

Rachel Ellis Neyra // March 26, 2014

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*"The emergency continues" – Deluxe Necessity*

We begin from this place: failure. We sit together here in this site of "battles we've already lost" (Cacho 32). Kill joys. Bitches. Unreasonables. Making some other kind of room, some other kind of movement. Lisa Marie Cacho's work happens in the realm of what she calls "the decision to struggle." "Empowerment," she writes, "comes from deciding that the outcome of the struggle doesn't matter as much as the decision to struggle" (32). Struggling, that is, for that thing that is not valued in this place, in this economic system, "a meaningful life [that is] not a luxury but rather the purpose of the struggle itself, the difference between surviving and living" (33). What I, in a slightly different but kindred register, would call a struggle for life as *poiesis*, as a re-sensualization of language and the experience of it in the flesh that refuses to pay up, pay out, pay in advance the semiotic debt of comportment to neoliberal citizenship.

Resisting the "lure of legibility" and "the need to be practical" even as she reads phenomena that we have seen a hundred times, and so, have been covered over many more times than that, Lisa Marie Cacho's work teaches us to pay attention to how whiteness is decriminalized, that is, how it vehemently produces itself as the perfect and inevitable merger of rights, freedom, and property. She also shows us the many lived and micro-instances of how minoritarian subject positions are discursively, economically, and psychically manipulated into identifying with the consolidation of whiteness, even though it is not in their, our, intra- or cross-communal interests.

When I was last here – so, when I was last talking with some of you a few weeks ago as we inaugurated this Social Death and Survival Talk Series – I ended by saying something along the following lines. That brown life, as I am invested in imagining it, is in an "emotive amalgamation" (Sexton 2010, 47) *not* with nonblacks, nor with "the unequally arrayed category of nonblackness," but with blackness, with the hold, with holding. When I was last here, we were in the present of the day after four of our students, your friends, had been arrested. And now we are in another afterwards of thinking, in part, with that strange category of the neoliberal *student* today. *After* the state invades, makes the invasion that is always already potentially here, when it shows us once again, then, the everydayness of blackness as limit case of being, when that gets turned out, we have to lean in and listen with care. Urgency is not always loud. Emergency doesn't always sonically show-up as raucous. Like Claudia Rankine's voice, like my friend Tsitsi Jaji's voice, like Lisa Marie Cacho's voice, it can be seriously, dangerously, quiet. Lean in. Listen with care. For how to intervene in the present shot-through by history's structural violences is not best strategized in the tense of the immediate, as in, transparent, practical, and quickly legible. The slave's tools, from which we derive the term Vernacular, we must remember, were *simple* but not *basic*, in that other vernacular sense; they were thick; the gestures of revolt are also abstract.

If "the emergency continues," and it does, then we need strategies for thinking and feeling brown together (Scott 3). Which is to say, we need think about brown and black and queer thinking as a *deluxe necessity*. As an excessive survival strategy. I was listening to one of my students yesterday tell me that while clicking through tumblr, she went from looking at the picture of an adorable black child and thinking, "What a beautiful child," to almost immediately asking herself – and the present, this world, "What is his life going to be like?" *Will he get to have a life*, my mind translated.

"I can't have that thought any more," she told me. "That can't be my next thought." Channeling James Baldwin, our black gay preacher exile uncle, I replied that to not have that next thought is naïve, and worse, it would be a refusal of the dangerous negation that she knows, I know, that that old beloved queen knew of the prince nephew he was addressing in his 1963 letter later titled, "My Dungeon Shook," that black baby holds. But I know what she's talking about. She's talking about wanting something on the other side of that negative thought about blackness as structural negation, relational devaluation; she wants that "obscene pleasure" that Fred Moten poeticizes for us in "consenting not to be a single being," which is another strategy for tarrying with the negative, to have "a country-ass hoedown," a rent party, to get some kind of needed fix while thinking with the negative, the abjected. To think about the sound of that baby's giggle, the soft insistence of his hand's grasp. Deluxe necessity.

