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Introduction: 1968 Decentered

“**T**he last time I saw Richard was Detroit in 68,” begins the Joni Mitchell song. “And he told me all romantics meet the same fate someday / Cynical and drunk and boring someone in some dark café.” Given Mitchell’s reference to ’68, one might think that Richard is talking about political romantics, those who believed that “another world was possible,” who were filled with hope as they acted energetically to bring about radical political change.

There was indeed a lot going on in Detroit in 1968 in the wake of the massive uprising in the summer of 1967, which had shut down the “Big Three” auto factories for a few days and forced the federal government to send in army troops with tanks. One might remember, for instance, the formation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), the Marxist-Leninist group that was sparked into existence by a wildcat strike in May, and which became the kernel of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Or, one might recall that John Sinclair, having been inspired by a Huey Newton speech, founded the leftist, anti-racist White Panther Party. And then, there were ongoing riotous disturbances, as in the clashes with the Detroit police and National Guard near the site of the 1967 uprising after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968.

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But for this song, the political is channeled through the personal. The year 1968 is when Joni Mitchell divorced Chuck Mitchell, a folk singer with whom she lived in Detroit (right next to the Wayne State campus) from 1965 to 1967, when Mitchell moved to New York City. The song examines the fate of the “romantic” by way of love’s vicissitudes in a way that seems like it is about the feelings one might have for an ex, even though, as Mitchell later observed, the song is not literally about Chuck (it was another folk singer who had made the comment about cynicism to her).¹ The song delivers a devastating indictment of Richard, who “got married to a figure skater,” “bought her a dishwasher and a coffee percolator,” and “drinks at home most nights now with the TV on and all the house lights left up bright.” Here, Richard is not just the critic, but also the antithesis of romantic dreams and love. “Look at the moons in your eyes,” he says to her. What she wants (according to him) is love’s “pretty lies.” (“Only pretty lies, just pretty lies,” she repeats, making them *sound* pretty too—gorgeous even—but then also a bit blue, as her voice veers down on “lies” the last time she sings it.) Richard does not fall for pretty lies; he’s no dupe.

But her rejoinder suggests that he is a romantic too: “you’re romanticizing some pain that’s in your head.” He is depressively dwelling on the pain even as he tries to disavow it with all those bright lights. Mitchell sees through him. “You got tombs in your eyes,” she says to him, pointing out that he has tried to bury his losses and leave them behind. But he can’t. When he goes to the Wurlitzer, she says: “the songs you punched are dreaming.” Pay attention to the music you like to listen to, Mitchell suggests—that’s where your lost dreams reappear. We are all punching our dreams. “So sweet. So sweet. Love so sweet,” she sings, again flattening or “bluing” the phrase’s notes (as Michelle Mercer remarks) on the final “love so sweet,” underscoring the fundamentally melancholic quality of our attachment to that sweetness.² Popular music—and indeed this very song she is singing right now—Mitchell reminds us, is one of those places where we can rediscover the forgotten futures we thought were buried and gone. It turns out that disappointed dreams don’t stay dead. Maybe that’s why they are so difficult to bear. What *does* one do with the emotional energy that was attached to those hopes, when our actions fail to achieve their aim, when the story we thought we were in takes a turn for the worse, or when we suddenly realize that time is running out? (“Drink up now it’s gettin’ on time to close.”)

Even well-founded hope is inherently disappointable, Ernst Bloch noted in 1961. After all, hope does not address itself to that which exists: “it is open in a forward direction” (Bloch 1998: 341). It “incorporates the element of chance, without which there can be nothing new.” Hope’s methodology

