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Servitude in Death: Lucrece/tia's Suicide and the Necropolitics of Representation

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Revolutionary suicide does not mean that I and my comrades have a death wish; it means just the opposite. We have such a strong desire to live with hope and human dignity that existence without them is impossible.¹

Og við sverðs míns egg
Loks af friður hlýst.²

Overthrowing the current governing system and replacing it with one that is, at least theoretically, fairer and more just is never an easy task. It requires several ingredients to be added into the pot of revolution – among them mass discontent, the willingness to make sacrifices and, more often than not, an inciting incident, typically an act of violence that underscores the problems of the status quo. *The Rape of Lucrece*, one of Shakespeare's extended poems, takes place at such a time and it is Lucrece's rape and subsequent suicide that become Lucius Junius Brutus's *casus rebelli* against the Roman monarchy.

This is perhaps all well and good on a macro level, but what are we to make of the position of Lucrece's death in the matter? If this rebellion is indeed carried in her name, what sort of concern does Brutus show for her plight and that of other women, if any? As he pulls the knife out of her still-bleeding body and solemnly swears to punish the monarchical system for the crimes of the king's son, Lucrece is already fully turned from a subject into an object – or, more precisely, an instrument by which a rebellion may be carried out and justified. In a way, the old feminist adage of “the personal is political” is just as relevant as ever, as her personal experience becomes transmuted by Brutus into a microcosmic representation of all the injustices, real and imagined, that Romans suffered under the political system of monarchy. Yet, it is also a personal power-grab, as Brutus and the other aristocrats who join in his pact suddenly have the opportunity to usurp the power of the king and distribute it among themselves.

This is, unfortunately, an all-too-common scenario in the script of revolutions and struggles for social change – the initially deeply personal circumstances of the inciting incident become

¹ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) 3.

² Austin Wintory, “Only We Few Remember It Now,” *The Banner Saga* 3, track 22, *Bandcamp* <<https://austinwintory.bandcamp.com/track/only-we-few-remember-it-now>>.

overwritten by the political desires of those who wish to use the victim's or survivor's experience as a rallying cry. I am not suggesting that this is always necessarily to the detriment of society³ or that this always goes against the wishes of those whose suffering and death become utilised in such ways, but I would nevertheless like to explore Livy's and Shakespeare's representation of the story of Lucretia and compare them to some modern examples in which the suffering and death of marginalised people are emptied of their personal situatedness and become, instead, a socio-political reference point. As someone coming from an activist background, I am particularly concerned about the long-term negative impact of these desubjectivised and decontextualised narratives both on the survivors/victims as well as on the stability of socially progressive movements. How do we represent individual experiences in a way that always centres and gives voice to the survivors/victims while also using them as exemplifiers of systemic issues that warrant addressing? In other words, how do we ensure that the personal and the political are allowed to exist at an equilibrium, rather than one becoming substituted by the other?

The politics of representing suffering and the conversion of said suffering into praxis is clearly nothing new – there is a vast cornucopia of texts that deal with similar issues, particularly in the context of journalism, a field which often tries to be a medium through which personal experience is converted into transformative praxis. Among many noteworthy examples, John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, a 120-page article that took up an entire issue of *The New Yorker* magazine in August 1946, attempts to mediate, through the perspective of multiple witnesses, the otherwise unimaginable horrors of nuclear warfare. This microcosmic-to-macrocosmic nature of *Hiroshima* allowed for the flow of empathy and directly helped initiate the first waves of anti-nuclear activism across the anglophone world:

[...] here, for the first time, is not a description of scientific triumphs, of intricate machines, new elements, and mathematical formulas, but an account of *what* the bomb does – seen through the eyes of some of those to whom it did it: of those who endured one of the world's most catastrophic experiences, and lived.⁴

³ Even drawing from recent Czech (and Slovak) history, it is rather clear that the Velvet Revolution protests of 1989 that led to the overthrow of the Soviet-inspired totalitarian system would not have grown to such a scale had it not been for rumours (later proven untrue) of a student being killed by the riot police.

⁴ John Hersey, *Hiroshima*, "Publisher's Note" (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1946) ix.

It is for this reason that any such analysis must be inextricably linked to journalism and historiography or, if we allow ourselves a broader expression, to the practice of truthmaking.

