

For An Ontological Strike

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We stuck in La La Land
Even when we win, we gon' lose
—Jay Z

Living at the speed of light,
Like a bullet.
I could be dead by morning.
—Sonder

Episode 1: Slow Death/Acceleration

I remember working as if I was running. I always had the impression that I would die suddenly, trapped in some sort of internal explosion or arbitrarily inscribed in those horrible statistics of *cuir*¹ people of color shot or stabbed, for no reason, in Brazil or elsewhere. Indeed, I was working as if I was running. Running towards an illusion of comfort and stability, trying to save myself from a thing from which I cannot be saved. I remember working as if I was running, and I also remember working as if I could reach the velocity needed in order to cross bridges yet to be made—as if, by running, I could exist in-between asymmetrical worlds.

The work I am running within, in the end, is not the kind of work my body is encouraged to do. The art world isn't a geography I am authorized to simply jump into, yet my body passes through there sometimes, running. To write, to read, to translate, to perform, to create, to speak, to think out loud against the constant expectation of failure and wrongfulness, against the whole social logic that institutes whiteness and cisgenderness and their presumption of self-established subjectivity, as the most reliable guarantee of access to the worlds of art and intellectuality... I could make of this story an exceptional narrative about the *cuir* black struggle for access to those worlds, but I am not particularly interested in portraying any trajectory towards them as heroic. Rather, this text aims to portray the art world as a naturalized tale made for breaking *cuir* black subjectivity down into stolen value.

¹ I use the phonetic contraction “cuir,” rather than the English-language term “queer,” so as to denote the linguistic, epistemological, and sexopolitical dissidence which defines the appropriation of queer studies, aesthetics, and activist practices in the Latin American context.

I want to talk about the costs of such a journey, since in the eyes of the entangled racializing devices which represent my body as marked by a wound, I do not exist in a form that can make this journey without cost. I want to talk about the ways in which contemporary modes of commodification exploit the presence of *cuir* black bodies within the art world in a particular manner. In other words, with this text I want to reflect on the value produced by our *cuir* black sensibilities and the way it is stolen from us, providing a redefinition of value in the afterlives of colonialism and slavery as something simultaneously robbed from and yielded by us. For this purpose, it would be necessary to redescribe cisgenderness and whiteness as forms of ontological thievery, and to rethink the entire contemporary art system as an unrepairable device for the white cisgender consumption and exploitation of the other.

As part of the infrastructure of the world as we know it, which is the infrastructure of white cisgender life itself, art systems are not separated from the social devices that reproduce the *cuir* black predicament. On the contrary, they are situated in a privileged position, from which it is possible to determine (at least partially) the limits of what is thinkable and imaginable in a certain time frame. The historically disruptive emergence of anti-racist, queer, feminist, and decolonial discourses, practices, and demands from the 1960s on has definitely changed the representational horizon according to which contemporary politics of visibility are defined. Nevertheless, it is not safe to read this process as linear or transparent, especially if we take into account the elasticity of racial capitalism (i.e., its ability to reconfigure the modes of appropriation of black work against blackness), the pervasiveness of racial and gendered forms of annihilation, and the internal contradiction of biopolitical forms of distribution of violence as constituent elements of this process.

To a certain extent, access to artistic and intellectual circuits concerned with the so-called politics of diversity is predicated on our ability to reproduce—even if as a critical position—the very logic through which we are marked. That is to say, to become a *cuir* black cultural worker is a process always already punctuated by the reconstitution of racialization as an inescapable global design, in the sense that our presence is conditioned by a demand for positive self-objectification, according to which we must always address our *cuir*ness and our blackness as the proper subjects of our expertise. This process can eventually grant us a position within the diagram of privilege which constitutes racialized societies, but it inevitably resituates our position within the historical struggles against inequality that have brought us here, due to our contingent inscription in structures formerly built against us, and which are now in the process of updating themselves to unevenly “include” those of us who have been working as if we were running.

The odd continuity between exhaustion and *unstoppability* operates here as an index of the scenes of subjection available for the “others” of the white cisgender world within hegemonic artistic

scenarios—especially if we consider the ways our very lives, including the overdetermination of them by structural dynamics, tend to become an extension of our work. The unstoppability of cuir black work yields its own byproducts. It feeds privatized archives with critical commodities; it creates images, texts, ideas, and sensations for the consumption of white and wealthy audiences in artistic circuits; it is appropriated by institutions as a sign of “social responsibility,” “diversity,” and “inclusion.”

It is precisely at the intersection of the apparently limitless, field of supposedly groundbreaking critical commodities, and the over-determined, besieged experience of being broken by the world as we know it, that my position is articulated here. Neither in opposition to the projects of liberation from which I descend nor in contestation of the emergent speculative traditions that are proliferating along with our presence in these spaces, this text is rather a renewed confrontation with the presumed stability of the narratives of inclusion and their non-emancipatory dimensions; an exercise in radical suspicion that, ultimately, seeks to preserve the outer space of our radical imagination from the soft extractivism that characterizes the commodification of the *cuir* black critical apparatus by the art system.