dwells in the “region of the not-yet.” Sometimes that hope takes root in action, in collective projects, and as a group we stop thinking “oh that’s impossible,” “that’s too utopian,” and we allow ourselves to take seriously what we all kind of know on some level (as Adorno remarked in his conversation with Bloch): that life could be different, that “a life without hunger and probably without anxiety” is possible (Bloch and Adorno 1988: 4). At least within the moments when solidarity comes into being (sometimes frustratingly brief or finite, a “package of minutes,” as Gwendolyn Brooks put it), when “this We” appears, the wicked spell that makes the present order seem necessary and inevitable is broken. Listen, for instance, to John Watson describe the ambitions of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and their reasons for organizing at the “point of production”: “We feel that black workers, especially, have the power to completely close down the American economic system. In order to implement that power, we have to become organized.” He continues, “assuming control of the means of production essentially means that you are at the first stage of assuming state power. It is from the escalation of this type of struggle and from the reaction of the ruling class to it that we see the development of an overall revolutionary movement which will forever overthrow capitalism and imperialism and racism” (Watson 1968: 21). This is not just daydreaming, but what Bloch would call informed hope; hope with a plan and a theory.

Joni Mitchell’s song suggests that disappointed hopes such as these do not lose all their power. Moreover, their power may be nurtured in melancholic spaces: “All good dreamers pass this way someday, hiding behind bottles in dark cafes.” In contrast to the ex-husband’s “bright house lights,” Mitchell is “blowing this damn candle out.” Her voice fills with spleen as she says “I don’t want nobody comin’ over to my table / I got nothing to talk to anybody about.” But these “dark café days” don’t lead to cynicism or boredom. Like the narrator at the end of *Invisible Man*, who writes of his hibernation underground as “a covert preparation for a more overt action,” these café days are just a phase, a necessary stopping place, “before I get my gorgeous wings / And fly away.” Those “good dreamers,” inevitably disappointed, must allow themselves to be transformed by that disappointment into something else, with new talents, capacities, and desires.

But does this new being have to be “gorgeous”? Is beauty essential for surviving disappointment without cynicism? This, of course, is an ongoing debate on the left, and we might reasonably wonder, with Herbert Marcuse ([1937] 1968), if beauty may not be just a “rejection of a bad historical form of existence, but also its exoneration.” Beauty’s pleasures may encourage us to

ignore the problems that sent us into the dark café in the first place. Thus, following Langston Hughes (1994: 135), we might admire Mitchell's romantic commitment to beauty, but think to ourselves that it might be better to "give up beauty for a moment," and instead "march with the new-world-makers."

Mitchell's song certainly offers aesthetic pleasures as it thematizes them (pretty lies, sweet love, gorgeous wings), but only to the extent that it also dwells on troubles and sorrow. As in the blues, the embrace of pain and isolation is only apparently personal. The feeling of having "nothing to talk to anybody about" is negated at the moment she sings to all of us about it. And in listening to her address us in this way, audiences may experience their own reversals, as disappointments that seemed mostly personal come to be felt in common, with Mitchell, but also with all the other listeners.

Refusing to Learn the Lessons of History

Our attachment to 1968 is of a kind with Joni Mitchell's: it signifies the last glimpses of a dream, and the rise of a new realism ("capitalist realism," in Mark Fisher's term) that brooks no more dreaming. Régis Debray (1979: 58) portrayed it as a doomed last stand in the unrelenting globalization of technocratic capitalism, with mistaken hope for its twentieth-century antipode: "In France, all the Columbuses of modernity thought that behind [Jean-Luc] Godard they were discovering China in Paris, when in fact they were landing in California." But perhaps the cynicism of capital triumphant and rampant conceals an even more romantic—or Gothic, perhaps—attachment to the tombs in our eyes, to our inability to conjure any certainty regarding the alternatives to the world that has remained after the crushing of revolutionary dreaming. This inability may partly be a reaction to capitalism's impressive (and depressing) capacity to absorb the critiques and oppositions thrown in its path. When, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) observe in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, values that had seemed oppositional, like non-hierarchy and connectivity, become central terms in the new business management manuals, it can erode one's critical confidence. In order to fight cynicism in such circumstances, one has to be quite flexible regarding one's political formation, constantly alert to capital's capacity for transformation and for the cooptation of apparently hostile ideologemes, but also willing to transform oneself and one's sense of political commitment on this constantly shifting terrain.

