

Fire and Futurity: Riot, its Object, and Queer Potentiality in the George Floyd Uprising

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*In response to the police killing of George Floyd in May, 2020, aggrieved members of the community broke into the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct and set it on fire. That moment became the emblem of a global movement for racial justice. This article employs the framework of performance studies scholar José Muñoz's queer futurity in order to reframe the initiation of the George Floyd uprising and demonstrate the sociopolitical efficacy of the first fire of that global movement: the overlooked burning of an adjacent AutoZone location. By employing Muñoz's theories as expressed in *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* as well as particular footage of that evening's consequential events, I demonstrate the AutoZone fire's role in substantiating a directed disturbance of the status quo and performing the disruptive and transformative possibility of riot. By prioritizing and making consequential the object of a riot's destruction (and, incidentally, fire itself), the article legitimizes the negation of this seemingly mundane locus of consumption and everyday exploitation in actualizing resistance, initiating systemic transformation, and actively constructing a viable futurity.*

No more waiting.
No more hoping.
No more letting ourselves be distracted, unnerved.
Break and enter.
Put untruth back in its place.
Believe in what we feel.
Act accordingly.
Force our way into the present.
Try. Fail this time. Try again. Fail better.
Persist. Attack. Build.
Go down one's road.
Win perhaps.
In any case, overcome.
Live, therefore.
Now...

— *Now*, The Invisible Committee, 2017



Video still from the Unicorn Riot stream on May 27, 2020

Riots are a spontaneous performance of rage. They are an instinctive and unpracticed response, a desirous and forceful rejection of complacency and the status quo. In the face of injustice and persecution, bodies, unmonitored and unchoreographed, take to the street and unapologetically occupy space. Riots forget order. They embrace chaos—even failure. Riots agitate hierarchy and instantaneously destabilize the distributions of social and political dominance. A riot is not straight; its movements deviate from normative boundaries. At the same time, riots are an embodied and deliberate act—a simultaneous dismantling and rebuilding. They have purpose. They are productive. They seek to disrupt normative states of oppression. Neither is the object of a riot random; the place and target of riot matters. The storefront that gets smashed, the items that get looted, and the buildings that burn direct attention to systemic networks of racial and economic inequality—products of racial capitalism—to instigate a necessary disturbance and transformation; to disrupt complacency; to confront and attack the structures of capital through its material presence. To stop it from being.

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I am proposing *riot* as the subject (not protest, or rebellion) in order to confront the reactionary use of the word and disentangle it from its racist and classist connotations: targeting the marginalized in their enactments of presumed aimless violence. Discourse in the United States, constructed primarily through biased media framing, habitually identifies rioters (Black rioters in particular) as “thugs,” disorderly bodies needing to be subjugated. This formulated construction of riot’s unhinged imperative and the need for control and order (prioritizing the protection of property over human lives) perpetuates racial biases and erases the institutional injustices and violence to which a riot is predominantly responding, necessarily failing to embrace the contextual complexities and purposeful intentions of a specific action.¹ I hope here to uphold the practice of riot and contribute to the work of deconstructing and reexamining it—bringing the inchoate expression of the street into purposeful, subversive specificity.

The George Floyd Uprising: Day Two

On May 27, 2020, the intersection of East Lake Street and Minnehaha Avenue in Minneapolis was burning. By the end of that second day of riots—a response to the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin—a Target, an AutoZone, a liquor store, and a newly built luxury condominium had all been set on fire. While images of the rioting were captured and widely reported by national news media, the Minneapolis-based independent outlet Unicorn Riot was on the ground, streaming the day’s events as they unfolded—as protesters confronted heavily armed police, set up barricades, smashed storefronts, graffitied the precinct, and rallied to the call and response, “What’s his name? George Floyd!”

