In the Mirrors of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt: Remembering Drucilla Cornell

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ABSTRACT: This remembrance of the life and work of our friend and colleague, Drucilla Cornell, is a view of her through the lenses of Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt and through her lively participation in the Caribbean Philosophical Association. As a result, it focuses on her as a philosopher who had mastered the Western tradition of transcendental philosophy. From that base, she engaged the traditions of Western Marxism and Feminism, and was deeply engaged in mastering the traditions of Caribbean Marxism and creolizing theory.

KEYWORDS: transcendental philosophy, creolizing theory, Rosa Luxemburg, Hannah Arendt

Drucilla Cornell as Reputation

I heard of Drucilla and started reading her works long before I met her. The references to her and her work were constant during the seminars on gender and sexuality that I participated in at Brown University’s Pembroke Center for the Study of Women in the 1990s. These seminars were organized by Elizabeth Weed and Ellen Rooney, the director and associate director of the Center. Along with Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, Drucilla and her texts were among the major feminists constantly read and referenced. It was in one of those seminars that I first read The Imaginary Domain (1995). At that time, I was lost in the world of Caribbean political economy and trying to forge some links between Caribbean dependency theory and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.
Poststructuralism was the reigning theory at the Pembroke Center, and the seminars assumed a familiarity with the works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Fortunately, while in graduate school at Cornell University, Dominick La Capra introduced me to these giants of poststructuralism, so I was not completely lost. It was a visit by Gayatri Spivak and the reading of *The Imaginary Domain* that helped to bring me deeper into poststructuralism. These were some of the elements of my encounter with Drucilla through her reputation.

**Drucilla the Transcendental Philosopher**

The significance of reading *The Imaginary Domain* was the engaging way in which Drucilla linked this work to Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic theories in establishing a legitimate space for talking about alternatives to the dominant “advanced capitalist” order and its ever-expanding processes of commodification. This theme would be even more fully developed in *The Philosophy of the Limit* (1992), which gave us a reading of Derrida’s deconstructive philosophy as leaving open a space for considering alternatives to our present order.

Drucilla’s reading of Derrida made absolutely clear her mastery of the Western philosophical tradition and in particular its school of German idealism. It was a mastery that gave her the confidence that she could critique and repair some of the major problems associated with the tradition’s simultaneous asserting of Eurocentric and universalistic claims. It was this ambivalent and contradictory strategy that enabled both the assimilative and exclusionary racist practices of the Western imperial tradition. Drucilla’s work demonstrated her phenomenological ability to dig deep into the transcendental foundations of the tradition, get at its false and highly problematic centering of Europe as the primary site of reason, and making the categorical changes necessary for the decentering of Europe and its philosophical tradition.

At the same time that Drucilla was working on the onto-metaphysical roots of the Eurocentrism plaguing the Western philosophical tradition, she was active in the tradition of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, and others who sought the revolutionary overthrowing of the capitalist system of political economy to which the Western philosophical tradition was systematically tied. Drucilla’s reading of Kant and Derrida as keeping open discursive spaces for alternatives to this capitalist political economy of commodity exchange and accumulation included the possibility of democratic socialism. Throughout her adult life, Drucilla maintained her commitment to this possible socialist alternative. She maintained it despite the crises that it has experienced, including the rise of totalitarian Stalinism and the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union. Keeping alive
the flame of this possibility of a socialist alternative runs through all her major works.

It was Drucilla’s transcendental re-engineering of the onto-metaphysical categories of the Western philosophical tradition that suggested looking at her in the mirror of Hannah Arendt. At the same time, it was her socialist work on the capitalist political economy of this tradition that motivated looking at her in the mirror of Rosa Luxemburg. Because of Drucilla’s extensive writings on reform Judaism, I for a very long time thought that she was Jewish. I had created this trio of Jewish women, with Drucilla in the middle, boldly challenging the dominant capitalist order from the subject positions of racialized others with sympathies for the exploited working classes of capitalism. It was not until the writing of this tribute that I decided to check on my assumptions about Drucilla’s identity with Jane Gordon that I realized that she was not Jewish and could not really be a member of my imagined trio.

For Rosa, the solution to “the Jewish Question” was inseparably tied to the revolutionary overthrowing of capitalism and its replacement by socialism. This position of Rosa’s clearly had a major influence on Drucilla. Sometimes when speaking with Drucilla about the history of socialism I got the feeling that she was right there for some of those great exchanges that Rosa had with the Leninists.

However, despite this convergence on the issue of a socialist alternative, there was an important difference between Rosa’s and Drucilla’s thinking: it was indeed the latter’s greater ability to access the antisemitic and anti-black practices that had their roots in the onto-metaphysical centering of Europe and the correlated othering and peripheralizing of all other traditions and societies. Drucilla’s original and insightful reading of Kant, Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Derrida along with Marx makes this difference between her thought and Rosa’s very clear. This greater attention to the onto-metaphysical dimensions of Western racism, colonialism, and imperialism occupied a much larger space in Drucilla’s corpus, and just cannot be left out of any serious analysis of her work. She spoke often of the closed nature of the major systems of Western philosophy and attributed this closure to the deep Eurocentrism that these systems both inherited and helped to establish.