If the many commemorations of 1968 have shown us one thing, it is that there remains widespread and intense interest in the possibility of radical social change. Increasingly, though, our '68 cannot be limited to the legendary events in May-June in Paris's Latin Quarter, or even to the ensuing sum-

mer of strikes, or even the Prague Spring and the Days of Rage in Chicago. '68 has proven resistant to such localized representations, and demands recognition as the central node in a broader and deeper moment in the global struggle against capitalist imperialism.

Paradoxically, this recognition means, to a certain extent, decoupling '68 from simplistic notions and images of liberation. As revolutions become mythologized as political liberations, and institutionalized into forms of government and national sovereignty, their specific social causes and claims become quickly forgotten. It turns out that even the *Magna Carta* was accompanied by a document about land rights (Linebaugh 2008); who knew? While May '68 has been commemorated as a time “when poetry ruled the streets,” to cite the title of one commemorative volume (Feenberg and Freedman 2001), it is not always remembered that the events were also embedded in colonial struggles, primarily Algeria and Vietnam, but also, less directly and often less immediately, conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, Central and South America, South Asia (Jameson [1984] 2008; Ross 2002). From an Eastern European perspective, '68 was already in clear evidence in Hungary in 1956, and it culminated no earlier than 1989.

These were some of the observations that led us, the editors of this volume, to convene the conference “1968 Decentered” at the Neubauer Collegium of the University of Chicago in October 2018, under the auspices of the Neubauer-funded research project “Revolutionology: Media and Networks of Intellectual Revolution.” Among the patterns that Revolutionology has examined is the way that revolutionary activity has been propelled by a desire for non-hierarchical community, and by a lasting fascination with the most radical experiments in this direction, despite their failure ever to stick. Although some took inspiration from the non-aligned grassroots socialism in Yugoslavia, the Western protagonists of 1968 mostly looked back to the Paris Commune of 1871 as meagre but sufficient proof that a just society can be achieved out of the conditions of modernity; Guy Debord fixates on the soviets of 1905 and 1917 in Russia as models of a non-spectacular society. Even Hannah Arendt (2006: 231) shares the desire to locate historical manifestations of grassroots democracy, highlighting the role of townships and town hall meetings as the “proudest possession” of revolutionary America—which however were disempowered by the Constitution. Few, isolated and fleeting as these examples are, they continue to animate the imagination and the mind as moments when human history touched upon an immediacy and intimacy that testifies to the possibility of a world beyond oppression, even if they require us to follow Lauren Berlant (and Joni Mitchell) in “refusing to learn the lessons of history” (Berlant 1994: 125).

The future produced by this refusal is uncertain, but when it comes it will have origins in 1968. It will be a moment when this past makes what Walter Benjamin called a “tiger’s leap” into the present, and those old dreams will all of a sudden seem vital and present again. As Benjamin (2003: 402) notes, “For the revolutionary thinker, the peculiar revolutionary chance offered by every historical moment gets its warrant from the political situation. But it is equally grounded . . . in the right of entry which the historical moment enjoys vis-à-vis a quite distinct chamber of the past, one which up to that point has been closed and locked.” The intent of this volume is to survey some of these distant, locked chambers, displacing our attention from the specific date of ’68, and the specific loci identified with it (Paris, Prague, Chicago), and investigating how the event was embedded in more extended and extenuated causalities, from Detroit or Kentucky to São Paulo or Ljubljana, from 1917 to the present day.

Leaves of Dreams

Like Mitchell’s “The Last Time I Saw Richard,” the Brazilian rock band Os Mutantes’s song “Panis et Circenses” (“Bread and Circuses”), from 1968, written by Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil, also addresses the problem of political and artistic disappointment. The song mocks the Brazilian bourgeoisie (“the people in the dining room”), whom the chorus describes as enjoying dinner, happy to ignore everything going on outside their dining room, right up to the point of their death. The singers of the song, by contrast, are singing to the sun, unfurling sails, and “setting free tigers and lions in the backyard.” This is a song about the impassivity of those who feel like they are protected by the order, and they just don’t care what’s going on anywhere else: like Richard, they’ve got the dishwasher and the coffee percolator and a well-prepared dinner, and they’re going to enjoy those little pleasures until they die.

