

Forms of Survival

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Foreword

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An nightmare becomes interesting when you can give in to its twisted power. In almost every intense experience, headroom appears that can be exploited for your own objectives, no matter how insignificant. Finding yourself in the sense of powerlessness, exhaustion, loss of control, or defeat? It is certainly worth looking for your own style of resignation. Not even for someone to notice – you must abandon the illusion. But a loss, a personalized form of loss – if we are capable of losing – is a circumstance that can open an ocean of potentials. You just need to switch attention – not only that of others – and wait something out, let it go or take ownership, fight from a weak position, become embroiled, or take a pounding. You can also flee or get involved, enter a role, or, finally, embody yourself. Indeed, you can become almost anything, even just for a moment.

An insect, for example, as in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*; a dog, as in Rachel Yoder's novel; a cockroach or balding bird, as in Bruno Schulz; a modern-day caveman, as in George Saunders's story; or a dolphin, as the actress Jennifer Coolidge declared. For playing a dolphin is a survival strategy. The range of strategies is infinite, but most are connected by the point at

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which the person begins to draw a strange – unexpected, subversive – power from inverting the previous perspective. “Hang in there, it’s only life,” or something similar. This kind of statement can be overwhelming if we hear it from others. But if it comes in the act of recognizing that we have nothing to lose, it can be a salvation. Not only from convention and pressure, but also from means of concentrated violence.

Starting Points

This is the case with the main character of Tahar Ben Jelloun’s book *This Blinding Absence of Light*. After participating in an unsuccessful putsch, Salim, a Moroccan military school cadet, is almost buried alive. Almost, because the powers-that-be decide to prolong the torment of those condemned to death. They are placed underground in cells the size of a grave without access to light but with air. The unbearable ordeal stretches into an expedition lasting many years – losing the orientation points of one’s own biography. In the eighteen years he spends underground, Salim divests himself of feelings and memories, drives them away, shaping his perception in such a way that the increasingly blurred images became stationary, ultimately cutting him off from the figure that was once him, “to break free of everything.”¹ However, he cares about biological survival – not to cultivate the idea of life as such or in the name of some impossible future. He wants to survive in an act of resistance. The only way he can do this is “to master the little that was left” to him, meaning the consciousness seeking to sustain his tormented body. “I absolutely did not have the soul of a martyr. I had no desire to declare that my blood was ‘permissible’ [sic – A. D.] and might be shed with impunity. I stamped on the ground as if to remind the madness stalking me that I would not be an easy prey.”² As a result, from these struggles emerges a new entity carried by the power of survival, existence in subsistence.

Ben Jelloun’s story about the secret Tazmamart prison is based on facts, with the example of Salim, while extreme, revealing a certain fundamental mechanism. To survive is to renounce. A person can survive only by cutting him or herself off, forfeiting the past, abandoning that which is familiar and close – to that person and others. An act of survival interpreted as continuity, as success and victory, is usually a myth – one of those not necessarily innocent myths upon which so-called Western culture is founded. In fact, the stories of Arachne, Odysseus and Job also do not portray survival as the continuation of fate. Instead of return, there is a process of radical change, rejection, exclusion, or decay, and only from this does a new

1 Tahar Ben Jelloun, *This Blinding Absence of Light*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: The New Press, 2001), 134.

2 *Ibid.*, 79.

subjectivity emerge – one with little in common with the previous course of life. The victims of violence testify to this rupture in various ways.

For example, the testimony of Stefan Lipniak, who survived several years of captivity at Auschwitz, breaks down when his return to the family home in 1945 is raised, when his mother does not recognize her son. “Who’s there? What do you want? Go away. [...] You’re not my son, I lost my son long ago.’ I tell her, ‘But no, Mom, I’m your son, let me in. I’m alive.’ [...] ‘You’re Stefek? I don’t know you, you don’t look like him. I had such freedom, and such a life.’”³ In Lipniak’s biography – like most of those who experience events of mass violence – survival is not the same as subsistence. Retaining one’s vital functions – thanks to one’s own determination, chance, help from others – does not mean a return to the world from before the event. On the contrary, such individuals are usually once again cast outside of mainstream society. One might say that, after the Second World War in Poland, this circulation was created practically from scratch anyway – the old world ceased to exist. And yet survivors such as Lipniak additionally had to endure the long-term effects of their salvation. Life after survival was one big unknown: they had nowhere to return to, nor did they have loved ones, a home, shelter, contacts, education, and economic or symbolic resources.