That night I tuned into Unicorn Riot. Since discovering their streaming of the protests that followed the police murder of Philando Castile in a St. Paul suburb in the summer of 2016, I had come to rely on the autonomous journalism of this media collective for on-the-ground, unbiased, unfiltered coverage of resistance. And so, at a remove, through the live broadcast of night two, I witnessed Niko Georgiades, cofounder of Unicorn Riot, walking with the community, reporting live through a gas mask, framing the constellation of direct actions. Georgiades worked his way through the riot, capturing the shifting dynamics

¹ Daniel King, “The Reliably Racist Cherry-Picking of the Word ‘Riot,’” Mother Jones, June 1, 2020, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2020/06/the-reliably-racist-cherry-picking-of-the-word-riot/>. King, in reaction to widespread use of the word riots to describe the uprisings in Minneapolis, queries the way in which the word is selectively used in referring to social and political unrest. King proposes the use of terms such as rebellion or even violent protest—if they are indeed violent. In the end, however, King admits that this liberal gesture of conscientious language modification is insufficient.

between those protesting, those attempting to repress them, and the activated urban landscape in which all parties were operating. At dusk the first fire was set, at the AutoZone. For over ten minutes Georgiades remained at the fire as it engulfed the building. Caught in the frame was the circulation of protestors as they reveled, posed for selfies, and warned each other of what they thought could be an impending blast. But it is the building on fire—a prosaic moment on the precipice of the exceptional—that brings into focus the performance of the object of riot.

José Muñoz's notion of *queer futurity*, as expressed in *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*, is helpful in reframing the initiation of the George Floyd uprising. Examining the sociopolitical efficacy and disruptive potential of the AutoZone fire, I look to Muñoz's queer futurity in order to conceive that fire's role in substantiating a directed disturbance, performing the transformative possibility of riot. Prioritizing and making consequential the object of a riot's destruction (and, incidentally, fire itself), enables us to legitimize the negation of a seemingly mundane locus of consumption and everyday exploitation in actualizing resistance, initiating systemic transformation, and actively constructing a viable futurity.

Entering into dialogue with Muñoz's queer futurity necessitates a particular scope of inquiry adjacent to the methodology and positionality of queer theory. It is within that tradition of challenging normative binaries—dismantling oppressive assumptions of gender, sex, and social hierarchy—that this analysis of riot lies. Riots are queer in their transgression; riots are a queering of public space. As bodies enter the streets, improvised and undisciplined, repressive relationships are threatened. Rioters decide where and how to occupy space. By queering state-imposed operations within both public and private space, riots engender opportunities for an autonomous practice of commoning, allowing for a dynamic process of collective world-making and actualizing the imaginal within occupied streets.

And so we need to investigate the ways in which we can conceive riot, this particular moment in the George Floyd uprising, as a queering of sorts, embracing the deviant and unsettling a practice of repressive civic order. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam points to the labor of queerness in celebrating the perverse humanity of failure and throwing into turmoil the colonial mindset of progress. “Why not think in terms of a different kind of society than the one that first created and then abolished slavery?” Halberstam asks.² Like the alternative proposed by riot, queer failure, per Halberstam, presents possibility; it shows us that “the social worlds we inhabit, after all, as so many thinkers have reminded us, are not inevitable....”³ The AutoZone fire, in these terms, is located

² Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 8.

³ *ibid*, 8-9.

at the nexus of a challenge to hyperperformance and colonial heteronormativity—contesting and collapsing barriers towards a queer future. In that moment of consequential eruption, the rioting in response to the murder of George Floyd can be envisioned as an opportunity to radically shift how we understand and engage with the seemingly inevitable consequences of capitalism. Rioters know best how to shape and move through their own environments. The negation of oppressive landscapes (by fire, by smashing windows, by graffiti), opens up voids and potential thresholds through which subsequent practices of actualizing an autonomous existence can begin to take form—even if these labors of queerness eventually fail.

This analysis takes objects of consumption and capital, as well as fire, as its primary agents—in the spirit of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s embodied event—in order to advance the focus of objects (versus bodies) as a site of performance analysis.⁴ Like bodies, these objects perform meaning, and as with the ephemerality of a body in motion, the burning AutoZone, though its fire eventually dies, continues to discharge an ongoing potency. The AutoZone fire performs beyond a semiotic event, an abstract representation of the real struggle that has yet to be actualized. Instead, the event proposes very real concrete possibilities—practical solutions that remain as memories, impressions, and frameworks for the next riot.

