist-scholarship of its moment. As Hilderbrand helpfully reminds us, the film not only responds to problems of how to represent "woman" in regimes of scopophilia, but must be seen in relation to woman-of-color feminist analysis as well as its interventions into white feminist/film scholarship.

Two essays address our anachronistic desires to read the film through today (and today through the film) while also attending to historical circumstances of its production. Steve Dillon reads *Born in Flames* as anticipating contemporary queer theory's interest in imagining futures against (heteronormative, white supremacist) frameworks of reform and progress. Dillon does so by putting the film in dialogue with prison activist and abolition politics and writing. For Dillon, work by George Jackson, Angela Davis and others helps mark the incommensurability of a politics emerging from those exiled to prison and deemed "without future" with state projects of deferral and containment. Following *Born in Flames'* exposure of the violence of "peace-time" after the revolution, Dillon asks us to reconsider forms of violence in and against state violence.

Christina Hanhardt's essay juxtaposes *Born in Flames* with *Milk,* Gus Van Sant's 2008 biopic of Harvey Milk. Van Sant portrays the queer activism of Milk's time and place in ways that support and mirror contemporary framings of white gay and lesbian politics, centering rights claims, electoral politics, and a white gay hero while erasing the leadership of lesbians and people of color, eliding as well the complex and multi-issue claims and strategies of Milk's time. Hanhardt juxtaposes *Milk*'s examination of the past to *Born in Flames'* speculative portrayal of the future to examine how both films speak to the race, gender, and class divides inside queer and feminist politics around 1980.

Regarding the second experience of viewing, we have tried to capture the excitement and generative, inspirational aspect of encountering the film, its utility and beauty. And so we have included two pieces along these lines. Filmmakers Wu Tsang and collaborative team Eric Stanley/Chris Vargas discuss their own work in relation to the politics and filmmaking practices of *Born in Flames*. Tsang, Stanley, and Vargas discuss the pitfalls of fundraising strategies for filmmaking, the ways that LGBT film festivals normalize queer and trans art and identities and collaborate in corporate and state violence, and the value of pleasure and improvisation for queer and trans prison-abolition and marriage-abolition politics. And finally, Toronto artists Allyson Mitchell, Deirdre Logue, and Scott Miller Berry provide a document of their own: the transcript of a conversation that took place

at a screening of the film in January 2012. Organized through the Feminist Art Gallery, FAG, and in response to the sexist programming of the Toronto International Film Festival, the event's publicity and narrative channels the rage and humor of *Born in Flames*, utilizing the energy of the film to provoke a contemporary intervention.

This kind of community-building activity seems a great way to close out the issue, to pay homage to the film, and to think of what future lives await it.

Note

1. Archives of the program can be found at http://www.ifccenter.com/series/queerartfilm/

Notes on contributors

Craig Willse is an assistant professor of cultural studies at George Mason University. His writing has appeared in *Social Text, Economy and Society,* and *Widener Law Review*. He is co-editor, with Patricia Clough, of *Beyond Biopolitics: Essays on the Governance of Life and Death* (Duke University Press, 2011).

Dean Spade is an associate professor at Seattle University School of Law and, from 2012–14, a visiting assistant professor of law at Columbia University. His book, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (South End Press, 2011) was awarded Honorable Mention from the GLQ Caucus of the Modern Language Association and was a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award.