Impossible returns are attested to by the ghostly protagonist of a novel by Kossi Efoui, a victim-perpetrator-witness of a fratricidal war in a country reminiscent of Rwanda:

He returned home, but didn’t recognize his neighborhood where it should have been; didn’t recognize his house where his house should have stood, didn’t know anyone where his family should have been; so he hurried to his friends, but didn’t recognize either their houses or their fields, nor their faithful animals. And neither did anyone recognize him. Everyone looked at him as if he were an unknown vagrant.⁴

The context of death is not needed to discern the rift in what outsiders, and sometimes survivors themselves, try to turn into a coherent narrative about survival as a return or continuation. Olga Tokarczuk’s Mr. Distinctive, realizing with alarm that his costly replacement face is a replica of a ton of faces looking at him, receives one piece of advice: “you’ll get used to it.”⁵ The bluntness of this suggestion results not

3 Stefan Lipniak, in Agnieszka Dauksza, *Klub Auschwitz i inne kluby. Rwane opowieści przeżywców* [Auschwitz Club and other clubs. Torn stories from survivors] (Kraków: Znak, 2021), 43.

4 Kossi Efoui, *Witajcie, powracające widma* [*Solo d’un revenant*], trans. Wawrzyniec Brzozowski (Kraków: Karakter, 2012), 30 (translated from the Polish).

5 Olga Tokarczuk and Joanna Concejo, *Mr. Distinctive*, trans. Antonia Lloyd Jones (New York: Seven Stories Press, forthcoming 2025).

only from the impossibility of choosing and the hero's similarity with "everyone." A fundamental change takes place in his self-perception: Mr. Distinctive is no longer distinctive; he becomes someone else entirely.

Transitions

The question of what survival is or can be usually sounds inappropriate. It is either too abstract – when we ask about survival "in general" – or excessively intimate when posed to individuals. It makes sense when it concerns something that is being or has already been done, referring to something embodied and concrete. The answer, meanwhile, either dodges the question or touches the nub of the issue: everything that had to be done or neglected to overcome adversity. Usually contrary to the rules in place, often at the cost of others, frequently without dignity. The successful one tends to use all possible means to secure survival, enduring longer or more successfully than others or the thing that made the struggle necessary. A serious attempt to answer this question entails disclosure of our own tactics for survival to the full extent of this experience: from powerlessness, via dependence, to attempts to maneuver these states. There are therefore as many responses as strategies and forms of survival.

Many times, they are connected by fractured transitions between resignation, activation, withdrawal, and engagement. All those moments when people feel that they cannot go on, yet this is just a warm-up to the suffering. When we delude ourselves that we have strength, and do it so effectively that we ultimately gain it. When someone unexpectedly offers a helping hand, although it seems that we lost our grasp reflex long ago. When we let go and refuse to survive, but do so by our own rules. Or when we are already lost, but defeat proves to be a liberation. After all, it is not always identical biological reflexes – the atavism of the struggle for survival – and attempts to more consciously guide our fate, the seeds of discord and resistance, that work together in us. The process of survival, despite all the contextual differences, always resembles a sine wave, and until the very end it is uncertain when and at which point of the line the cut will be made. A new system of connections forms dynamically around the individual – forces are at work that make the existing endurance difficult, those that benefit it, and those that seem neutral, but can be used for one's own purposes. The contradictory forces are not mutually exclusive, but operate as a resonance determining the context of the event. The individual need not be aware of them to feel the influence that activates streams of passivity and activity and leads to moments of exhaustion and lifts in energy. A person trying to survive is not so much in the whirlpool of events as embodies the mechanism of the whirlpool, drawing into their field everything that can increase their causative mass.