Cacho's writing helps me to tarry with the negative, with abnormal, deviants, with kids who do drugs, homos who've been kicked out of their bio-parents' homes, social monsters whose constitutive being holds an insurgent promise, which is to say, holds a threat to the normal and the consolidated interests of proprietary whiteness. As I vocally italicized above, she also has me thinking, and with Darieck Scott, and Azealia Banks, and Sethe, and Belicia, with Trayvon Martin and his skittles and watermelon, no, ice tea drink, about *luxury* and necessity these days. "Will he get to have a life?" In the introduction to his book *Extravagant Abjection*, Scott palms a dynamic conjunction of terms between parentheses: "(I am going to try to establish in this book that these paradoxes—luxury that is necessity, freedom that is imprisonment, and, perhaps surprisingly, their correspondent vice-versa formulations—speak to the very core of what blackness is in our culture and how we embody it)" (3). It's strange to think of luxury in the same breath as social death. But this is something that I would ask us to do. And it might sound something like this.

Hey, hi, hello, yo, what's up?  
My, oh, me, oh boy. What's word, could I call ya?  
Of late I've no one, I'm from New York  
My, oh, mi amor  
Who told you you could, look so good?

Ooooh, sire, lie next to me  
So I can peek at ya before you wake  
Ooooh, my love, my luxury's right here if you want  
You want to stay

(Chorus)  
Let me in your world  
You know what I spy?  
Spy you looking lonely, ya know boy that's why  
I wanna be your lady  
Your I-I-I-love, my I-u-x-u-r-,aye ya know what I would  
If I could, if I could, if I could

If I could, the super uncertain conditional tense, is also a strange conjugation to place inside a song titled "Luxury," a song that ends with the sounds of waves crashing on the shore, the shore of Banks' Afro-diasporic soundscape. But here we have it, Azealia Banks' verbal, phonemic excess

wherein black love is a luxury, wherein it is the shift from the subjunctive – desire’s more willful tense – into the tense of, *if I could, if I could, if I could*, intoning us in a low, deep moan. Cacho makes a way for us to think about this conjunction, of luxury and necessity and in close proximity to freedom and imprisonment, and to think this conjugation, of the present speaking in a tense of uncertainty that is nicked by doubt and desire, in a passage from the introduction to her book, *Social Death*. Thinking from the Gulf’s Shores about various forms of media that flanked the militarizing of New Orleans and the maligning of people of color after Hurricane Katrina, Cacho writes that, “Under Neoliberalism, impoverished African American citizens’ consumption patterns are under constant scrutiny. Poor African Americans are not only represented as unentitled to “luxuries”; they are also denied the power to decide what constitutes a “luxury” and the power to define what they need and what they can’t live without. They are chastised for spending “taxpayer” money on items derided as “frivolities”—notwithstanding the fact that poor people of color also pay taxes... Because poor people of color are not entitled to define or to decide what they need and what they don’t, it is easy to accuse them of “mismanaging” their lives because they are held up to standards that are not always in their best interest to observe. Impoverished African American U.S. citizens are stigmatized and disciplined for being structurally positioned in ways that make *adhering* to neoliberal principles a form of entrapment. Working to become “ideal” neoliberal citizen-subjects requires that they undermine their own demands for living wages, fair employment practices, and rights as citizens so they can compete for jobs with undocumented immigrants” (21, 22). What her thinking shows us is how unemployment, chronic/cultural/black-poor unemployability, “illegality,” that is, brownness as illegality, and economic precarity are written into the Law. Law that protects *not folks* but a specific conception of value – that perfect and inevitable merger noted above, of whiteness as rights, property, freedom. The orchestrated discourse that sets poor African Americans and illegal Central American and Mexican immigrants, in this case, in opposition to each other is operative because, as Cacho puts it, “it is all but legal to discriminate against both groups. Hence, because permanently criminalized, rightless statuses are also always already racialized, law ensures that there will always be a population of color rendered permanently rightless in the United States” (Cacho 22, 23).

Redundancy, interchangeability, and disposability within lived modes of entrapment are the forms of racialized devaluing that neoliberalism and its companion multiculturalism reproduce (Cacho 161). It’s because we are in a struggle with this constitutive permanence of racialized rightlessness, and its terms of devaluation, that alternative conceptions of value become luxury-as-necessity. That is, become the excess with which we have to think. And not practically, but sensuously, defiantly.

Wishing that you all will *not become* good citizens – and I do mean that, I do not *want* my students to be good citizens, in that sense, I close with verses from Claudia Rankine’s book, *Citizen: An American Lyric*:

The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow.  
Drag that first person out of the social death of history, then we’re kin.  
Kin calling out the past like a foreigner with a newly minted  
“fuck you.”

...

Yours is a strange dream, a strange reverie.

No, it’s a strange beach; each body is a strange beach, and if you let in the excess emotion you will recall the Atlantic Ocean breaking on our heads.