Three Routes Beyond the Dead Ends of Man: A Tribute to the Legacy of Drucilla Cornell

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ABSTRACT: In this article I reflect on meeting Professor Drucilla Cornell as a bachelor’s student at Rutgers University, working as her assistant, and the irreversible impact she had on my life. I argue that Cornell was a thinker of profound courage and that this virtue was crucial to her developing several ways beyond the philosophical anthropology of Euro-modern man. Cornell envisioned three main ways beyond what she called the “dead ends of man”: feminism, critical philosophy (including dialectics and Marxism), and African humanism. These three traditions combine in an explosive, revolutionary way in Cornell’s writings; each are essential pillars of her thought. I also identify a dialectical or “productive” tension in her thinking between tendencies toward both idealist and materialist metaphysics. I conclude by recounting personal experiences with Cornell, exploring the consequences of her ethical philosophy, and posing questions that I think she could help us answer in the tumultuous times we are currently living through.

KEYWORDS: Drucilla Cornell, ubuntu, Hegel, South Africa, African humanism, feminism

It was April 19, 2015, and we were sitting in class on the fourth floor of Hickman Hall at Rutgers University. Hickman Hall was where the political science department was located when I was a student, and that day I sat there thinking it would be like any other day in Drucilla’s seminar on critical theory. I had just completed college and Drucilla let me sit in on her graduate seminar, so I tried my best to understand. Class had barely started before one of our colleagues, Bill, said that news was reporting that an unarmed Black man in Baltimore, Maryland who had been apprehended by police was confirmed dead in police custody. We later learned Freddie Gray died due to traumas to his cervical spine.
I was young with much to learn, but this did not surprise me. The year before, 2014, was the year of the public executions of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, two unarmed Black men and a Black boy who were lynched before the entire country that my political science classes wanted me to imagine was held together by a social contract. One year later would be Walter Scott and two years later Alton Sterling, the rebellions after which produced the iconic photograph of Leshia Evans, the lone Black woman confronting a legion of pigs dressed in full riot gear, guns in hand, with only her glasses and dress blowing in the wind. Bill continued feeding our class the news. Soon he heard that the people of Baltimore were rioting. Drucilla finally spoke. She looked at us very sternly and said class was dismissed. There was only one place that any of us should be. Baltimore was not rioting; the people were staging a rebellion.

On that day my concept of action changed, as did my understanding of the nature of political responsibility, which is quite different from many of the other forms of responsibility we face in existence. My classmates Kurt Poeschl, Peter Yoon, and I packed into my car and drove down to sing and march with the people of Baltimore as well as with those from around the country who had travelled there, like us, to elevate Black demands on the city government. It was only upon returning, however, that I began to feel the weight of my experience. Like the Great Detroit Rebellion of 1967 and so many other cases of Black political spontaneity preceding and succeeding it, the people of Baltimore faced attempted delegitimization through imposition of the term “race riot” onto their actions. I had participated in a protest that was becoming more organized by the day. Yet family, friends, and teachers all told me that what was transpiring in Baltimore was violence rather than politics. This was a lie and they were functioning as liberal apologists for the anti-black structure of U.S.-American life. The question thus became learning a language with which to tell the truth; the political truth. All of Drucilla’s classes (I took many with her) gave us, her students, a syntax for expressing political truth and for understanding and communicating the realities of those who the neocolonial and capitalist system tried to keep below the bar of humanity.

Telling the truth is an odd thing in political contexts. Riddled with problems, it’s not as easy as one might think. It is not a matter, for instance, of simply being honest. In this sense we might distinguish between moral and political notions of truth. As the great Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu explains, his people, the native Akan, use two separate words to capture this difference. The first nokware is a moral notion of truth. It means “one voice . . . the idea being . . . that truthfulness consists in saying to others only what one would say to oneself” (1980, 116). Of course, anyone who has studied the existentialism of
Jean-Paul Sartre understands that human beings lie to themselves. Through acts of bad faith, we convince ourselves of things we do not believe and manage to self-deceive while simultaneously telling the “truth” in a moral sense. In their writings on organized criminality and public self-deception in Nazi Germany, moreover, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt bring out the problems associated with normative and institutional bad faith. They demonstrate the necessity of the second, political notion of truth among the Akan. As Wiredu explains, the political word for truth is not a word but a phrase roughly translating to “what is so” or “what is the case” (1980, 116). The idea is that making “what is so” appear to others often requires courage enough to confront them. Thus political truth is dialectical and implies struggle. Its evidentiality concerns not only what one personally believes but how far one is willing to go to ensure that it is seen and understood by others. This means fighting, additionally, for the normative and institutional mechanisms with the power to underwrite the trustworthiness of truth as a phenomenon connected to the well-being of human communities.