In this sense, survival is the struggle of the individual with outside forces and oneself as the object of survival. A split, or at least mediation, between the “I” struggling for agency and the “I” who gives up, weakens, and withers, seems unavoidable. The act proceeds in trembling – of the body, affects, status – and oscillation between the active and the passive. Except that people trying to survive are not solely active or passive; this division is impossible to sustain. What they are is counter-passive, balancing between agitation to act and withdrawal, and actively responding to stimuli that arrive. I understand counter-passivity as the ability to counteract one’s own passivity, manage one’s discord, mobilize reserves, and make a series of turns, shifting smoothly from defense, via evasion, to fighting, escaping, and dependence. Counter-passivity is based on known scenarios of behavior, while also marking the potential horizon of salvation through acts of improvisation. Arguments of past and future are only potential references – some among many tools of survival. What counts above all is the here and now, spontaneous reaction to a changing context, mindfulness of one’s own feelings and interpretations, and sensing what is happening. To survive means to have good intuition. And this is always past-future, drawing from the body’s experience and with designs on further materializations.

However, the sense of time is complicated. One cannot survive by living only in the past. Indeed, cutting oneself off from habits, people, places, things, and memories can be a condition of salvation. It would therefore seem more obvious to keep up the strength by thinking about what will come next when the adversities have been overcome. But the strangeness of this experience is often complex: the past is a closed chapter, with no return, and the future seems so uncertain that it is unthinkable. What is happening now is the only dimension available, but it can be equally unbearable: the person is immersed in a present he or she does not want and tries to wait out. The present, therefore, is embodied, but not necessarily experienced – there is no access to it. This means that those affected by this process, by embodying the present are thrown off the experience of intimacy. They are corporeally exposed to the actions of destructive factors, but have no chance either of regeneration or of feeling themselves. The freedom of the body, urges, customs, the right to manage their own time and space are subordinated to the dictate of external forces. The paradox of the act of survival is therefore that the illusion of steering one’s own course is dispelled, and yet individuals are left to their own devices, able to depend solely on themselves or on a changing, improvised community of survival.

It is no coincidence that one of the verbs meaning “survive” in Polish, *przetrwąć*, has only a perfective aspect, indicating completion. So one can declare a desire or intention – “I will survive” – or assess a completed act – “I survived” – but not say the equivalent of “I am surviving.” Similarly, Polish lacks a word for “survivor” – coinages

such as *przetrwanie*,⁶ *przeżytnik*⁷ or *przeżywca*⁸ are still met with a skeptical or indulgent reaction. So where is the present of survival lost? And what happens to the subject in this process?

For many reasons, the transitory nature of survival cannot be consolidated, presented, or narrated. It is not so much a snatched-away time as a maelstrom of time and space sucking in the individual's senses and generating intensity. The act of survival contains numerous mutually exclusive possibilities, critical points, turns and ruptures. This seems to be the state that Hayden White described as "a moment of absence of presence, the moment at which one presence is drained of its substance and filled with another."⁹ Survival does not occur pre-rationally, just as it is not located outside of experience. While it is taking place, it is by no means clear yet whether this act will crystallize into an experience, whether the individual will manage to surface from the wave of pressure. The subject of survival is exposed to the effects of conflicting tensions and as such becomes a "hot-and-cold" excluded middle. Yet this gap of feeling is not about a void or stoppage; there is a surfeit of impulses and impressions that it may not be possible to assimilate. It is no coincidence that this diagnosis coincides with Brian Massumi's description of the subject lifted by affective stimulation, which is all receptivity.¹⁰ And at the same time, the relational nature of such people is usually suspended, an incidental presence – excluded from circulation. Those who confront them do not see the surviving individuals as they once were, and cannot imagine what they might become. Like the German residents in Kornel Filipowicz's story, who throughout the war – as long as their everyday lives remain – ignore the sight of camp prisoners being led to work next to the ruins:

Days passed, and every morning at the same time we marched through the town that smelled of caramel candies and synthetic fuel. The town's residents paid no attention

6 Krzysztof Wodiczko, "'Najpierw jestem podejrzany,' rozmowa z A. Sabor" ["First, I am suspected," conversation with A. Sabor], accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/najpierw-jestem-podejrzany-132979>.

7 Zygmunt Bauman, "Świat nawiedzony" [The haunted world], in *Zagłada. Współczesne problemy rozumienia i przedstawiania*, ed. Przemysław Czapliński and Ewa Domańska (Poznań: Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne, 2009), 15–27.

8 Dauksza, *Klub Auschwitz*.

9 Hayden White, "Postmodernism and Textual Anxieties," in White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957–2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 305.