Right now, while I am writing this text—as a still paperless, *cuir* black cultural worker, migrating from a former colony into Fortress Europe—I feel as moved by the call made by authors such as Denise Ferreira da Silva towards the possibility of refiguring blackness through an equation of value² that would allow us to move beyond the modern text and its grammars of death and captivity (and towards another world), as I am unequivocally stuck at the border of the violent sociality that holds *cuir* black experiences under the restrictive force of modern-colonial determinacy. Wounded and creative, precarious and productive, equally rotten and triumphant in my escape route, diseased with desperation, and yet safer than those for whom access to geographies of privilege such as the global art world and academia are blocked by structural economies of power: I cannot help but think that the condition for my own *cuir* black inclusion in this world is to buy slow death with acceleration.

Episode 2: Anxiety/Intuition

Lauren Olamina, the central character in Octavia Butler’s *Parables* series (1993–1998), is a fifteen-year-old girl living with her family in a United States walled community in 2025, who senses

² See Denise Ferreira da Silva, “1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value,” *e-flux* (February 2017), online at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/> (last accessed February 11, 2018).

the limit of that collective way of life due to the coming apocalypse. What triggers her speculative process is a conjugation of episodes from the present: gunfire and explosions she hears from beyond the walls; the images she herself collected when she left the neighborhood with a committee for a field reconnaissance activity; the death of a child shot by a stray bullet randomly fired at the community's gate; pieces of news about the dissemination of a new drug which transforms the sensory experience of watching things burn into a form of pleasure "better than sex"... It is the indefinite actualization of these signals which, for Olamina's besieged subjectivity, feeds the formulation of a futurity under threat, in the face of which, however, one must not remain passively in wait—and this is the ethical formulation which I seek to render evident here.

"God is change" is the fundamental premise of the experimental theology which Olamina is developing while she prepares for the worst. The subjective operation she performs—situated as it is by the sense of inevitability of the situation she predicts—makes her raw dive into the economy of the threat coincide with the articulation of a dense speculative texture, capable of refounding possibility even in the face of a diagram so thoroughly saturated with impossibilities. To shape god is to shape fate: to fold the conditions, to study time and the choreography of forces, and to operate on fate like a sculptress who knows, from the start, that she is not enough for the materials with which she works. Through this character, and throughout the whole series, Butler draws the convergence between a radically pro-positive form of pessimism and an optimism which is, from the get-go, dispossessed of any investment in hope.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), which provides the textual containment of anxiety as pathology, defines it as "the anticipation of future threat."³ According to this definition, the fundamental threat posed by anxiety is to overreach the future, through an intensive materialization of a pessimist futurity in the experience of the present. In other words, the risk of anticipation in the form of pathologized anxiety lies in its capture into the cage of captive imagination. It is the deterioration of anticipation as liberated intuition in the name of serving the reproduction of the economy of threat as the ultimate form of social futurity. But how can intuition (as anxiety) break free of its captivity, dismantling the scope of pathologization, when experienced within the intersectional predicament of the *cuir* black experience, which is always already inscribed by violence within that economy of threat? And how would it redescribe the risk and the unavoidable pain of existing in a world that exists against our social existence, without circumscribing every anticipatory gesture in an economy of desperation?

³ *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (DSM-5) (Washington, DC, 2013), p. 189.

Thus, if the approach to time that Butler provides Olamina with is profoundly motivated by what the *DSM* would designate as anxiety, this anxiety cannot be circumscribed to the atomized domain of the subject which the character embodies, as if it were a problem with the body which has been individuated by the logic of pathology. In other words, Olamina's anxiety is predicated on a potent form of social engagement, as a principle of realist interpretation and, above all, as a device which conditions her survival in a period later referred to as "the Apocalypse," or simply "the Pox." This, more than ensuring a transparent version of anxiety as an uncomplicated form of ill-health, problematizes the pathological device itself (and, by extension, whatever we may call "health"), opening the illness's code against the hegemonic scientific analytics which shape it, so as to reproduce the diagnosis, at the cost of generating the unlikely as a matter and force proper to the diagnosed body.

At this point, it is unavoidable: as a fury in the chest, as an urgency running through my veins, as a perpetual spasm in the main muscle, it will come and it will last for right now and forever. Because it is already here: the unstoppable instant of anxiety, the inextricable knot of desperation. Again and again, vibrating regardless of immobility. As a revulsion in the world which is also a revulsion of the body, of the body against the world, of the body against the body itself, and of the body against the text. It is unavoidable in the sense that to write about anxiety with anxiety is necessarily a form of writing beyond anxiety and against the text. This attempt at redescribing anxiety as a program predicated on intuition—and subsequently also on the relational modes in which the world (with its power dynamics and diagrams of force) and the body (with its rhythms, marks, and situated sensibilities) interact—is inseparable from the anxious vibration which courses through me.