Where does this, then, leave Lucretia/Lucrece? How did her story get told by those who approached it and where did they place their emphasis? Let us begin with a brief overview of Titus Livy's version of the tale and do so with the presupposition that not only is historiography itself an act of storytelling and ideological construction, but also that the story as recorded by Livy would have already passed through numerous sieves of alteration, regardless of whether the events even occurred to begin with. In her book *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli and Rousseau*, Melissa M. Matthes presents Aubrey de Selincourt's translation of *The Early History of Rome* on which I will base my own reading, as well:

One day several men, among them Collatinus, Lucretia's husband, were drinking in the quarters of Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the then ruling tyrant. Soon the subject of wives arose, and each man bragged that his wife was the most virtuous. Collatinus interrupted the rivalry urging, "What need is there of words when in a few hours we can prove beyond doubt the incomparable superiority of my Lucretia?" With this the men galloped off to Rome, where they found all of the other men's wives luxuriously enjoying themselves in their husband's absence while only Lucretia was found modestly dressed and "hard at work by lamplight upon her spinning."

During the subsequent dinner, Tarquin was inflamed with lust by Lucretia's beauty and proven chastity. Several nights later he burst into Lucretia's bedroom, demanding she submit to him. Even when he threatened her with death, Lucretia refused. Finally, he reviled her: "If death will not move you, dishonor shall. I shall kill you first, then cut the throat of a slave and lay his naked body by your side. Will they not believe that you have been caught in adultery with a servant—and paid the price?" With this threat, Lucretia yielded.

The following day she called her father, her husband, and Brutus, a family friend, around her. She recounted the rape and demanded revenge. She would testify to her innocence, she asserted, by killing herself: "My heart is innocent, and death will be my witness".

Her family tried to dissuade her, arguing vehemently that only her body, not her honor had been violated, that without intention there could be no guilt. Refusing to listen, Lucretia plunged a dagger into her heart.

While her husband and father were lost in grief, Brutus pulled the dagger from Lucretia's breast and urged the men to join together to drive the despotic Tarquins from Rome. Roman men rallied around Brutus's call for vengeance, and Rome was subsequently liberated and Brutus named the founding father of the republic.⁵

I am choosing to cite this passage in full in large part to illustrate how closely, in fact, the plot contained in Shakespeare's poem follows Livy's rather simple outline. Notable here is also the fact that, already within this account, there is some attention paid to Lucretia's inner struggle with what she's been through paired with the lack of external judgement of her as "impure" or "dishonoured" – after all, the first paragraph very strongly presents Lucretia as a paragon of Roman feminine virtue.⁶ Additionally, what is more relevant to the concerns of this essay, Matthes observes the important fact that while Brutus already had a very clear *casus rebelli* against the Tarquin family, as they murdered his brother and father, it was actually Lucretia's rape that was the rebellion's inciting incident.⁷ In this sense, Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide actually carries more weight than even the act of murder. Brutus's reaction, which remains the same both in Livy's and Shakespeare's versions, is then both more personal and cynical. On one hand, he is once again forced to grapple with the power the Tarquins have over the lives of Roman nobility, the same power that ended the life of his brother and of his father, and these are certainly images that come back to him as he bears witness to Lucretia's suicide. On the other hand, her death becomes the instrument through which he can not only accumulate more power by wresting it out of the hands of the king, but also as a way through which he may finally achieve his own revenge, as he begins to build his alliance of outraged noblemen. The

⁵ Titus Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (New York: Penguin, 1978), 1.57 98-99.

⁶ Of course, this begs the question of whether Livy would have been similarly charitable in his judgement towards the other women who did not prove themselves to be as chaste as Lucretia if they had been raped under similar circumstances.

⁷ Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli and Rousseau* (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, Pennsylvania, 2000) 26.

fact that one of Brutus's goals is vengeance dramatically recontextualises his character, as he is not only the perpetrator of political violence, but also a victim of it.

Returning, then, back to Shakespeare's poem, we can now contrast its focus with that of Livy. As stated earlier, Livy already hints at Lucretia's psychology and the tragedy of a woman who was compelled to commit suicide, despite her husband's assurances of innocence, because she was unable to cope with her trauma. The bulk of *The Rape of Lucrece* is comprised of depictions of two inner struggles – one on Tarquin's side, the other on Lucrece's. The important effect here is one of humanisation of both the rapist and of the survivor and the movement of action from the external into the introspective, the result of which is that far more attention can now be paid to Lucrece herself who would, otherwise, be forced to remain a fairly passive actress throughout the narrative (with the exception of her temporarily assuming agency through suicide, a trope that has historically plagued many fictional representations of women). Shakespeare's insertion of the psychological element into Livy's outline represents a radical shift in the act of truthmaking, as it recognises that the "truth of the matter" is not merely contained in the description of observable action and social transformation, but must also seek to depict the emotion and psychology that motivates people to these actions.

In a way, this recontextualisation of the story of Lucrece follows the pattern that many contemporary activists, journalists and historians who are concerned with the praxis of radical social transformation favour over accounts of the world that are rooted in physically observable evidence and numbers – in other words, it resists the notion of empiricism as the singular valid tool through which a human and social experience should be represented.