10 Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31 (Autumn, 1995).

to us, didn't turn their heads, didn't look at us, although the clacking of clogs could be heard from far away in the quiet morning air. They were blind and deaf."¹¹

But of course, one can survive against hope, with no chance of returning and no future prospects. Without motivation and optimism, against all reason. I do not think that people live in a situation of extreme threat in some abstract, impossible future – survival takes place in small doses, from one respite to the next. It is about being tenacious, latching onto moments, which grow into larger units of time, using more and more tracts of the here-and-now to replenish your bodily and affective endurance. What matters is not the hope itself, but the arduousness of the attempts made, the flexibility of momentary connections, the accumulation or adept spending of energy and matter. Perhaps, in fact, there is even room for hope in survival, but this is a tissue hope, or, as Björk puts it, hope as a well-developed muscle.¹² One that gives support, but is forged through painful repetitions, damage, and ruptures.

Would-be survivors straddle the instinct of self-care, the desire or duty to be involved in the community, and suspension of all reciprocities. Dangers knock them out of the linear experience of time and remove the fluidity of being, but also expose the fragility of the idea of solidarity. However, they also disrupt the sense of one's own agency and the point of the solitary struggle. Support from others is therefore often the only chance – ultimately, the act of survival is seldom performed alone. A labile survival network is formed. Like the one mentioned in his testimony by Karol Tendera, a prisoner at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Depleted and emaciated, sick and with no desire for life, he was supported by his fellow inmates who shared a common place of origin. They carried him, hid him at selection, cared for him, held him up on both sides while marching, and talked him out of throwing himself "at the barbed wire": "Władek Krok saved me – because I was almost unconscious, ready for the crematorium [...] I was two or three days away from getting burned. [...] I was as weak as a fly."¹³ Tendera was joining the ranks of the *Muselmänner*, but turned back from the path of absolute decay by solidarity, persuaded at the last moment of the need to survive.

The labile community formed in the situation of threat is a network of reciprocity – the network retains some flexibility of reactions and moderate tolerance for weaker elements – but it by no means excludes the effect of rivalry, hostility, and antagonism. In this "negative" form too, however, survival is a form of dependence,

11 Kornel Filipowicz, "Biała ręka" [White hand], in Filipowicz, *Białe ptaki i inne opowiadania* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1973) (translated from the Polish).

12 Björk, "Atopos," *Fossora* (One Little Indian Records, 2022).

13 Karol Tendera, in Dauksza, *Klub Auschwitz*, 340–341.

relational and changing everyone embroiled in the process. Many cases could be listed, but the mechanism is the same whatever the context, as seen in even the simplest stories. Ulrich Hub's tale of the lame duck and blind chicken, for instance.¹⁴ A chance connection formed because of the protagonists' loneliness and powerlessness grows into a survival network. Their relationship is concocted, invented by one of them. Like the journey, in which the protagonists deceive each other and – rather than forests, rivers and mountains – take on the obstacles of their own yard. Yet the dangers that they face have a real meaning, for this is how they experience them. And the potential loss also becomes real, especially when mystification turns into engagement for a shared experience. Past traumas fade and old dreams vanish – the characters in Hub's fable do not remember, or do not want to remember who they were, and are emancipated, joining together to form a hybrid entity. First they are together to survive, and then to survive they only need each other.

The answer to the question of what it means to "survive" is becoming increasingly complicated. For some, it simply means to live through, to maintain vital functions and biological continuity. There is much to suggest, however, that survival can differ from subsistence. The biographies of Tadeusz Borowski, Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Jerzy Kosiński and Romain Gary, for all the differences of fate separating them, make it clear that survival of the concentrated violence of war need not go hand in hand with subsistence, enduring its far-reaching consequences. Bruno Bettelheim writes of survival without subsistence as a phenomenon of "retaining a life that has lost all meaning." Such people not only lose their subjective continuity and their self-image, but above all, by living through something they should not be forced to experience, they pass the "point of no return." Adjudicating on such individuals, Giorgio Agamben says that there was nothing human about their maximum suffering. Forced to endure more than they should have had to, they are unable to rejoin social life. When they testify – if they are capable of doing so – they represent not only their own loss, but also – and maybe above all – those who have lost their lives. It is they whom Agamben calls "superstes" – witnesses who survived everything until the end, who were and are mired in it, "charred" by the event, and are forever branded, unable to be neutral. They are at once witnesses and victims. They have often admitted that, though they survived in an objective – biological and legal – sense, nothing protected them from losing themselves. From the maelstrom of the experience of violence, they emerged as different entities. Yet their voices and gestures were dispersed in the welter of more optimistic, unambiguous declarations. They lost out in competition both with individual testimonies of salvation "against all odds" and with the community, political strategies of planned separation from the difficult past – separation meaning a new beginning, a project of power