Poet and critical theorist Joshua Clover’s historico-tactical notion of the intention and effect of the work of rioting is helpful in locating an analysis of the AutoZone fire within a broader dialogue of sociopolitical struggles. It may also be seen to expand the discourse of performance studies by including congruent modes of social, cultural, and political inquiry. The significance of public reaction and perception to the burning of the Third Precinct, in contrast to the actions of looting and burning places of business, is brought into focus through Clover’s theory and historical analysis of riot’s relationship to social and economic factors. In *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*, Clover argues that each represents a specific strategy of resistance to inequitable structures of capital. The strike, according to Clover, is a wage struggle directly related to, and intended to disrupt, production. Riot, in its late-capitalist form (which Clover calls *riot prime*), expresses resistance beyond the reach of labor actions, directly attacking—correcting—modes of commodity circulation from which a community is disenfranchised. Clover sees riot as the necessary expression of a surplus population whose labor has been made irrelevant by the marketplace and, therefore, ineffective as a mode of resistance. In contrast to the state-tolerated strike, the riot, targeting oppressive systems that deny communities equitable circulation, is rendered illegal. That determination is not only a reaction to the presence of subsidiary actions already identified as crimes—looting, property damage,

⁴ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Performance Studies,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, Third Edition, ed. H. Bial and S. Brady (London: Routledge, 2016), 31-32.

setting fire to the loci of production and commodification—but a defensive response to the riot’s true, overarching crime: forcing a reset of the price of goods.

Vicky Osterweil’s *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action*, explains riot similarly, as a means of engendering economic horizontality. These actions, according to Osterweil, make “day-to-day life easier by changing the price of goods to zero.”⁵ Looting, she continues, “relieves pressure by spreading wealth in the community.”⁶ Osterweil also makes the important distinction between riot and protest in the mechanism by which communication is enacted. Protests, according to Osterweil, convey demands to those in power; riots make the changes in the world they wish to see. Riots are prefigurative.

Riot as a Making of Queer Futurity

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz activates a methodology of constructive imagining and future worldmaking through his theory of a “not-yet-here.”⁷ In his radical envisioning of a queer temporality, the past has the potential to generate a collective resistance to the complacency of an oppressive present, activating the utopian—not as an ideal finality but a repetitive methodology of doing. Muñoz looks to Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose writing on the utility of utopia he employs as a foundation from which to construct his queer futurity. Through an analysis and critique of queer visual art, photography, writing, performance, and culture, Muñoz reflects on the utility of particular elements within these works in disrupting normative notions of time, relationality, and the manufacture of identity. For Muñoz, queer futures are instantiated in these aesthetic representations.

The ideas of Muñoz can be effectively activated on the corner of East Lake and Minnehaha, elucidating the ways in which the video of the burning AutoZone may be read and understood as an instance of queer futurity. Like Muñoz’s focus on queer aesthetics, this moment as captured by Unicorn Riot is an opportunity to understand its role in presenting another possible (perhaps better) world. Like the potentialities Muñoz identifies in Kevin McCarty’s *The Chameleon Club*, a series of photographs of empty Los Angeles nightclub stages, or the remnants of Kevin Aviance’s drag performances, the ephemera of which is sustained in ongoing conversations and local newsprints, the scene of the burning AutoZone captures a moment of dismantling at the edge of transformation. The project of resistance and revolution, like queer performances, requires the act of

⁵ Vicky Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting: A Riotous History of Uncivil Action*, (New York: Bold Type Books, 2020), 14.

⁶ *ibid*, 14.

⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 30.

disappearance, the intentional negation of heteronormative and oppressive networks of the status quo.

In this particular temporal framing—as the auto parts chain store burns and is eventually put out—what is being eliminated and what remains is significant. The AutoZone plays its role within a city landscape where a geographical narrative is intertwined with racial inequity, overpolicing, and economic disparity. Aren Aizura, in “A Mask and a Target Cart: Minneapolis Riots,” emphasizes the overlooked specificity of the geography of South Minneapolis when contextualizing and analyzing the riot.⁸ In his analysis, Aizura, a resident of the Powderhorn Park neighborhood where the riots began, describes the corner of 38th and Chicago—where Floyd was murdered in front of the Cup Foods, the intersection that soon would become the autonomous zone of George Floyd Square—as a place where people habitually gathered, particularly during the pandemic.⁹ Neighborhood volunteers set up mutual aid operations there and had established that corner as a focal point for community solidarity. Aizura notes the transformation of the historically Black neighborhood as it was increasingly closed in by gentrification. He also points to the history of the Third Precinct and its eventual placement at the the corner of East Lake and Minnehaha. The building, according to Aizura, had the logic of a fortification. It was sited and designed for maximal surveillance of the surrounding neighborhood, coming into its own as a defensive installation when, during the riots, it served both as an important staging ground for the police and a redoubt from which they could attack protestors from above. In Georgiades’ video, as the fire breaks out at the AutoZone across the street, you can see officers in this dual offensive and defensive positioning, lined up on the roof of the police station.