In her work as a teacher, writer, and political activist, Drucilla was a person of profound courage, as she fought for truth and was a truth-teller in this political sense. She struggled to ensure that all of the conditions necessary for truth’s appearance in the world could be met. Drucilla’s truth-telling was political because it necessitated a multidimensional and multivalent struggle on many fronts, at different times over the course of many life projects.

The reason this struck me is because courage is a virtue our society is sorely lacking. Courage can be considered a cardinal virtue, a virtue of virtues because it makes others such as honesty and truthfulness possible. Those steeped exclusively in analytical moral philosophy are liable to forget its importance. For Aristotle, courage was some abstract mean between the absence of cowardice and excesses of recklessness, but for Drucilla it was concrete and simple. Courage requires us to act, often under conditions of radical uncertainty, to keep the possibility of justice alive in the world—and justice, Jacques Derrida taught, is undeconstructable (1992). This was Drucilla’s position as well. Rather than lower the standard for the kind of responsibility that is needed politically, the undeconstructability of justice raises it.

Let us begin more formally with the courage embodied in Drucilla’s writings. When Drucilla began teaching at the University of Pennsylvania Law School in the early 1990’s, she was already arguing that political belonging in much of European thought was theorized on the basis of fear and utility. For Thomas Hobbes, it is primarily out of fear that we give up our natural liberty and agree to subject ourselves to a Leviathan who will protect us from all the terrible dangers presented by reality. Drucilla argued this was a complete...
projection, a lie, and that there was more to an ethical community than contracting away our fear. Critical philosophy (including dialects), feminism, and African humanism were her ways beyond the Dead Ends of Man, by which Drucilla meant Euro-modern Man or *homo economicus*. Getting beyond them was urgent.

For Drucilla, we should all be fundamentally discontented by Hobbesian fear and should treat it as a poor excuse for failing to think boldly with revolutionaries who accept nothing less than the total transformation of an alienating and exploitative capitalist society. The challenge she poses: do we have the courage to act? Do we have the courage to assume the responsibility for acting? Over many decades Drucilla's approach to politics produced courageous ideas but it also gave us, her students, *permission* to act courageously. She made us unafraid to fight and speak truth to power. Now, many of us no longer need permission. That is due to her pedagogy.

The evolution of her career suggests that Drucilla found many ways beyond the Dead Ends of Man. I only explore three of them here, as these are also personal reflections. I cherish all the stories Drucilla told about her decades of activism. This was courageous, too. The labor movement and socialist revolution were present in everything she did, even in the smallest acts. But she did big things. Drucilla was a skilled union organizer. She took up arms when the Black Panthers called over the car radio for solidarity. She even organized a brothel to protect sex workers in the South Bronx with Las Grenudas, a consciousness-raising group in the 1970's. They ran the brothel collectively, distributed the profits equally, and created a democratic space that empowered women. Naturally, the pimps came after them. And of course, the pimps were backed by the racist and militant New York City police, so things did not last too long. But that was not the point. At stake was the value of action and the ability to learn through struggle so as to gain the political wisdom necessary for future battles. It was also about consciousness-raising and working together with women who were, likewise, committed to realizing leftist and progressive ends.

Drucilla also had a magnificent sense of humor. Thirty years later she reflected, “It was a little bit of an idealistic move for us to think we would take on the pimps all by ourselves.” I wish she was around to tell me the story of Las Grenudas once more. I will miss Drucilla's laugh and her funny, quirky cackles that she would let out after identifying a profound irony. Since she was so brilliant, I heard her distinct cackle frequently. We had the best conversations, and they often had me thinking for the rest of the day.
I met Drucilla Cornell in 2014, when she had already produced *Moral Images of Freedom* (2008) and *Law and Revolution in South Africa* (2014). I was twenty-one years old. From the start of our relationship, Drucilla was completely convinced of the necessity of decolonizing critical theory on the basis of insights from Black Existentialism and Caribbean thought. In a profound sense, for her, the future of critical theory and the very possibility of doing critical research were tied to the future of the world. I understand her writings on ethical feminism and socialism through the lens of these later books that explored the concept of ubuntu and the bold idea that the purpose of moral considerations in political analysis has nothing to do with liberalism but is, in fact, a consequence of the aesthetic requirements of politics (here Drucilla was an astute reader of Ernst Cassirer). Drucilla was animated by the so-called “big” ideals of freedom, justice, and dignity that, however grand or romantic as symbols, were never abstract. Drucilla lived these ideals, arguing that we have a political responsibility as intellectuals to continue clarifying their meaning if we are going to ally ourselves with movements fighting for power. Her career and life thus embody dialectical political responsibility: efforts that reach beyond themselves, then return, and then expand outward again, this time further than before.