14 Ulrich Hub and Jörg Mühle, *Duck's Backyard*, trans. Helena Kirkby (Wellington: Gecko Press, 2022).

and agency, (re)building social relations – incidentally, all differences notwithstanding, strategies employed after the war in both Israel and Poland.

Human Lizards

I am writing about the spectrum of survival – about those who lose themselves or are lost on the way – but there are also those who manage, or are at least able to feign, to themselves and others, the fortuitousness, or even success of their efforts. What is it to survive “against all odds”? Survival attempts are often described as aiming for a goal, with clear motivations – the desire for revenge, dissension, hope, the need for reckoning, to punish the guilty, testify to harm, or preserve biological and cultural continuity. As if the fortuity of the act depended on a rational plan, determination, and effective implementation. But might these motivations not be created by survivors *ex post* as a secondary justification for the strange, difficult process they underwent? And above all, are they not provoked or enforced by the community, which makes stories of determination a prerequisite for survivors to return to social life? It is difficult to escape the impression in such cases that the category of survival is closely interwoven with the concepts of emancipation and social advancement. The fortune of survival is usually viewed through a prism of continuation, the scale of success in the “new life.” In the perspective of the narrative memory and trauma, the physical survival of the experience is only a starting point for potential continuations of survival as endurance. It therefore spans between the past – the experience as a precondition – and the future based on this condition.

I call this form the lizard model, survival “against all odds,” since the description of it usually focuses on the act of saving some essence of identity, status, or image, and all the losses borne by the individual are presented as an unavoidable cost, something that had to be cut off or abandoned as it would have rendered salvation impossible. This idea of survival is reminiscent of the mechanism employed by lizards, which cast off their tail when endangered to distract their opponent. Although a tail can grow back – in a smaller or deformed state – autotomy means that lizards lose their previous position in the hierarchy.

Wisława Szymborska wrote about the autotomic defensive reaction of the sea cucumber:

When in danger the sea-cucumber divides itself in two:
 one self it surrenders for devouring by the world,
 with the second it makes good its escape.
 It splits violently into perdition and salvation,
 into fine and reward, into what was and what will be.
 In the middle of its body there opens up a chasm
 with two shores that are immediately alien.

On one shore death, on the other life.
 Here despair, there hope.
 [...] To die as much as necessary, without going too far.
 To grow back as much as needed, from the remnant that survives.¹⁵

This model, according to which it is possible to salvage the essence of individuality, in the European context has become the most obvious form of representation of survivors. It certainly became entrenched in Western societies after the First World War. Psychologically and physically ravaged soldiers returning to their local communities made a major impact on the social imaginary. They returned alive, albeit radically changed; they experienced loss, and yet survived. Their social status changed, but still they were part of the community and could aspire to rebuild themselves and their position by new rules – performatively as veterans, for example.

The exterminatory nature and scale of mass violence of the Second World War should potentially have changed the way of defining what survival is and in which terms the status of survivors is described. Yet this did not happen – at the level of symbolic and political representation, the loss of those who survived was again gradually turned into a model of survival “against all odds,” a lizard model. When, after the Adolf Eichmann trial, a new era began – that of testimony – and thus only then did a delayed, postwar convention of testimony emerge, at the same time the form of expression on survival stabilized. The institutions gathering testimonies from Jewish survivors in Israel, the United States, and Western Europe developed templates of asking and telling about a survival, struggle, resistance or escape. As a result, certain standards of possible reactions to these testimonies were also accepted. Survivors were expected to provide a narrative of the heroism, agency, activation, and action that enabled them to get away from the epicenter of violence. The human lizards therefore spoke of why it was they who had survived, but also about what they had lost: families, friends, homes, their health, dreams, plans. But the more and more often they spoke, the more they moved from a position of victims – which they also were, after all – to one of witnesses – at least from the perspective of outside observers of the testimony. The community expected testimonies to have drama and intensity, colorful illustrations of the triumph of the strength of the spirit over the weakness of the body (and vice versa), cunning, persistence, solidarity. It also expected above all a happy ending and “tried and tested” stories of a successful survival strategy, tips forming a more universal guide or handbook on how to escape oppression.