Aizura also turns his attention to the Target store down the street from the precinct. The fact that this particular Target was looted (shopping carts were used to create a barricade) is important. The Target is a seemingly neutral mainstay of any commercial strip—particularly in Minneapolis where the company is headquartered. However as one of the only places to shop in Powderhorn Park, one of the biggest employers of that community, and as a partner with the Third Precinct through a program called SafeZone (a public/private security initiative), its significance as a locus for disrupting circulation cannot be overstated. Like the AutoZone, the Target is located in this predominantly Black

⁸ Aren Aizura, “A Mask and a Target Cart: Minneapolis Riots,” *The New Inquiry* (May 2020),

<https://thenewinquiry.com/a-mask-and-a-target-cart-minneapolis-riots/>.

⁹ In June 2021, as reported by Unicorn Riot, Minneapolis authorities began the process of removing the concrete barriers in order to reopen the street, but were met with resistance by community members defending the autonomous zone and memorial site. In May 2022 the intersection of Chicago and 38th was renamed George Perry Floyd Square.

Minneapolis neighborhood whose intersections mark racial capitalism's manifestation of food deserts, minimum wage jobs, and the profiting by corporations off captive disenfranchised communities through both labor and consumption. A community's actions toward the object of riot, such the Target or the AutoZone, communicates to that institution a rejection of its exploitive practices, as well as to the lawmakers who create the preconditions for exploitation and the police who enforce it through violence. As at the AutoZone, attacking the Target, looting its shelves, disturbs enforced hierarchies and redistributes agency to the community. The actions of those rioting exposes the fragility of a system that relies on consensus to maintain its authority. That shift in power, while momentary, performs a precedent of possibility—a utopian doing.

For Muñoz, the mechanisms for this utopian doing are found in the quotidian—the smallest gesture, the everyday object, the habitual encounter. In writing about Frank O'Hara's poem, *Having a Coke with You*, Muñoz points to the way that O'Hara couples a lovers' discussion of historical paintings with sharing a soda. The poem's utopian effectiveness, per Muñoz, is in the transformational efficacy of a simple social interaction, versus the pretensions of art.

So what is in the everyday, the quotidian, of the AutoZone? Before burning the luxury condo, the liquor store, the Target and the police station, a chain store that sells car parts was set on fire. In the context of a riot, anything is possible. One might suggest that even the neutral familiarity of a car parts store holds within it a complex system of economic and racial injustice—the representation of mobility versus immobility, the tensions of which are perpetuated and reinforced by racialized geographies. The flamboyant racism that Marshall Berman famously attributed to the New York projects of mid-20th century urban planner Robert Moses—designing parkway bridges too low for buses, for example, as “a means of social screening”—is in fact a feature of the plan of every American city which favors the automobile, with its attendant costs, over pedestrian life.¹⁰ Economic and social accessibility is thus dependent on this privileged mobility. In its burning, the AutoZone emerges as an activated rejection of this racialized barrier to civic inclusion. Seen in this Muñozian manner, the AutoZone emerges as an exceptional if quotidian instrument for imagining acts toward a more equitable common landscape.

Muñoz also establishes a central tenet for his argument through Giorgio Agamben's notion of potentiality, which according to Agamben exists as an ongoing tension present in choice and action. This potentiality, Agamben emphasizes, is distinct from possibility. Where possibility implies a knowable occur-

¹⁰ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988): 299. Tensions between race and mobility are activated in Berman's discussion of Robert Moses and the ways in which the architecture of his highways privileges the privatization of public space through the automobile.