In contrast to this onto-metaphysical difference with Rosa, it was precisely her remarkable ability to do this work that connects her to Hannah Arendt. Particularly, in a work like *The Human Condition* (1959), we can see Arendt hard at work re-organizing the categorical infrastructure of the Western philosophical tradition, inverting and re-ordering the hierarchies between key concepts such as the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, speech and the self, and elevat-
In the Mirrors of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt

In the Mirrors of Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt was very much at home in these subterranean regions of the Western philosophical tradition and displayed a similar confidence in doing this transcendental work. Arendt’s inverting of the hierarchy between the \textit{vita activa} and the \textit{vita contemplativa} reminds us of Drucilla’s re-ordering of the relations between aesthetic ideas and logical ideas. In both cases, Arendt and Drucilla were redefining and reordering basic categories of thought that earlier philosophers had taken for granted. This is what made them pathbreaking philosophers.

However, despite sharing these innovative achievements in the transcendental field, Arendt’s and Drucilla’s reasons for engaging in this foundational work and the larger projects to which it was attached differed significantly. Arendt had a much stronger attachment to the tradition of German idealism and its roots in Greek and Roman thought, and thus had a much harder time breaking with it, even while feeling more directly the violent antisemitic practices of the Eurocentrism that this philosophical tradition had been supporting. The engagements of both with the thought of Kant and Heidegger make this difference clear. Because of her stronger attachment, Arendt saw Europe’s totalitarian crisis of the inter-war years as also \textit{her} crisis and thus rushed to contribute to the rescuing of this civilization with which the German side of her German-Jewish subjectivity was still very strongly identified. The Heideggerian “care” with which Arendt made her transcendental and theoretical contributions revealed even more of this deeper attachment.

\section*{Drucilla’s Socialism}

As noted above, the category of the future in Drucilla’s philosophy was socialist, as in the case of Rosa. In contrast to Arendt, Drucilla’s socialism pointed to her ability to make a more radical break with the West, and to form new identifications outside of the West. Consequently, the larger project of her transcendental work was not the rescuing of Western civilization from the totalitarian and other crises associated with its imperialism, but the extracting of those German idealist fragments scattered by these crises that still pointed to the need and the possibility of surpassing the capitalist foundations of the West. This possibility of a clear break is what is significantly less graspable in the case of Arendt.

Like Rosa, Drucilla thought that both the totalitarian explosion and the anti-Jewish racism that it inflamed, required for their solutions a transition to a socialist order. For both women, this socialist alternative was necessary if there was to be real social justice, and thus was basic for their ethical philosophies. However, in Drucilla’s case, this transition to socialism would have to
include the uprooting of the factories of racist othering that were located at the Eurocentric core of the Western tradition.

**Drucilla’s Feminism**

Further, it was Drucilla’s greater distance from the assimilative practices of the West, and her greater attention to the patriarchal categories and codes of its Eurocentric core that help us to understand the more explicit and expansive nature of her feminism in relation to both Rosa and Arendt. Arendt’s feminism called on women to pursue very limited and specific political goals such as equal pay for the same work. She did not see and could not see her feminism as an integral part of the struggles of more revolutionary Jews, workers, and women to move past the capitalist order and its onto-metaphysical justifications.

But this was where Drucilla targeted her work, helping to re-engineer not only the founding categories of the male-dominated Western philosophical tradition, but also expanding those of early Western feminism to include Black women, gays, lesbians, and transgendered individuals. Hence, we get the clear differences that can be seen between Drucilla’s feminism and that of Rosa and Arendt.

**The Meeting of Reputation, Mind and Face**

During this period of major transcendental work on the categorical infrastructures of both Western philosophy and Western feminism, I only heard about Drucilla. I knew her only through her reputation, and this was the reputation that preceded my meeting of her. It was only after Jane and Lewis Gordon introduced her to the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA), and we fully embraced her, that I was finally able to put the face, the mind, and the reputation all together. Meeting Drucilla was an absolute delight as her intellectual energies and capabilities were immediately palpable.

I soon began to feel that I was now a long way from my days attending the seminars at the Pembroke Center. My knowledge of her was now so much more concrete. Here was the transcendental philosopher, live and in person. One of her first presentations at the CPA that has really stayed with me was one that she did with Oscar Guardiola-Rivera. Drucilla’s contribution was on a trend in Western philosophy “from transcendental to speculative Kantian relativism”; Guardiola-Rivera’s contribution was to link this trend to the rise of finance capital that came with Western capitalism’s project of neoliberal globalization.
of financial and commodity markets. This, he argued, led to a sharper turn to probabilistic thinking in an effort to eliminate risk and uncertainty.