Yet, even today, there remains a strong tension between the politics of representing the suffering of one as opposed to the oppression of the many and, more often than not, this distinction often follows social patterns of marginalisation and dehumanisation in cases where the human subject becomes reduced to a numerical figure. Broadly speaking, those who already possess some degree of privilege are given more opportunity to have their negative experiences represented as being particular to them, as being simultaneously personal as well as symptomatic of some greater socio-political issue that warrants addressing. Staying with the example of sexual violence, the #MeToo movement is a prime example of this inequality of access to

subjectification. While it has been widely known that women, particularly marginalised women, experience high rates of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, their stories were routinely denied the same media attention and, by extension, cultural and political impact that the stories of privileged, rich, typically white, Hollywood actresses. In the wider global arena, we can observe the ways in which death becomes framed along similar axes of significance. What makes the loss of certain lives “grievable” while others get reduced to statistics or to Livy-like accounts that prioritise depersonalised description over the actual circumstances of an individual internal and external life?

For this, I would like to look at an annual event that remains important to my community and that has already been subject to relevant criticism, the Transgender Day of Remembrance that occurs every 20th November. The history of the Transgender Day of Remembrance (otherwise known as TDoR) goes back to 1999, when it was originally started as a vigil for Rita Hester, a trans woman from Allston, Massachusetts who was murdered in a transphobic attack. The modern importance of the event is two-fold: Firstly, it honours the memories of those whose lives would have otherwise been deemed ungrievable by a society that systematically devalues the lives of trans people. Secondly, this act of remembering the dead also reminds the participants of how much there is still left to be done in the field of social change as well as of their own complacency. In other words, TDoR retroactively makes the lives of trans people into lives that mattered and continue to matter through the act of grieving, putting into practice what Judith Butler describes in her introduction to *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*: “Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters.”⁸ Yet now, twenty years later, it remains dubious whether TDoR truly achieves this.

As the project itself grew, so did the list of those deemed to have been the victims of transphobic violence, a list that predominantly contains the names of trans women of colour, many of whom lived in parts of the world far away from the remembrance ceremony. Beyond their names (many of which are listed as anonymous), the only other records on the list typically contained

⁸ Judith Butler, “Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life,” *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2016) 14.

in an entry are month of death and cause of death. Can it then, in any reasonable way, be said that this is an act of resistance to the depersonalisation of marginalised death? That we are somehow honouring the hundreds of names that list contains every year in a way that remains aware of each individual life? Are we truly grieving for people or are we, instead, grieving for the concept of transphobic violence?

As the organiser of last year's Transgender Day of Remembrance in Prague, these were questions that weighed quite heavily on me and which, over time, made me inherently suspicious of similar depersonalised representations of the suffering and pain of others. I did not want to instrumentalise the lives and deaths of people I never knew for the benefit of my own local activism, a criticism raised against Berlin-based trans activists by C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn in "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence and the Trans of Color Afterlife":

"Their" deaths were not in vain, one of the speakers is said to have stated: "they" made it possible for "us" to come together today. Among "them" was Tyra Hunter. Like so many of its globalizing predecessors, the Berlin TDOR thus incited a trans community into life whose vitality depends upon the ghosting of poor trans people, trans people of color, and trans people in the Global South.⁹

A similar, albeit a much more personal, criticism of how TDoR has been transformed from an act of remembrance into one of political activism also appears in Amber Dawn's essay "How to Bury Our Dead" where she describes her experience of attending TDoR in Vancouver in order to grieve for a trans woman she personally knew and who was brutally murdered a few months prior. She went to the event with hopes of being given some space to speak and inform people about what a resilient and strong woman Shelby Tom was, especially considering this event was held in her home city. Instead her name was simply read out from a long list that

⁹ C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection of Violence and the Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Transgender Studies Reader vol. 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013) 74.

included a gruesome description of her murder, which made Amber Dawn break down in tears, as she was denied the chance to publicly honour Shelby's memory.¹⁰

Such an approach very strongly echoes the ways in which Brutus responds to Lucretia's murder. While her husband and father bicker over which one of them has a greater claim to grief (which in some ways mirrors other discussions surrounding TDoR that have to do with whether certain people memorialised were truly victims of transphobic violence or of violence that had a different motive), Brutus wastes no time as he pulls the knife from her body and immediately begins instrumentalising her corpse as well as the weapon for his own needs. Furthermore, as Melissa M. Matthes catalogues in *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics*, the mythological event of Lucretia's rape has been used to justify different forms of society and constitutes a "[...] memory designed to ignite political action even as it aims to occlude femininity."¹¹ In other words, issues such as masculinity, power, ideal constructions of womanhood etc. become overwritten with what philosophers and historians (often one and the same) would consider to be more "pressing matters" – the political system at large as it pertains to the distribution of power among privileged men. As Brutus and the two other men go "To show her bleeding body throughout Rome, / And so publish Tarquin's foul offence,"¹² the suffering of this Lucretia undergoes an irreversible transformation from the personal to the political, employed to change the Roman system to one that is just as unfair to women as the previous one. In a way, as Tarquin forcibly claimed Lucretia's living body, so does Brutus claim her corpse to sate his own desires for power and revenge. It is unavoidable to think of the real-world parallels to Brutus's instrumentalisation of Lucretia's death, some of which have already been outlined here, but the question remains of how we should transform our praxis in order to be fairer to both the living and the dead.