rence that may or may not happen, potentiality demands an absence, the sustaining of an unknown, the not-*yet*-here. In such a temporal suspension, a form of anticipation, the past is the threshold by which a future may be imagined. For Muñoz, gazing with nostalgia at an empty stage—curtains closed, lights on—as captured in the frame of McCarty’s camera does the work of offering a temporal threshold that anticipates an unrealized and imagined future. In that absence there is potentiality; or hope, present and palpable in queer events, places, and aesthetic representations that remain as glimpses of “a mode of nonbeing that is eminent.”¹¹ Looking to queer aesthetics and to Bloch’s notion of concrete utopias (ones that are relational to lived events and past struggles), Muñoz argues that the “past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity.”¹²

In imagining Georgiades’ ten-minute framing of the AutoZone fire as a representation that, as a past event, remains with potentiality, we can begin to understand its critical efficacy via notions of a queer futurity: how this moment in suspension opens itself to something else and something more. As the AutoZone was set alight, the first of five buildings to burn that evening, there was an opportunity to envision what this action could be—a projection of a not-*yet*-here eminence, of racial capitalism dismantled, and an autonomous, liberated future made visible. A fire, like a riot, has potential just by starting. As its eruption ruptures complacency and redefines space, property, and power, a riot offers glimpses toward radical improvisatory practices of relationality. At the moment bodies initiate a transgression into the streets, for instance, the city’s carefully designed expressions of hierarchy and control are disrupted. People moving into the street perform vocal and gestural expressions of defiance and self-determination, a refusal (at that very moment) to accept the status quo. And so the potentiality enacted by the burning AutoZone established a direction, a means by which to initiate a disruption and transformation. Witnessing the growing fire as it found its way through the stuccoed one-story big box, the utility of that moment was clear: not a metaphor—a semiotic performance of unattainability—rather, the burning of this avatar of the everyday was doing the precise work of Muñoz’s and Agamben’s potentiality. The building actually burned, after all, and its charred presence days later, I would argue, continued to present an instance of Muñoz’s not-*yet*-here, a queer futurity. While fleeting, as we know fires must die—and like the ephemerality of performance—its potentiality for something more remains. Similar to Peggy Phelan’s assertion that performance

¹¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 9.

¹² *ibid.*, 16.

is contingent on its inevitable disappearance—fire (like riot) continues to generate meaning through what *it* leaves behind.¹³ Once a riot is over, once the buildings stop burning and “order” is forcibly returned to the streets, through the generated collective memory of community, as well as the visibly transformed urban landscape, the work of that escalatory moment continues.

But what if this potentiality fails? What if the doing of a queer utopia disappoints? A measure of failure is presumed in Muñoz’s not-yet-here, and it is the temporal working out of that noplacement that necessarily does the utopian work of queer futurity. Like queerness, Muñoz argues, failure is about doing something else, and for Bloch, as Muñoz explains, this tension between disappointment and hope is central to any movement of transformation. The practice of failure is integral to imagining another world, one that is better and more just than the present. Jack Halberstam understands this state of non-attainment—the absence of success or progress—as a resistive practice of reclaiming an anarchic curiosity and potentiality. “Failure,” Halberstam writes, “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development...”¹⁴ He continues: “Failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent.”¹⁵ Therefore, failure disrupts stasis and, as Muñoz suggests, “the linearity of straight time” imposed by dominant power structures.¹⁶ In the failure of a queer potentiality, the present, the here and now, is no longer the only option. Failure, according to Muñoz, is a past with potentiality. Riots, like all except the final one that presages and inspires revolution, must come to an end. Rioters know this. This “overdetermination,” as Joshua Clover terms a riot’s inertia, is what compels systemic rupture and an unwavering desire for transformation.¹⁷ We learn from our mistakes.

But the spread of revolution is also dependent on a co-laboring of subversive bodies in the street. Collectively executing a porous and improvisatory mode of resistance brings into play a critical reimagining of building community outside of hierarchical power structures. It is in this collective struggle that a shared space of memory and preparation for future riots and future modes of being takes place. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz argues for the condition of a codependent and collaborative doing of his not-yet-here present, insisting that “from shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality.”¹⁸ Muñoz critiques antirelational theories embedded in queer culture, arguing instead for a

¹³ Phelan, Peggy. Chapter 7, “The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction” In *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 146-166. New York: Routledge. 1993.

¹⁴ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3

¹⁵ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

¹⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.

¹⁷ Clover, *Riot, Strike, Riot*, 150-152.