She began in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992) by arguing against the Hobbesian fear and pessimism of many postmodernists through a brilliant reworking of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel that enabled her to bring readers the ethical message of Derridean deconstruction. As stated above, this message involved the undeconstructability of political ideals such as justice. But her thought on these issues later found a kindred spirit in the African humanist philosophy of ubuntu. In addition to critical philosophy, this offered her a second way around the Dead Ends of Man.

Drucilla explores the relationship between Kant, Hegel, and ubuntu in *Law and Revolution in South Africa* (2014), a text she published around the time I met her. Her account is striking. For Kant, the possibility of a social bond began with the moral autonomy, singularity, and uniqueness of each person, who is valuable not for what they achieve or produce but for the irreducibility of their presence within a field of affective and material potentiality that, for Hegel, outlines the parameters of an ethical community everyone is responsible for making. As we will see, this completely transforms when creolized through the philosophy of African humanism. Here is Drucilla:

One conclusion now appears inevitable . . . the approach to persons in African Humanism is generally more exacting [than Kantianism], insofar as it reaches for something beyond such requirements as the
presence of consciousness, memory, will, soul, rationality, or mental function. Being or becoming a person is truly a serious project that stretches beyond the raw capacity of the isolated individual, and it is a project laden with the possibility of triumph, but also of failure. (2014, 161)

Drucilla critiques the philosophical anthropology of Euromodernity. It is significant that she is not satisfied by the proposition of dignity’s rootedness in rationality. Her uncompromising ethical stance, whether read through her Marxism, her feminism, or her African humanism, peers more deeply into people and gets more out of people. At the very least, it demands more of people. But what is special about Drucilla’s account is its links with existentialism: She views the human being as a project and admits the terrifying truth that there are actually ways we can fail to be a person. Foregrounding the openness of this possibility, Drucilla raises the standard for the kind of choices all of us will inevitably have to make. Her argument is a courageous performance against Hobbesian fear because it is also a confrontation with it.

In much of African humanism, particularly that explained by the Nigerian poet Ifeanyi Menkiti, we do not become a person simply by being born (2006, 324–331). Our umbilical cord must be buried, and we must receive a name. Often this does not happen until weeks after a baby is born. It takes time to become a person and to be brought into society. Our personhood is an achievement marking only one of the ways that human reality transcends its biological beginnings toward something greater. Likewise, physical death is not the end. One still retains their personhood as they assume the role of ancestorship, thereby beginning an entirely new series of phases of their journey on a plane that is inaccessible to those of us still experiencing an embodied, corporeal existence. This is the idea of existence to which Drucilla was committed. Whether we achieve personhood or not (and to what degree) is a function of the choices we make and the many shapes and transformations we undergo on this long journey.

But what, for Drucilla, is ubuntu? In a sense we have already described it, however this is a forum to let her speak. I cannot help but hear her voice as I read these words. She is so eloquent. Allow Drucilla to elaborate:

ubuntu . . . marks us as unique from the beginning of life as we struggle to become a person. The burying of the umbilical cord marks the biological distinctiveness of each person. We are distinct from that moment of the cutting of the umbilical cord, with an origin shared by no other. But we only become a unique person through a struggle
We can understand, then, that our ethical relationship to others is inseparable from how we are both embedded in and supported by a community that is not outside of us, something “over there,” but is inscribed in us. The inscription of the other also calls the individual out of himself or herself. uBuntu is in this sense a call for transcendence. (2014, 161)

Dialectics and ubuntu meet and transform one another. Anyone who knows Drucilla knows that she was a Hegelian “all the way down.” The only way
the ethical community is realized, for her, is if we take the fact of our singularity and difference as a call to make a difference in the world. Indeed, this dialectical feature of her philosophy of ubuntu was undoubtedly inspired by the work of the Kenyan-born philosopher D. A. Masolo’s theory of “participatory difference” (2010). It makes Drucilla’s version of ubuntu also a political philosophy.

