

The Line: When Death is Not the *Worst* Thing

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We are not all revolutionaries, and that is not a moral indictment—it is a *human* one. When I hear “we are not our ancestors,” I imagine that to be true only in *our* lack of bravery—our unwillingness to unbecome in the process of a new world becoming.

For many of us, the liberal task of speaking truth to power is accessible. For a smaller radical portion, getting into trouble for the cause is, as James Baldwin might describe, the “price of the ticket.” However, the smallest of us are willing to bear the revolutionary death cross that, while leaving us unraveled to dust, may stand to birth a free world.

But what is that *line*? What is the unreconcilable wound, for each of us, that bleeds radical into revolutionary? For me, and many of us I presume, this has been a pervasive inquiry haunting many a conversation over the past years. What, worse than death, stands to draw us to destroy the world that is destroying us? At what entropic moment, does our collective endeavor shift from staying alive to taking as many of our oppressors with us as possible?

As a critical scholar, the power of death and more pointedly the power to *will* death bewitches me. From bell hooks’ (2000) musings on our cultural worship of death and its hindrance on our ability to know and embody love to the death worlds that Frank B. Wilderson III (2020) theorizes as perpetually binding Black bodies to the status of slave, my academic relationship with death has mattered deeply to how I have come to behold my own Black queer aliveness.

And perhaps, no scholarship has invited me to hold this responsibility more than that of *Necropolitics*. What Achille Mbembe (2020) offers us through Necropolitics is a proper burial for our dead whose greatest faux pas was living on the wrong side of power. As a socio-political theory, Necropolitics examines how social and political power is critically deterministic in who lives and who dies, who is called casualty and who remains unnamed animal slaughter. What, then, becomes most compelling (and perhaps generative) in our call to revolution, is what power cannot reach beyond: the *boundary* of death. After all, you cannot *re-kill* the dead. Oppressive powers cannot exert sovereignty over that which it cannot reanimate. Thus, what oppressive powers hold over the living, is what they intuit for even themselves: the *fear* of death.

What, then, becomes of us when we lose the fear of death—or rather our daily civil and social deaths (Mbembe, 2020) outweigh the risk and grief of our physical demise? Our answers lie in the face of the revolting slave

for which bondage was a worse hell than death—in the face of the emaciated Palestinian who dares name home. We are not all revolutionaries, and that is not a moral indictment—it is a *necessary* one. Naming our fear and what it limits is necessary to naming what we can do, what we *will* do.

There is no way to make just or fair the often, if not always, cost of our freedom: martyrdom. Revolutions are bought in blood, and I do not fault those unwilling to make that purchase. I have loved (and even longed to be) men braver than I. I have watched lovers leave my door, understanding that their dedication to the movement was greater than their dedication to me. That, because of this, they also saw their lives as more *owed* to the movement than to me. And as much anticipatory grief as I have held in my heart's collection of preemptively written obituaries, the fracture of our modern world has offered those wounds understanding.

What was impossible to confront then but becomes perceptibly clear now is that death does not always start when the body's breath stops. That for some, the daily deaths that leave the body intact while decimating the spirit are enough cause for the purchase.

For what, in retrospect, now seems a short-lived eternity, in the midst of exacerbating madness, we have clung to a fabricated aliveness. We disdain imperialism, but we do not disdain its daughters. We abhor the exploitations that make our luxuries possible, but we luxuriate. For what, in retrospect, now seems a short-lived eternity, we could consider ourselves inhabitants of geographic privilege. *Safe*—for no greater talent, no greater uniqueness, than the happenstance of birthplace.

But as democracy dissipates, as lynching lingers near, I am returned to a simple question: what is your *line*? What is your hell on earth, the repetitive daily death, that would tip the balance?

Admittedly, each day is a confrontation of my own (and presumably *our*) fear and worship of death, reimagining death as, more than a dark thing, simply the *next* thing. I do not know if I will see—in our lifetime, our fickle geography—the line that necessitates a revolutionary offering. I think even the most exhausted of us hope we do not. But should we, it is perhaps best that the first time we think about that line is not at its emergence.

Even still, the cost of *no* revolution is high. We are far beyond the imaginary of reform, and at *best*, our abuse of this world and each other could only gift the drawn-out death of a nation. A hospice of heartbreak, the absence of revolution would never offer a cure for our national ailment—only comfort.

References

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