¹⁸ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 189.

collective of mutual dynamics of knowing and organizing. He draws from Jill Johnston's notion of "intermedia" to argue for an engaged horizontality by which arbitrary separations and hierarchies between objects and living things, reality and fantasy, legality and prohibition, cease to exist—to perceive "new circuits of belonging" and a "new ordering of epistemology."¹⁹ Riots are an intermedia gathering of sorts, a different way of seeking autonomy and agency, and even pleasure, together. Riots are a means of manifesting the commons. Riots, per Osterweil, are about "reproducing a community."²⁰ They are a spatial and temporal doing and undoing (yes, things are broken) that consolidates the marginalized and oppressed, centering agency in that collective body. Riots transform relational structures and, as the AutoZone fire makes evident, disrupt the social arrangements mandated by capitalism. And so, laying witness to the fire that evening—through Georgiades' curation—there appeared to be both a co-struggling and a reinvention of the public sphere. In anger and in grief, in this mutual and collaborative co-creation of a new type of engagement, space and place (the streets, the street corners, the parking lots, the store fronts) are activated in opposition.

The AutoZone was on fire and in the foreground protestors were entering and exiting the frame. Some appeared to watch the flames in admiration and longing (our relationship with fire is complex), while others escorted their comrades to safety.²¹ In these networks of collective action, what is perceived is a collaborative performance of actualizing liberation, getting free. A protestor enters the frame. Placing themselves in the foreground of the burning building, they pose for a photo. It appears to be a joyous moment, and the instinct to capture it speaks to the particular ways in which a burning fire and a riot can instigate an ecstatic reorientation of relational boundaries.

On the evening of May 27th, anger was growing among the protestors. The standoff on the corner of Minnehaha and Lake continued and fellow residents shouted "get down," protecting each other from rubber bullets being fired by the police from the roof of the precinct. Out of the frame but audible in Georgiades' footage, a protestor is heard announcing to the crowd that the AutoZone has been set on fire. Georgiades begins to walk his livestream viewers in the direction of the smoking facade. The fire's spectacular emergence draws other protestors and shouts of "fuck" can be repeatedly heard coming from the growing audience. Watching this moment take form, there is a peculiar sense of in-betweenness—a co-embodiment of fear and defiance, but also joy. The fire captivated a street corner and its sublime presence performed the unpredictable.

¹⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 126.

²⁰ Osterweil, *In Defense of Looting*, 14.

²¹ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: A Brief History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019). Pyne writes about this complex relationship fire has with human evolution, progress, and the Anthropocene.

While someone attempts to extinguish the fire, another is seen in the frame of the camera capturing the flames on their phone. One protestor says “take a picture!” while he poses in front of the burning building. Someone shouts “back the fuck up!” A chorus of “yeahs” and “woohoos” is heard. Fists are raised. This emergent space of intermediate response feels like the threshold of revolution; it is in this noplacement, the defacing of codes, signifiers, and borders, that one begins to engage in alternate and improvisatory gestures of world-making.²² The fires that engulfed the AutoZone, the Target, an Arby’s, a luxury condominium and the Third Precinct in response to the murder of George Floyd were a community’s way of grieving. But there was also in this liminal moment a glimpse of astonishment; the fire performs an unexpected convergence of reaction and repercussion. As the fire was lit and protestors watched the AutoZone go up in flames—while imagining, perhaps, a whole city on fire, while knowing the fire department would eventually arrive and, protected by yet more cops, extinguish it all, while this one fire would fail—potentials of an alternate future, alternate fires, were spreading throughout the country, and the world.

So why shouldn’t we, after all, be astonished by a building on fire, its virtuosic flames? Following Bloch’s notion of astonishment as untethering from the tyranny of the present, Muñoz argues for the importance of a kind of virtuosity as necessary traces for a queer futurity. In an analysis of the Los Angeles-based art collective My Barbarian, for instance, Muñoz argues that their fantastical representations of mythic worlds, through their costumes and Vaudevillian acts, conjure realms beyond this one. This queer virtuosity, as he defines it, while comical, is committed to disrupting straight time and “the limitations of an alienating” and unimaginative “presentness.”²³ Riots, of course, are disruptive too. Riots call forth a virtuosity of maneuvers and generate a surfeit of images. Rioters insist on marking the streets with unfettered embodiment, throwing their bodies into a contestation of power and performing feats of spectacular transformation. In his introduction, Muñoz professes the predicament in which he is writing, stating, “critical imagination is in peril.”²⁴ In a riot, however, imagination is privileged and instrumentalized. The fire at the AutoZone—the camera’s presentation in remaining, and my obsessive witnessing—initiated a longing for something. In this longing, an embodied performance of something unfinished, and in a palpable rage, the protestors appeared empowered. Community members were shouting at the police, demanding justice and accountability. But they