I do not write, however, to save myself from anxiety. Rather, I write to save anxiety from me, by liberating it from the all too historical and all too position-specific circumscription of my subjectivity. Only then will the subjectivations which transverse me be freed from the excessively formal and normative regime of pathology, making them both a pore and a surface of contagion for anxiety as an intuition turned toward the limit of the world. Or, to be more precise, toward the limit of the predicament tentatively articulated throughout this essay, which is not just the oppression suffered by *cuir* black lives, but that on which those systems of oppression sustain themselves: the arbitrary and cruel circumscription of *cuimess* and blackness to an ontology, rather than a force.

Episode 3: End of the World/Transition

In August 2017, I returned to Brazil for a twenty-day stay, during which one of my jobs was a public conference in Rio de Janeiro. I arrived at the space just before it began, and the room was already

full. I was not feeling well. Thoughts evaded me, without taking shape, repeatedly losing themselves in a space somewhere between voice and impulse. It was a painful immobility. Speaking was difficult, but that was my job. I began by asking permission to stutter. Throughout, there were moments of quite lucid stuttering, especially one which marked me intensely. When, nearing the end of the conference, as I tried to provoke a critique of the standardized conception of gender fluidity which certain appropriations of the queer canon in the south American context seemed to reproduce, I was only able to say something like: “The conceptual problem with the idea of gender fluidity in a context of generalized precarity... is that... my gender... my gender doesn’t flow... how come?”

Just a few days before the conference, at a party, in a more or less intimate social context and to a rather large and diverse group of people, I had announced the embodied, affective, and sensorial crossing in which I have insisted for a few years now as a program both for self-destruction and for self-invention. Just a few days before that stuttered statement about the non-fluidity of my gender in the world against which I struggle, I had spoken freely about being in transition. Transition. Though I can index the framework from which it departs as a fugitive movement—from compulsory masculinity as the arbitrarily inscribed project of cisgender fundamentalism (and thus, of the modern-colonial-racial project of humanity) on my body—I proceed without the coordinates for where this may take me, and therefore I stumble, opening up the texture of my voice to stammering as a politics of enunciation.

Just like the process of decolonizing, it might just be that in any transition there is, more or less implicitly, a demand for the end of the world, without that necessarily meaning—other than as a promise—reassurance regarding the world to follow. Articulating this negative, strictly abolitionist dimension of any process whatsoever that precipitates itself on and against the world as it has been given to us is part of the necessary work of care that these processes entail. Here, caring does not refer to a reparative function. It designates more directly working towards and to the limit, and against any idea of healing as a return or as a reinstatement of cohesion for the social body. It is possible that transitioning, like decolonizing, demands a form of care which is solvent, that is to say: a form of care which mediates the deterioration of things, which accompanies the duration of the ruin, which deepens the crack on the horizon, and which settles into lava the world of senses, formulae, figures, and oeuvres of power which any transition, just as any decolonizing process, demands to see burn.

This is not a mere call to destruction, nor simply a poetics of creative destruction, but rather the tentative—risky—formulation of an opening which can bear that which is beneath every formula and the passage through which implies a work against the work of the world, a work against the

oeuvres of power, which involves something other than destroying them, so as to somehow recreate them somewhere else. More precisely, I speak of sustained forms of destruction as a program for the refoundation of the whole surface of meaning. To think of transitioning and decolonizing from an abolitionist perspective requires thinking about this effect, and provisionally displacing the question about becoming, so as to open up space for a different set of questions, such as “how to undo what they make of me?” or even “how to unmake the imperative of being?”

When considered in parallel with the issues I began this essay with, about the unstoppableness of *cuir* and black work and about the reproduction of the onto-epistemological regime within which only our markers may endow us with consistency as persons, this negative care that I now speak of acquires political contours. It strategically interacts with spaces, situations, and contexts which solicit, quite violently, that we occupy our ontological predicaments as a condition for combatting the brutalizing effects of power unfolding from those predicaments themselves. What this means is that even when we seem to have the tools to interrupt the cycles of oppression and violence operated on us in the context of this world, these tools, rather than opening up space for the emergence of affective, sensory, cognitive, embodied, and epistemological alternatives, return us—repeatedly—to the same world. To the same predicament, with another kind of position.

How, then, to care for destructive processes without stopping them in the name of the ideals of health, progress, morality, normalcy, and civilization which constitute the basis of the colonial text? How may we care for the destructive processes which deprive the human of his altar, as a necessary condition for displacing the racial as a hierarchical criterion? How to gather the conditions for an increasingly consistent destruction of the mechanisms which give weight and efficacy to cisgender fundamentalism, with all of its pathological machinery, capturing and reinscribing anything that evades the norm as a condition of the emergence of the normal? Finally, how do we integrate such processes into the dynamic and intensive apparatus that we may create in order to preserve the germs of peoples yet to be named, in the flesh of peoples whose names have been denied; how to implicate, in any transition which comes to be announced, the ancestry of the peoples whose earth was stolen, as the pollen and the seed of peoples whose earth is yet to be created?