Drucilla’s presentation was a brilliant overview and updating of the results of her extensive transcendental work. She talked about the collapse of the European hegemonic subject, and how this opened spaces for multiple identities and interests. Engaging a key CPA idea of creolization as a strategy of further decentering the Western subject, she talked at length about creolizing Heidegger and challenging his fatalistic view of the technocratic domination of nature and society, which she linked to his reading of Kant’s Gegenstand or the relation between subject and object. She concluded her talk with a revisiting of The Philosophy of the Limit, with its theme of possibilities for alternatives despite contrary readings by other scholars of the deconstructive impact of poststructuralism. Guardiola-Rivera’s suggestion for addressing these growing relativistic trends in philosophy was funk music: “only the funk unites us,” he argued. After this talk, I understood so much better the things I had read in the Pembroke seminars.

There can be no doubt the CPA benefited greatly from having Drucilla in our midst. She influenced us and we influenced her. We connected in at least three crucial ways. First was around the then emerging area of Africana phenomenology and Black existentialism that was being systematized by Lewis Gordon. Gordon’s phenomenology connected very easily with the main thrust of Drucilla’s transcendental work. Second, we connected around the already noted discourse of creolization, which Jane Gordon, Neil Roberts, and Michael Monahan had been expanding beyond its roots in the Caribbean to enable it to address some of the challenges left by the deconstructive impact of poststructuralism on thinking in the Western academy. Third and finally, Drucilla engaged very directly with themes of spirituality and Marxism that I had been trying to systematize in my work on Afro-Caribbean philosophy. In particular, she was really excited about discovering the spirituality of Wilson Harris and the Marxism of Tim Hector.

Evidence of these deep engagements with Africana thought can be seen in her book, Moral Images of Freedom (2008), and in her later works. Here Drucilla examines in detail the Black existentialism of both Frantz Fanon and Lewis Gordon as part of her larger project of helping to decolonize critical theory. Building on her earlier critiques of Western Eurocentric constructions of the self/other relationship, Drucilla quotes Gordon as follows: “white-black relations are such that blacks struggle to achieve otherness; it is a struggle to be in a position for the ethical to emerge” (Cornell 2008, 107). The Black resistance that has flowed from this distinct process of sub-othering opened a new line of
critique in Drucilla’s sustained attempts to uproot that white supremacist core of the Eurocentrism upon which the tradition of German idealism rested.

Similarly, in their co-edited volume, *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg* (2021), Drucilla gave her strong and explicit endorsement of the project of creolizing the Western canon, and particularly the work of Jane Gordon. Indeed, I can feel here the transmitting of a legacy from Rosa through Drucilla to Jane. Thus, when it becomes time to write about Jane’s work, it will have to be an essay entitled, “In the Mirrors of Rosa Luxemburg and Drucilla Cornell: The Thought of Jane Gordon.”

**The Crossing Over**

It was a phone call earlier this year from Jane and Lewis which first alerted me to the unsettling fact that our good friend and colleague Drucilla was experiencing serious health issues and was in hospital. Somewhat concerned, I kept my ears close to the ground for news of when she would be returning home. Soon after I heard she was out of the hospital, I gave her a call and we had a very spirited chat about the book she was working on and, in particular, she asked me about the work of Hector, a Caribbean activist and socialist scholar to whom I had introduced her. It never occurred to me that it would be my last conversation with her.

About two weeks or so later, I got another call from Jane and Lewis informing me that Drucilla was back in hospital. About three days later, the third call came with the sad news that our dear Drucilla had crossed over and was no longer with us. Although I knew that her passing was a real possibility, when Lewis said it there was that immobilizing thump in my chest that made me think of the lively conversations we had and papers I had heard her present. It was difficult to believe that there would be no more of those stimulating sessions and presentations.

After these initial recollections, the questions that stayed with me were: where had she gone, and where did she come from in the first place? Who or what gave her to us? I had no good answers for these deep questions of what is beyond the bookends of birth and death that frame our lives. So I thought of Drucilla’s talk on the West’s subjective movement from the transcendental to speculative relativism. I was again struck by the feeling that Drucilla was not at all satisfied with the philosophical drift through Kant, Heidegger, and Derrida toward relativism and a disappearing future beyond capitalism.

On more than one occasion, I had the notion that her interest in the spirituality of Harris and other Afro-Caribbean thinkers was motivated by a sense that there was something that transcended the transcendentalism of German
idealism; that this transcendentalism, while close to what transcended it, was also a significant obstacle in the way of our being close enough to this beyond for it to contain the entropic drift toward the increasing conflicts between multiplying perspective and identities.

Unlike Guardiola-Rivera, for Drucilla the funk did not unite us all. Thus, in the final analysis, it is quite possible that the major lesson from Drucilla’s transcendental philosophizing is that we must remain open not only to our future beyond capitalism, but also to our originary past beyond the onto-metaphysical claims of German idealism. In other words, her transcendental philosophizing challenges us to live with courage, hope, and openness within the bookends of birth and death that frame our lives.

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