²² Stavrides, Stavros. *Common Space: The City as Commons* (London: Zed Books, 2016): 183-207. Borrowing from Michael Taussig’s notion of *defacement*, Stavrides argues the necessary defacement of stereotypes within public space in order for the horizontal practice of common-space to emerge.

²³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5.

²⁴ *ibid.*, 10.

were also laughing and communing. They seemed to be inspired by their catharsis.

In this moment of exceptional pleasure and improvised engagements with others in space, there is also uncertainty. Throughout *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz approaches, but does not fully embrace, what I believe to be the crucial component of his argument at the center of the tension between his hope and disappointment: the notion of risk. The risk of failure, the risk of exposure, and even the risk of death; utopia is an uncertain practice. Muñoz points to dancer Fred Herko's childishness (and his eventual suicide as he grande jetéed out his New York City apartment window), as it challenged and put at risk the minimalist agenda of his Judson Dance community. Kevin McCarty's photographs of empty stages, the performers unseen or disappeared, risk inviting the critique of a subjectless aesthetic, a visual void. Artists take risks all the time. Queer art, by virtue of its intention, by definition, is especially risky. But, as Muñoz argues, it is necessary as the work continuously improvises spaces outside dominant systems of knowing, representing, and being — constructing another world.

Riots are also inventive and improvisational. They embrace both chaos and risk; and reading Georgiades' ten minutes from the perspective of a queer aesthetic, it too has representational risks. Proposing fire and destruction as its subject while glimpses of rioters appear sporadically to assert their own perilous and embodied agency, destabilizes dominant representations of riot. Attending to the fire's effective performativity — risking the portrayal of the extraordinariness of riot — this captured moment stages an instance of transformation. While bodies occupy the street and angry residents demand accountability for the murder of yet another Black man, the camera fixes on the engulfed AutoZone. And while the already marginalized risk further exposure, the possibility of a better world, their presumed immortality, is perilously on the brink. In the actions of the determined, permanence and stability are risked for an experience of, and participation in, that better world.

The Future Now

Muñoz's proposition is a hopeful one. And so too are riots. The imagistic and transformational narratives that unfold remain as traces for a future potentiality. To glimpse a gesture, a vacant cabaret spotlight, a spectacularly mundane moment, a childish naiveté, a blazing fire, or a defiant collective body, is to embrace a utopian doing. Fires are used to convert landscapes. Fires are started to zero out and begin again. Fires, like riots and queer futures, are a renewal.

On May 29, 2020, following three days of riots, after the police had surrendered their station, after the fires had been put out, Derek Chauvin was charged with third-degree (later to be upgraded to second-degree) murder. On that same day, Governor Tim Waltz signed into effect a curfew. But the streets remained occupied. Unicorn Riot continued its coverage as thousands marched from the

burned and abandoned Third Precinct to the station house of the Fifth Precinct, as cars were set on fire, as more businesses were looted, as the governor deployed the National Guard, and as the vigil and future occupation site at 38th Street amassed people, flowers, messages, and artwork dedicated to the memory of George Floyd.

The curfew went unheeded because rioters demand a different present. As a riot imagines queer streets and queer futures, what becomes necessary are transformative pasts (like the still smoldering street corner) that sustain us in a present and usher us into a utopian future. A reexamination of the first days of the George Floyd uprising presents a methodology by which to construct an ongoing mutual responsiveness to movements that unfold on the street. And bringing attention to the forgotten AutoZone fire expands the scope of significant actions to be considered in this necessary work. In our writing, in our generation of discourse, we have the responsibility to reinforce and advance these movements, to sustain the cause once the fires are put out, to persist through to the next uprising—in riotous and queer solidarity.

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