In this process, the figure of the witness has become synonymous with that of the survivor, who, having survived, should testify. The category of survival is

15 Wisława Szymborska, “Autotomy,” trans. Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak, in Szymborska, *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, ed. Clare Cavanagh (New York: Ecco, 2016), 183.

increasingly broad, no longer concerning only traumatizing events. Survival has become an experiential pass to adopt a position, speak out, and testify as an attempt to change status. Those testifying with the power of their authority and the authenticity of their experience and image built a cultural figure of survival, reinforcing the myth of biographical continuity as well as the model of the human lizard. They testified to their losses as well as their painful and difficult, yet still possible continuation, while between the words there was an impossible gap to fill, a barren mental field.

Today, however, it is increasingly difficult to argue for the suitability of the model of survival "against all odds" – for example for describing the experience of migration forced by wars, terror, famine, lack of access to water and poverty. Separation with the family context and loved ones cannot be described as a single, neat cut – "just as required, without excess." Yet Szymborska also states in "Autotomy" that "The abyss doesn't divide us. / The abyss surrounds us."¹⁶ And it seems that the metaphor of constant threat, exposure to loss or failure is closer to the reality of those who first try to survive, and later live – although these stages are also hard to separate. Exposure to extreme stimuli, endless uncertainty, the need to sharpen the senses and reactions to stay alive, while temporary, have long-term consequences. One never emerges from the process of survival whole. This mode is only ever a moment from being ruptured. The next installments are always marked by the damage done; the loss never ends. The destructive potential endures, the individual consigned to incidental continuation.

Indeed, it is worth considering survival as a sum of the interruptions that dispel the illusion of linearity of the experience, knocking the individual from the previous framework violently enough to create a different quality of being. And this is not about the notion of "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger" beloved of capitalist thinking, training the individual in intense experiences to bring about development and progress. Nor is it about complete disintegration, a transformation so far-reaching that it makes self-recognition impossible. For example, the kind that Catherine Malabou is referring to when proposing the idea of destructive plasticity to describe people harmed in sudden accidents, affected by dementia, or experiencing major cognitive disorders.

Malabou argues that the impossibility of escape from an extreme experience leads to a new form of presence that does not inform of an outlet, but constitutes one itself. Transformation entails an explosion of form that makes people "become someone else, an absolute other [...] without last wishes,"¹⁷ without a future or po-

¹⁶ Szymborska, "Autotomy."

¹⁷ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 2.

tential. The philosopher writes of being that retain their vital signs but, by fleeing the impossibility of escape, become insensitive to their fate, dissimilar to themselves; their metamorphosis is final, breaking causality, and incomprehensible as to its effects. Malabou draws on Spinoza, arguing that in such cases the overwhelming force of affects is revealed with full force, usually regulating intensity and instincts and affecting the capacity of living beings to remain in their being. However, their disruption deregulates the ability to be stimulated, to react, and to act.¹⁸ And the domain of this disruption is destructive plasticity – constantly present in us as a potential and able to be activated at any moment. A rift appears between life so far and death, a strange state of suspension, withdrawal, indifference, apathy, which in certain cases can last for years. Malabou says that this concerns subjects that do not survive their own transformation.¹⁹ The problem is, however, that they survive it, but do not manage to do as self-aware individuals.

Who Stays in the Tal?

I mean the gray area between survival and subsistence. An experience that is an irreversible change, a radical break with the previous order, but retaining awareness of the change and its scale. Survival with no happy ending, deprived of hope, not even desired by those who have made the effort, nor wanted by outsiders. One that is too unstable to be able to breathe a sigh of relief, or is only temporary, when there is no chance of a return to the community, or even of feigning optimism. So this time it is not about survival against all odds, but about those and that which was cut off, the remnants, the scraps of survival. One could say that what has been lost, removed, or rejected like the lizard's tail no longer matters or even exists. But I want to ask about these tails and offcuts, their status and further date.