In contrast to the manipulable and complacent bourgeoisie, and in response to this situation which seems frustratingly static and resistant to change, the song fantasizes about planting “leaves of dreams” (*folhas de sonhos*) in the garden. In its emphasis on a process of transformation (like Mitchell’s cocoon), this is another futural metaphor for what music can do. But here the emphasis is not on a process of *self*-transformation, but on music as a *plant*, not only nonhuman but also not-animal, that has a formidable and urging agency of its own. The song reminds us that, unlike humans and animals, a plant generates life and substance (and oxygen for

humans to breath) from sun and carbon dioxide. The leaves know how to seek the sun (*As folhas sabem procurar pelo sol*), and the roots, too, know how to do their own seeking underground (*E as raízes procurar, procurar*). In its English version, the song ends with the group chanting for a “music lighted with the heat of the sun.” This inexorable growing, dreams feeding off the sun, while rhizomes spread beneath the surface, all according to its own temporality not quite translatable into human time, is figured by the trumpet we hear throughout the song blowing and peeping and pulsing off beat, with variable but exuberant force.

This solar music promises an arboreal revolution, but it cannot figure what comes next. As Benjamin (2003: 407) remarked, “The existence of the classless society cannot be thought at the same time that the struggle for it is thought.” Thus any revolutionary theory runs up against the resistance of revolution to representation or theorization. Kristin Ross (2002: 1) begins her book by asking how “May ’68 in France, now more than thirty years past, has been overtaken by its subsequent representations.” If, in the memorable phrase of Tumelo Mosaka, revolution is when “the people emerge into visibility,”³ then any attempt to define or represent this emergence distributes power unevenly, as Oleg Aronson discusses in his contribution to this volume. One way around this blockage is to excavate and critique past practices of representing and describing revolutions, and to dwell in the gaps between what was hoped for and what remains to be achieved.

The possibility emerges that the center of the revolutionary event might be sought at a maximal distance from it—in space and in time, even in medium and mode. The impulse of 1968 resonates in Brazilian labor film of the 1970s (see Sarah Ann Wells in this issue), or in Noah Purifoy’s exhibition *Junk* in the wake of the Watts riots (see Rod Ferguson in this issue). As Berlant (1994: 155) has remarked, “’68’ denotes, in the U.S., an event whose history is still un-folding, still cluttering the way with little piles of waste and inspiration.” The extent to which a countercultural underground is capable of preserving and extending revolutionary energies—instead of simply diverting them into harmless, marginal cultural production—has been disputed. Doubts also pervade the cultural theory that traces its origins to ’68, but might be dismissed as arid scholastics feeding the industries of academic debate and publishing. These are versions of the old problem of the intelligentsia in the revolutionary process, a pervasive and unavoidable anxiety in these essays.

Counterbalancing this anxiety are stories like that of Fredy and Lorraine Perlman, as related here by Lorraine together with Danielle Aubert. Having experienced May ’68 firsthand in Paris, Fredy formulated its spirit

in the slogan “anything can happen.” Returning to the United States, the Perlmans went first to Kalamazoo, and then to Detroit, and focused their revolutionary activity on the operations of an open print shop in Detroit, at which they based their publishing house Black & Red. If the Perlmans’ first major success was the English edition of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, then no less telling is Fredy’s use of William Blake’s images in the graphics of his 1983 book *Against His-story*. The genealogy Blake-Debord-Perlman helps us to understand how the mastery of revolutionary theory goes hand in hand with the mastery of book design. The Perlmans’ story resonates further in those told by Colette Gaiter and Robert Bird, about the graphic art of Emory Douglas and the provocations of British post-punk, which like the Perlmans’ design experiments, turn out to be embedded in earlier revolutionary moments, right back to Russia in 1917.