It was a privilege to work as Drucilla’s assistant. I enjoyed typing and editing her papers, even if I did not fully apprehend the gravity of the work we were doing together. I would often take the bus in from New Brunswick, New Jersey so we could work at her apartment on Waverly Place. Afterward, we would go out to dinner with her daughter Sarita and her daughter’s best friend Ashley. We would frequent bars, play pool, and have great fun. Other times I would be working late at night at Alexander Library at Rutgers and Drucilla would call me. We would talk on the phone, and she would dictate her writings to me from afar. Reading these works again fills me with gratitude.

Like any human being, Drucilla was filled with contradictions. On one hand, she was a complete idealist. She even had a strong mystical side that was a crucial part of her identity. Having now read Hegel’s *Science of Logic*, I see one source of her mysticism. Though it undoubtedly also came from her frequent visits to see a Candomblé priestess with her grandmother as a child. I’m sure such foundational orientations were reconfirmed when she began working with the advanced particle physicist, Lee Smolin, who has, among other foci, written books on time and quantum mechanics. When imagining Drucilla’s worldview, I think of the *Metaphysics of Modern Existence* (2012) where Vine Deloria, Jr. quotes thinkers such as Julian Barbour and Werner Heisenberg who wrote about how our understanding of nature is only a sliver of the multiplicity of phenomena observed by our senses, and how the significance of modern physics lies not in its disclosure of some fundamental aspect of nature but rather its ability to highlight the limitations of science (Ibid).

If I could sum up Drucilla’s metaphysics in one sentence I would say that Drucilla was committed to the idea of the “fundamental inter-relationality of all that is.” So frequently did she utter these words that they are etched in my mind. For Drucilla, the idea in this statement was not only a metaphysics, an article of faith, it was also a political principle. One that affirmed the ethical status (and personhood) of all forms of life including not only the grass, trees, and birds, but also the ants in her courtyard. Every little insect, pebble, and particle floating in the air we breathe are connected within the all-Encompassing, for Drucilla, and we are connected with them. Things as small as a grain of sand, for instance, were considered an Other by Drucilla and therefore had the
potential to be treated with dignity and respect. This fierce ethics is a quintessential feature of Drucilla’s worldview. I appreciated, loved, and now miss her idiosyncratic way of seeing reality. She helped me to see for myself things I otherwise would never have seen.

On the other hand, Drucilla was not an idealist. Whatever the opposite of mysticism is, she was that, too. She forced you to reckon with the brutal realities of material existence and the need for thoroughgoing economic transformation. She was not a Marxist because it was fashionable. Historical materialism was a fact of Drucilla’s life. In her mature work, it was the principles of ubuntu that necessitated a socialist revolution, but Drucilla interpreted ubuntu as a historical materialist. She introduced me to Abahlali BaseMjondolo, the shack dwellers movement in South Africa that coined the term “revolutionary uBuntu” and that I would later write about in my dissertation. One of the largest organizations of their kind, they were created by the poor. As comrade-professor Nigel Gibson writes in *Fanonian Practices in South Africa* (2011), there were many “popcorn movements” that sprung up after the struggle to overthrow apartheid led to its downfall. Since many of them are now gone, it begs the question of what Abahlali does differently. I theorize that it is their disalienating “practices” from which a new humanity is being synthetized. They are a laboratory for liberation to which Drucilla introduced me and whose political work led her to argue, along with Sampie Terreblanche, against ongoing practices of “unfree black labor” in the new South Africa.¹

Sometimes I forget that my initial encounter with Drucilla was with the myth of Drucilla. The other students on campus at Rutgers spoke of a professor who ran a Marxist-Leninist reading group out of her house. Word circulated of an “actual radical,” a “legitimate revolutionary” who was a professor in the political science department. This is what led me to sign up for one of her courses in the first place. As I write these words, I am reminded that my friend, Aaron, who, despite taking every other course with me, was too afraid to register for Drucilla’s! All these years later, I am so glad that I did!