An example presents itself in the recent coverage around the five-year anniversary of the death of Eric Garner, an African-American New Yorker killed by a member of the NYPD, which

¹⁰ Amber Dawn, "How to Bury Our Dead," *How Poetry Saved my Life: A Hustler's Memoir* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013) 97.

¹¹ Melissa M. Matthes, *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) 159.

¹² William Shakespeare, "Lucrece," *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Arthur Henry Bullen (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1994) 1224.

became one of the sparks that ignited the Black Lives Matter movement across the United States. While much of the recent re-emergence of coverage had to do with the fact that the statute of limitations would run out if none of the cops were charged with his murder – which they were ultimately not, not even the one who put Mr Garner into an illegal chokehold which eventually caused him to suffocate – and the fact that New York City mayor Bill DeBlasio, a self-proclaimed progressive and a Democratic candidate for the presidential office, refused to punish the perpetrators through some of the extra-judicial means available to him, such as firing them, progressive media outlets like *Democracy Now!* provided space for the voices of Mr Garner’s family to be heard, bringing grief and personal outrage to the forefront.¹³ Decisions such as these regarding the presentation of socio-politically important violence and death ensure that, while the act itself may be instrumentalised by movements with which the victim/survivor may or may not have allied themselves with, the personal impact of this violence is not forgotten in the protests that it helped spark. In fact, this polarity between the personal and the political can be seen in how another event that had to do with racism and police brutality is remembered in name – the Rodney King Riots are also known as the 1992 LA Riots. One preserves the name of the man who was beaten for the LAPD’s entertainment, the other does little but tell us where and when the event took place.

This is, to some extent, the same barrier that separates Livy from Shakespeare. Livy cares little for who Lucretia may have been as a person, what things must have been going through her head for her to take her own life even as she was ensured that her honour had not been sullied. While glimpses of the internal may be spotted in his account, she remains a mere tool for his narrative of social progress, more useful as a corpse than as a living woman. On the other hand, Shakespeare is far more interested in the living woman and, in order to present her as such, he is forced to take Livy’s story and begin writing in its margins, breathing new life into the void of Lucretia and transforming her into Lucrece. Yet, as I praise Shakespeare for the act of giving her an interiority, it is important to also keep in mind that the Lucrece of his poem only comes to life at the moment of her rape – her mind is hidden to us up until that point and we are instead forced to witness Tarquin’s thoughts – which presents a whole new challenge of its own, one

¹³ “‘They Didn’t Do Their Job’: Eric Garner Family Outraged DOJ Won’t Prosecute His Death by Police.” *Democracy Now!*, Democracy Now!, 17 July 2019, <www.democracynow.org/2019/7/17/eric_garner_justice_dept_no_charges> 23 July 2019.

that similarly echoes the ethical issues of grievable violence, where the perpetrator's background is often picked apart and analysed while what we know of the victims/survivors rarely extends beyond the event they had been through, as was the case with the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida. It is in this regard that I find my edition of Shakespeare's work, a reprint of the 1904 Stratford Town Edition, to be quite striking, as it refers to the poem simply as *Lucrece* – the rape is nowhere to be found in the title. While we may speculate over this particular choice, the impulse for which was likely a conservative one, it does remove the character of Lucrece from the traumatised state, the only state in which she appears to us in the poem, and opens up new possibilities for us to think of what she may have been like as a person, as a woman and a human being. The title, *Lucrece*, is the next step on the road towards genuine compassion and empathy, a step that many people, be they activists, writers, journalists or readers, have, unfortunately, yet to take. This is because the politics of representation not only represent what happened, but they also alter the memory of the very thing they are representing, as Susan Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*: “Something becomes real – to those who are elsewhere, following the ‘news’ – by being photographed. But a catastrophe that is experienced will often seem eerily like its representation.”¹⁴ In order for a shred of ethicality to be preserved in how we write about events as personally catastrophic as rape, suicide and murder, we must build our representation from the experience rather than constructing the experience around its representation.

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¹⁴ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) 21



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