Most of the authors in this volume came too late to experience 1968 in real time, but too early, it seems, to witness its future culmination. Perhaps, as Régis Debray has predicted, the new media situation will require and produce a wholly new set of ideological parameters. Certainly, since 1968 ever new dimensions of the global liberation struggle have swung into the center of attention—race, sexuality, the climate crisis—which require not only new answers, but new practices of thought, representation, and action. The essays gathered here represent 1968 not as an event at the center that reverberated outwards, in ripples of more or less proximate consequences, but as the moment when events on the peripheries reverberated at the center as fissures in the basic structures of power. “Vietnam is in our factories,” Fiat workers declared in Turin (Ross 2002: 81). In this sense ’68 actually took place in Algeria in 1961, in Brazil in 1977, and in Detroit in 1968. And it continues in all these places today.

Forgotten Futures

Joni Mitchell’s and Os Mutantes’s songs stand in stark contrast with Aretha Franklin’s 1968 song “Think.” Aretha is not planting trees or hibernating in preparation for a future action; she’s *got* her gorgeous wings and she is flying. As Daphne Brooks points out, her shifting, stretching, veering, soaring notes themselves perform and enact a kind of freedom. And like Amiri Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, she is “calling all black people.” She is representing a people, and she is representing them to themselves, something black music has often done, from the music of the slaves (as both Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois memorably described it) up to the present moment. But in a

song like “Think,” she is also speaking to the government and to a majority white mass public, too. And her message is simple and straightforward: “I am not a second-class citizen. Do not fuck with me. I have a voice that cannot be silenced.” In saying this, in singing this way, she opens up a space in the right now of the singing. When she warns “you better think / think about what you’re trying to do to me,” the “*me*” is at once her voice and all the people (in her audience, her fans, listening to her records and on the radio) singing “*me*” with her, finding their own group voice by joining in with hers. Such voices can be essential for the formation and circulation of new moods that replace political cynicism with active demands for liberation: “Oh, freedom (*freedom*), freedom (*freedom*).”⁴ Such voices create a space—a gap, Jodi Dean would say—where a collective can enter in.⁵

As the people prepare once more to emerge into visibility, we take up the urgent task of reexamining the conditions of vision—of image-making, of world-making—that have made previous emergences possible and, at the same time, coopted them into the capitalist spectacle.

But why go back to the music of 1968, and more to the point, what is the idea of this collection of essays? As in 1968, the present moment feels a bit apocalyptic, but hope of the well-informed type seems to be in shorter supply. The sense that, in Fredy Perlman’s words, “anything can happen,” or that we know (as John Watson did) how to “overthrow capitalism and imperialism and racism,” does not seem to have persisted. Fascism is threatening, authoritarianism is already here, and our efforts at resistance can seem increasingly desperate. Still, as in ’68 there is a nearly global sense that the current situation is untenable, universally fucked up, and we are not the only ones looking around for models, for political imaginaries, for forgotten futures we might return to now. The idea of the conference and this volume was to assemble a small collection of the practices and projects that occurred in and around 1968 that were all trying to make something possible. If these examples from the past don’t give us gorgeous wings, they may nonetheless refresh, reinvigorate or expand our sense of what is possible and of how we might make the possible actual.

Notes

- 1 Mitchell: “Patrick Sky, a fellow folksinger, said to me one night in a bar in New York, ‘Oh, Joni, you’re a hopeless romantic. There’s only one way for you to go. Hopeless cynicism.’ And that was it. That one little nugget became the song” (quoted in Mercer 2009: 112). Many thanks to the brilliant Ann K. Powers for recommending this book, for emphasizing the importance of Mitchell’s Miles Davis–like blue notes at the end of

- lines, and for sharing her smart and insightful observations about Mitchell and this song more generally.
- 2 Mitchell talks about Davis's influence on her singing in the song "Blue" in particular in Mercer 2009: 110. About her use of blue notes on *Blue* (the album), Mercer writes "In the '40s, bebop musicians starting bluing the fifth note of a scale, or fooling around with flattened fifths, and on *Blue*, Mitchell does the same. For example when she sings "love so sweet," her flattening of the phrase's notes complicated the lyric, making the meaning bittersweet" (113).
 - 3 This formulation belongs to Tumelo Mosaka. Cf. "rewind, fast forward, play" in Bird et al. 2011.
 - 4 "The communist party holds open the gap through which the people appear as the political subject" (Dean 2016: 28).

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