Although not herself Jewish, one of the qualities I admired most about Drucilla was her *chutzpah*. Drucilla’s *chutzpah* came out anytime she would explain her magnificent knowledge of political economy and how the structural arrangement of norms, institutions, and material reality necessitated thoroughgoing economic transformation. For Drucilla, we must produce new forms of subjectivity, a new humanism, but only through revolutionary projects that globally redistribute wealth and implement democratic socialism. In her lecture on the Négritude poets, which she dedicated to Lewis R. Gordon, Drucilla opened with a rallying cry for the students in South Africa who were
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fighting fee hikes and “therefore also fighting for their lives.” I can watch this lecture over and again, each time feeling the chills up my spine when she utters: “Free education! Free education! Free education for everyone at the university level!” She was met with warm applause.

Drucilla’s passion would come out anytime she decried the need for self-criticism within the labor movement. I learned from her that capitalist political economy must be understood fundamentally as a problem of racism because of how it is arranged to effect an ongoing extractive relationship with the Global South. In a position that reveals her close affinities to the specific Judeo-Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg, early or “primitive” accumulation, for Drucilla, was always in effect. In her chapter for the Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg volume that she edited with Jane Anna Gordon, Drucilla reminds us that Rosa was “one of the first European thinkers to concretely discuss what colonization meant in southern Africa and to understand colonization in all of its brutality” (2021, 54). Rosa writes, “indigenous forms of life should be protected and not slaughtered” (2021, 54). As should be clear from our discussion of ubuntu, ethics, and metaphysics, this was Drucilla’s position as well.

For Rosa and Drucilla, there were alternative ways of living together that need not be dragged into Euromodernity by capitalism, an issue which led Rosa to debate with Vladimir Lenin, who Drucilla argues thought that indigenous forms of life needed to be “civilized” by being brought under “normal capitalism” so that the conditions could be created for a socialist revolution. Drucilla sides with Rosa, who, she explains, did not reject the right of national self-determination out of hand. Indeed, her paper on the transnational relevance of Rosa’s socialist critique of Lenin reframes Rosa’s rejection of “normal capitalism.” The very concept of normal capitalism pushes the boundaries of coherence since it will never be normal to destroy and conquer life in the name of super profits, militarism, and the commodification of all features of human relationships.

Like Rosa, Drucilla had the chutzpah to charge Leninists, in this case with moralism, when treating the national question. For Drucilla fighting against moralism was an ingredient of the courage that defines political responsibility. What Rosa’s critics often miss is that she was saying national liberation always had a class component, so ceding power to so-called “freed nations”—whose ruling classes are antagonistic to liberation—is not in itself revolutionary. In the case of the Bolsheviks, the “freed nations” sided with German imperialism and resisted the Bolshevik seizure of power. Thus when Lenin defended the right to national self-determination, it was lip service. The right remained abstract. Lenin only moved to support the right to national self-determination because
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of pressure from Global Southern nations (2008, 45–46). From their perspective, one must respond to Lenin: “Put up! Put your money where your mouth is, otherwise, you are just moralizing.”

Rosa was ambiguous on the question of whether a revolution can move directly to socialism or whether it must pass through stages. For her, history always has surprises. Drucilla emphasized this openness to surprise when cautioning that one danger of moralism was the Communist Party becoming more and more estranged from the mass movement (2021, 57). In response, Drucilla quotes Frantz Fanon who so eloquently argued that, in the context of African liberation struggles, the people are not a herd and do not need to be driven (2021, 57). Drucilla showed that Marxism should not regard itself as a value-neutral science of historical change and affirmed Rosa’s insistence that the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more valuable than the infallibility of the cleverest central committee. In Drucilla’s words: “Marxist theory works precisely in a dialectical manner with those historical tasks at hand, so that there are no ready-made answers, but only the ability to learn from the actual struggles of the people” (2021, 57).

Drucilla was so prolific a political theorist that it is easy to forget she was a true Renaissance intellectual. In addition to working as a professor, she was an accomplished playwright, having written The Dream Cure, Background Interference, and Lifeline that were produced on both coasts of the U.S. These are only the plays I am aware of. Knowing Drucilla, there are others still to be produced.

