

The Politics and Erotics of Time

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Elizabeth Freeman. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Duke University Press, 2010. 256 pp.

What does it mean to take pleasure in or to have fantasies about “rubbing up against the past” (xii)? Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* weaves together affect studies, critical historiography and politics to nuance our understanding of queer time. Building on Michel Foucault, Dana Luciano, and Jacques Derrida’s yoking of modernity with the temporality of nation states and corporations, Freeman argues that alternate formations of time offer the power to disrupt. She describes queer time as a “hiccup in sequential time” that “has the capacity to connect a group of people beyond monogamous, enduring couplehood” (3). For Freeman, queer time is political work: it articulates a separate register from the time of modernity and capitalism; it is a temporality of slowness; and, most importantly, it works on bodies. Indeed, Freeman is most interested in what happens when bodies meet across time.

The corporeal entanglements of the past and present prove particularly enticing for Freeman. The non-sequential interactions produced in experimental film, fiction, and performance art form the ground of queer time and grist for Freeman’s close reading. We are led through a dazzling array of queer temporalities, which are experienced through the visual juxtaposition of photographs, the handling of historical objects, inhabiting places with a past, performing practices with a history, and, in one case, actual time travel. Freeman is less concerned with the negative feelings that might accompany temporal dislocation—feelings that other theorists such as Jack Halberstam and Lee Edelman have described in negative terms—than she is invested in the connections and pleasures that these encounters produce. In contrast to melancholy and pain, Freeman focuses on the reparative possibilities that these encounters engender.

Most centrally, *Time Binds* explores the ways that queer time can “fold subjects into structure of belonging and duration” (xi). The first chapter, “Junk Inheritances, Bad Timing” works with Julie Kristeva’s concept of Women’s Time to illuminate the possible alternate generational time of daughters and domesticity via a reading of several

experimental films and a novel. Freeman argues that these films explore the classed nature of familial intimacy and illuminate queer possibilities by highlighting pleasure as a mode of class struggle. This connection between queer time, politics, and pleasure is at the fore of the readings and arguments offered by Freeman in each of the book's subsequent chapters. The second chapter, "Deep Lez," brings feminism in conversation with LGBT politics through Sharon Hayes's project *In The Near Future* and the civil rights movement by way of the film *Shulie*. In putting these political movements face to face with their failed projects, Freeman explores the seductive undertow of temporal drag. The third chapter, "Time Binds" produces close readings of *Frankenstein*, *Orlando*, and the science fiction film *Sticky Fingers* to explore the ways in the practice of history is infused with tactile pleasures in the joining together of the past and present through what Freeman terms erotohistoriography. The final chapter, "Turn the Beat Around," works through the race play and sadomasochism in Isaac Julien's film *The Attendant* to show the reparative potential of erotohistoriography. Sadomasochism, in this case, provides a way to come to terms with the collective legacies of the transatlantic slave trade through its attention to suspension and slow time.

If reparation is central to Freeman's vision of a political temporality, so, too, is reenactment. In a provocative (and timely) reformulation of Judith Butler's notion of performativity, Freeman presents the concept of temporal drag, which highlights drag's associations with "retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present" (62). Temporal drag illuminates that which is often left ignored in the future-oriented time of performativity; it is the excess of historical signification. Freeman uses temporal drag to examine the generational aspect of the relationship between feminism and queer theory. In a compelling reading of the 1997 film *Shulie*, Freeman illuminates the ways in which Elisabeth Subrin's inhabitation of Shulamith Firestone, in a shot by shot remake of a never screened 1967 documentary, produces moments of harmony alongside moments of smugness and discomfort. The moments of discomfort, Freeman suggests, arise because they "reanimate cultural corpses" (72). Instead of shedding the ghosts of the past, Freeman suggests that the present remains haunted by it, in a particularly queer way. These moments exert a drag on the present and show the failed projects that precede it. In this way Freeman argues we can read the failure of feminism with regard to civil rights and the schism of identity politics vis-à-vis queer theory. Most saliently, Freeman suggests that temporal drag highlights the tactility of our relationship to the past. It is Subrin's demeanor, the subtly changed backgrounds, and the present day context that illuminate these moments of drag; temporal drag is located in the meeting of bodies.

In Freeman's analysis of *The Attendant*, reenactment also plays an important role. Freeman argues that the race play in Julien's film emerges as a set of *tableaux vivants* which rescript history in a mode of erotics so that it can be analyzed and reexperi-

enced as pleasure. The protagonist of Julien's film, the black attendant, engages with the white visitor as an S&M bottom, a form of reenactment that alludes to the treatment of blacks during the transatlantic slave trade. The attendant thus reexperiences a collective history in an erotic mode: "historical memories, whether those forged from connecting personal experiences to larger patterns or those disseminated through mass imagery, can be burned into the body through pleasure as well as pain" (162). Referring to sadomasochism as a mode of erotohistoriography, which sutures affective history to *jouissance*, *The Attendant* presents a temporality of stasis and suspension as a way to produce pleasure and reparative possibilities for the future.

In addition to elegant and radical close readings, *Time Binds* gives us a way to think about pleasure and temporality in combination. Pleasure suffuses the text and emerges as one of queer time's primary modes of disrupting the hegemony of capitalism and modernity. In this way, we might assign Freeman to a genealogy that includes Fredric Jameson, Gilles Deleuze, and Michel Foucault. Where Freeman's work departs from this genealogy is through her attention to the specificity of pleasure and temporality; the working class lesbian generationality of the mothers and daughters of the first chapter is not reducible to the racialized sadomasochistic play that she explores in the fourth chapter. The encounters that Freeman stages are particular in their attention to race, class, gender, and sexuality such that the bodily effects of the temporal collisions have profound implications for thinking about both identity and history. If we take identity to be a mode of mixing the present and the past, then the erotic dimension of Freeman's work offers new possibilities for theorizing affect, identity, and embodiment. Similarly, we have been given tools to theorize history as a mode of producing pleasure, which, in turn, allows us to think critically about what has been omitted and how we might begin to reincorporate these other histories. Theorizing temporality and pleasure in tandem also gives us a way to think about the materiality of temporality and invites us to think about class in a different mode, as "embodied synchronic and diachronic organization" (19). Here, Freeman writes that she "aims ... to restore a differently queer body—the body erotic thought not only in terms of its possibilities for making sexual cultures but in terms of its capacities for labor" (18). Class struggle is figured in terms of both temporality and pleasure. Following Freeman, we might begin to imagine using temporality and pleasure to work through identity and class and the ways in which they overlap and pull apart.

In short, *Time Binds* provides us with close readings of experimental works of film and literature while simultaneously exposing the political stakes of temporality by foregrounding pleasure and the body on both an individual and collective level.

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