When referring to the living-dead, Malabou does not clarify what these beings are or specify whom this category includes – they are certainly not all mired in lethargy or torpor inhibiting any activity.²⁰ When Ariella Azoulay writes of the worldless as refugees from imperial history,²¹ she leaves something unsaid – to whom is she referring, who are these people, and where are they? When Paul B. Preciado writes of himself as a gender dissident and generates a liberating ambiguity in thinking about what refusal to accept a binary world can be, he still evades telling the potential

¹⁸ Ibid., 27–29.

¹⁹ Ibid., 27–29.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

story about what has not survived repression.²² When Judith Butler writes of the specters yawning from the gaps between statistics, reports and summaries of wars, the question arises as to the traces of these people, their stories, gestures, bodies, and finally their graves and memorials.²³

Who and what is in fact meant here? Indeterminate figures that do something and have a certain function, yet remain abstract at the descriptive level – it is hard for the reader to imagine their materializations. Surpluses of meanings can be sensed in what is unsaid – we do not necessarily understand them, but we suspend this moment of uncertainty in reading, adding coherence to it, focusing on the substance and not the extraneous. Yet something remains on the edges of perception, lingers, and sometimes returns in completely different circumstances. Contrary to appearances, the mechanism of framing our own interpretation has much in common with selection of what is needed for survival, with casting off the tails of endurance. Both our own and the shared one that divided communities – usually in a violent, painful way. Survival is usually at the cost of someone or something, even a part of ourselves.

The entire universe cut in half and solely in half. Everything is heads or tails in this system of knowledge. We are human or animal. Man or woman. Living or dead. We are the colonizer or the colonized. Living organism or machine. We have been divided by the norm. Cut in half and forced to remain on one side or the other of the rift. What we call "subjectivity" is only the scar that, over the multiplicity of all that we could have been, covers the wound of this fracture. It is over this scar that property, family, and inheritance were founded [...] names are written and sexual identities asserted.²⁴

Preciado is writing about his own crossing, the experience of transition, which he treats not as a passage from point A to point Z, but an endless road with many junctions on the way. This crossing also marks a broader social context that enforces identity declarations, stubbornly identifies and attributes, stripping the power of individual diversity. Everyone is stripped in this way, although of course at varying costs. Yet the offcuts of endurance are not extinguished once and for all. Scars are visible, and memories resurface, along with phantom pains and embodied intuitions manifested in various ways. Gestures, for instance, tics, hesitations, or changing timbre of voice. Preciado advises being attentive of these signals: "if you feel your throat constricting when you hear one of these words [classifications of identity], do not silence it. It's the multiplicity of the cosmos that is trying to pierce through your

22 Paul Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2020).

23 Judith Butler, *Frames of War? When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

24 Preciado, *An Apartment*, 27.

chest."²⁵ Archives are full of cast-off tails, with documents, testimonies, stories, literature, and art recording the traces of the separation process. They can be masked and ignored, but since they are still an obstacle to attempts to maintain continuity, does it not make sense to harness their subversive potential? Especially for those who have not endured their own endurance or are lost in this process. After all, these are entire groups of marginalized people, minorities condemned to oblivion, invisible people without citizenship, with unclear or disjointed political status. The offcuts from endurance are often reactive, seeking material and symbolic carriers; they might be a seed of resistance and form its strategies. As Efovi's protagonist says, we are not yet finished with the present.

Translated by Ben Koschalka

Abstract

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Forms of Survival

The author writes about aspects of survival: powerlessness, withdrawal, engagement, activation, dependence, and maneuvering between these states. She proposes the concept of counter-passivity as the ability to counteract one's passivity, manage disagreement, mobilize reserves, and transition from defense, through evasion, fight, and escape. She distinguishes acts of surviving – or attempts to maintain vital functions – and subsistence as the preservation of self-awareness, cognitive functions, and capacity to resist. She writes about the dominant in twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural models of thinking about survivors as winners of fate. The author calls it the lizard model or survival "against all odds," which focuses on the act of saving the essence of identity, as any losses the individual may suffer are presented as an inevitable cost, something that had to be cut off because it would have prevented salvation. Continuity is the primary determinant of survival success, considered in the context of advancement and emancipation. The article provides an alternative survival model: without a happy ending, without hope, with no chance of returning to the community. Hence, she means that which has been severed through division, about remnants of survival and their political and subversive potential.

Keywords

survival, living, resistance, disagreement, survival network

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.