Drucilla was also a novelist. Among my last assignments as her assistant was to help her find a publisher for her novel Stricken: a Zombie Novel. She wrote Stricken the semester we co-taught a course on zombies, vampires, and the apocalypse—in short, the horror genre in literature and politics. Set in post-apartheid South Africa, in Stricken a zombie apocalypse had swept the globe. The main character, Nara, her mother, Nolitha, and their friends and loved ones try to navigate a contaminated zone without killing any of the “afflicted,” as Drucilla’s sweet Nara calls them. Nara has a special ability to see the spirit of the afflicted as it desperately clings to its now diseased body. This young woman’s life becomes a journey to fight for liberation. The metaphor of the zombie is capitalism and neo-colonialism’s aim, what they want to turn Black South Africans into. The story illustrates how anti-black racism continues in the new South Africa amid the broken promises of the ANC government. But Drucilla’s band of characters is interesting. They use camouflage cream to mask their smell from the afflicted. Soon they attract the attention of the hostile state and some are taken. Some fall in love. There is blood and gore to symbolize the brutal, tragic costs of capitalism. The novel ends with a showdown on the rooftop.
of the genetics building at the University of Stellenbosch where Nara’s father works as a scientist. He is one of the only people capable of synthesizing a cure due to his having access to Nara’s blood. Indeed, Nara is the first person that anyone is aware of to have proven immune to the zombie virus. This is why the government is after her and her father. Earlier in the novel Nara recovered after being bitten, so it is her blood that holds the key. This ending suggests that Drucilla wrote a sequel. Perhaps one day both novels will be published.

*Stricken* poses many ethical questions: whether to experiment on the afflicted; the responsibility of navigating interracial friendship and queer love; and how to respond to violence, abductions, and other threats. But always—this is Drucilla we are talking about—the humanity of the afflicted is at the fore.

Due to Drucilla’s contributions as one of the greatest ethical philosophers of our time, it can be difficult for me to remember her early training as a lawyer. Drucilla’s concern with realizing the ethical relation and bringing about a “new choreography of sexual difference” comes from her feminism. In addition to her Marxism and her African humanism, Drucilla’s feminism was a third resource she used to bring us beyond the Dead Ends of Man.

If you follow her argument closely in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992), you will see that Drucilla was more than an astute reader of Kant. She was a brilliant theorist who traced his arguments to the work of Ernst Cassirer and his philosophy of symbolic forms. For Cassirer, the human being is a symbolizing creature as opposed to an exclusively rational one. This means that part of political work for progressives must involve developing new ways of symbolizing the feminine within sexual difference. For Drucilla, this re-symbolization is part of how the ethical relation comes about. She wrote about this in the context of thinkers she loved. Earlier I mentioned Jacques Derrida, but there was also Emmanuel Levinas. At this point we must ask: what is the ethical relation for Drucilla? Let us examine her words from *The Philosophy of the Limit*:

> By the ethical relation, I mean to indicate the aspiration to a non-violent relationship to the Other, and to otherness more generally, that assumes responsibility to guard the Other against the appropriation that would deny her difference and singularity. (1992, 62)

Drucilla is clear about what this implies. In taking responsibility for her unique signature, we are tested in our ability to exercise our tenderness and openness toward the Other. We are to resist our narcissistic temptation to tame the otherness of the Other, who should never be made into mine or yours. Finally, we are responsible for confronting the challenges posed by our asymmetrical relationship to the Other. Indeed, Drucilla’s Other was not an idealized Other
but an embodied, fleshy, and even carnal one whose presence shapes our life in ways that could at best only ever reflect a “strange symmetry,” but never an actual symmetry. The responsibility of confronting rather than fleeing the challenges posed by this “strange symmetry” is perhaps the greatest lesson she taught me as my teacher and mentor.

I have no doubt that Drucilla’s life’s work, her three paths beyond the Dead Ends of Man—critical philosophy, ubuntu, and feminism—were about realizing this ethical relation. Despite her being a lawyer, legal philosophy, for her, was always a language to express a broader politics. At stake in her ethical project were not prescribed rules that one must follow, but open-mindedness and spirit that the ethical relation calls for. At stake is our character and our personhood as human beings. Ultimately, bringing about this ethical relation transcends the ethical. It can only come about through a dialectical dance by which, on light feet, we gracefully navigate the divide between the serious business of ethics and the playfulness of the aesthetic realm where the big ideals Drucilla fought for are born (1992, 36–37, 170).

Drucilla’s life’s mission was to create the conditions for social transformation so that justice could be done with the Other. Her preoccupations with justice, her feminism, her materialism, and her socialism—each of her political commitments—went down to the bone. It was a privilege to be her assistant and I’m fortunate that I was able to see her in person during the last six months of her life. Not just for Drucilla but for me, too, her assuming the role of an ancestor means she is on another journey now. Though she is still very present in our lives.

I did not have a chance to speak with her in her final few weeks of her existence on the physical plane, but I would have wanted to ask her about the recent attacks on civil and human rights in the U.S. and globally. I wonder what she would have said if she knew that at political science conferences across the country last month scholars were picking up her earliest works again, desperately trying to make sense of the political, juridical, and philosophical assault on abortion, the legitimacy of the Supreme Court, and human rights per se. I wish I could tell her I walked into a panel discussing The Imaginary Domain (1995) at the 2023 Western Political Science Association conference in San Francisco, California.

Drucilla knew what these would signify beyond the immediate concerns over women’s reproductive healthcare. She would point to the class issues at work in this anti-political constellation and the vulnerability of poor women and families. She would point to how unionization efforts are being sabotaged as workers from Amazon factories, Hollywood writers, UPS drivers, and rail
workers are all either striking or threatening to strike. She also would point to the simultaneity of these events with the fascist purge from the Tennessee legislature of two Black male democratic congressmen, Representative Justin Jones from Nashville and Representative Justin Pearson from Memphis. She would note how we are living in a time when this is happening all over our country at the state and local levels, which is where we see many of the direct effects of Trumpism. In New Jersey Victoria Kilpatrick, the female mayor of Sayreville, a municipality near my birthplace, has chosen not to run for reelection because she fears for her safety. This news comes after months have elapsed without a press conference or local investigation into the death of Eunice Dwumfour, a Black town councilwoman in Sayreville who was murdered in cold blood outside her home. Kilpatrick’s colleague was found in her car with multiple gunshot wounds in her chest and there has not been a peep in Sayreville. Christian Onuoha, a Black man, and Mary Novak and Donna Roberts, two women, also sit on the town council. Alvin Bragg, the Manhattan D.A. prosecuting Trump, also a Black man, is facing death threats and has had anthrax sent to his office. In the U.S. South, particularly in Florida and Texas, Africana Studies courses are being cancelled. These states are not only banning books but closing down entire libraries rather than allow the circulation of Black ideas. Representative Mauree Turner, a non-binary congressperson of color, has been stripped of all their committee assignments in the Oklahoma state legislature. Representative Zooey Zephyr, the first openly trans congressperson in Montana, is no longer allowed to enter the house floor in her state or participate in any proceedings. She “made the mistake” of fighting some of the encroachments I have been discussing. As a result, she has been completely censured. Our system has assumed a form of anti-black racial-fascism underwritten by capitalism’s greed and profound loathing of the value of human life.

We have barely scratched the surface regarding these developments, but they attest to the upscaling of naked violence now saturating the very air we breathe. There is no doubt that the room of one’s own, the space described by Virginia Wolf as fundamental to a woman’s dignity that in part inspired The Imaginary Domain (1995) is in the crosshairs of the racist and fascist right-wing. Drucilla would also be quick to point toward the global consequences of these developments and how they effect and are affected by capitalist political economy and imperialism.

So what is to be done? In times like these we need to find the courage Drucilla had. She would say that the undeconstructablitly of justice is a call to action in every sector of our lives and thought. The revolution is total. Continuing to clarify the meaning of big ideals is among the most urgent tasks during tu-
multuous times when even the relations between us—our very intimacy and trust as friends and comrades—are potentially under siege. There is no doubt that if enough of us remain committed to the ideals Drucilla stood for, we can build something better. But it starts with accessing the imaginary domain and telling the truth about what we see there. This is a simultaneously political and aesthetic project that involves working together and living together differently. We must daily attend the very bonds through which we live and revolutionize ourselves. If we do this we can keep what Drucilla called the spirit of revolution alive.

I miss you, Drucilla. A lot of people miss you. All these years later I am still learning from your writings, but even more importantly from the way you thought and lived with rigor and grace. The world needs more people who bare your militant political commitments and creative mind. Until we reach beyond the Dead Ends of Man, the struggle continues.³

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### NOTES

3. I end this tribute to my teacher in a way that echoes her way of temporarily signing off: “Love me” Greg.
REFERENCES


