Beyond Corporeal Constructs: The Imaginary Domain as Philosophical Intervention

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ABSTRACT: The article is a brief analysis of Cornell’s *Imaginary Domain* (1995) as an intervention into decolonizing intersecting systems of oppression. Cornell’s *Imaginary Domain* forces us to think of the intersecting factors that retain systems of power. It isn’t just about one form of oppression but all systems of oppression that separate us. However, creating a shared struggle to find and embody wholeness in response to the historical traumas of slavery, segregation, and systems of anti-Black oppression is fraught with tensions.

KEYWORDS: imaginary domain, human value, grievable life

In 2020, while waiting in the emergency room with her sister, 24-year-old Aya Brown noticed that all the workers in the hospital were people of color and mostly women. She began to sketch these women and realized—from the janitor to the nurse, the Emergency Medical Technician to the checkout person at Target, the subway worker for the Metropolitan Transit Authority (aka the MTA) to the checkout worker at that C-town grocery store—all were women of African descent. Yet, this same population was being blamed for contracting COVID-19 because of racist stereotypes regarding their supposedly unhealthy eating habits and predisposition to pre-existing conditions that made them more susceptible to succumbing to the virus.

In fact, this same population did not have the privilege of staying at home during a pandemic because they were and are essential workers. As essential workers, they cannot take off from work, which inhibits their ability to stay on top of medical appointments. They are often underpaid, and face food and home insecurities. If they can stay up to date with medical appointments and
sustain healthy habits, they can face medical racism which could lead to their not being diagnosed, a misdiagnosis, or post-partum mortality. Yet, Aya saw the value these women bring to the table. Why does it take death or the threat of death for other members of U.S. society to contemplate the value of Black life?

In her essay “Politics of Grieving,” Drucilla Cornell uses numerous geographical locations to discuss politically-situated violence, whether it entail physical or epistemic harm. For Cornell, no community deserves to experience violence. Nor should they be barred from grieving and receiving recognition and reparative justice. Borrowing from Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004), Cornell asks readers the following questions: Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *what makes for a grievable life?* (Cornell 2011) She and I affirm that, despite our differences in location and history, it is possible to appeal to a “we,” for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all.

To experience loss of fortune or life creates an existential unifier that does create a “we.” In the act of grieving, we acknowledge the brevity of life and how the universal we move beyond. Yet, grief from an Africana perspective is to remember the presence of the one whose name we call. I think how Drucilla Cornell’s work didn’t only create avenues and a methodological approach to naming and theorizing varieties of marginalization, it is the universal we that moved her. Her work on ubuntu philosophy—whether explicitly named or covertly threaded—is what inspires my thinking. Whenever I and others approach Cornell’s work, we cannot just approach her thoughts. Instead, one hears and joins the “we” that she is not only referencing but talking to. That “we” is what informs her work, however, to borrow from her longtime intellectual inspiration Ernst Cassirer, “humanity is transcendentally limited by a mark of ideality” (Cornell 4–5). Thinking with and beyond the limited mark of ideality is what makes Cornell’s work so compelling. For her, the only limit is one’s imagination. To imagine is to think from a Levinasian perspective “il*ya*.” It is an invitation to an existence of a there. If “there” is possible, we are possible.

Cornell speaks of the imaginary domain in which the human subject can have freedom in the imagination of possibility instead of the imprisoned domain of socially assumed persona(s). Yet, what happens when the subject is outside of the normative binaries of subjectivity? I use Cornell’s words to illuminate this question:

> the person is not a given, but one that is a project which we pursue throughout our lives. This project demands at least three minimum conditions of individuation. They are as follows: “1) bodily
integrity, 2) access to symbolical forms sufficient to achieve linguistic skills permitting the differentiation of oneself from others, and 3) the protection of the imaginary domain itself.” These minimum conditions of individuation could turn us to a much more profound understanding of transindividuality as it has been particularly embodied in African philosophy. (Cornell 1995, 4)

To think with the imaginary domain is to think of the role of value placement regarding marginalized people who are racialized as Black, Female, Queer, Trans, and overall non-normative (Ibid.). In other words, Cornell’s work on feminist philosophy, ubuntu, jurisprudence, and deconstruction, or as she termed it, “philosophy of the limit,” created a methodological approach that pushes us to think broadly about the intersecting factors of oppression during specific and broad encounters with oppression (Cornell 1992). To help explain this, consider a quote from Alain Locke,

the gravest problem of contemporary philosophy is how to ground some normative principle or criterion of objective validity for values without resorting to dogmatism and absolutism on the intellectual plane, and without falling into corollaries on the plane of social behavior and action, of intolerance and mass coercion. (Locke 1935, 312–33)

Locke helps to imagine a domain of inclusivity of the gendered, racialized, and anti-ableist as he asks what it means to focus on feelings and their forms instead of interests and their utility. If, according to Locke, “man does not, cannot, live in a value-less world then where have Black people been living this whole time?” (quoted in Harris 1992, 3–50). Locke focuses on feelings and forms because of the state of Black Life in 1935. Feeling valuable and forming value was the only way to survive and thrive in an anti-black world then and now.

Therefore, focusing on art, music, poetry, and the archive of Black culture and thought was much more generative for Locke’s valuation of Blackness than the intricacies of the social, political, and economic basis for Black life and being. However, examining on the expansiveness of feeling is just as complicated as focusing on utility and interest. It requires attention to the nuances in which Black life and how beings are evaluated and valued. To think of it from Cornell’s perspective, such work involves the “nonviolent ethic.”

Yes, there are limitations to Locke’s value theory, which omits gender and sexual expression from analysis. Arguably, Locke wants to engage the plurality
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and jouissance of Black Life even as he is limited because he is thinking about life in a racialized and gendered binary. Even in his value imperative he is, as Leonard Harris points out, proceeding in a universalized/legitimized way which makes him prescriptive and not imaginative (Harris 1992). His project of legitimacy and universal inclusion creates an assumed persona or personas of Black being that negates the imagined and the further ability to imagine. The results of including Cornell’s imaginary domain and, I add, the imaginary domain for Black beings and minoritized beings has yet to be illustrated. To do so at this moment would covertly become prescriptive.

On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade decision, overturning forty-nine years of legal, if not always civil, protection of reproductive rights for women. The decision, made eight days after Cornell’s birthday, not only marked a historical ruling, but also proved the impermanence of victories of women and marginalized communities in the face of the U.S.’s legal commitment to patriarchy. A month before the ruling, Cornell, together with Carolina Alonso Bejarno, stated, “Black revolutionary feminism has long pointed out that the abortion movement must take into account a full reproductive freedom agenda which would include the right to have a child, not have a child, and parent a child with dignity” (Cornell and Alonso Bejarno 2022). For Cornell, race, class, gendered identities (including non-binary people), and anti-ableist praxis were in chorus with each other. She saw the attack on the right to reproductive choice as an attack on all marginalized communities and their right to bodily agency too. Her imaginary domain is not just for parous women and people. It gives “each individual the right to project a body that is ‘theirs’—not the state’s” (Ibid.). The imaginary domain is intended to see individuals as having agency over their bodies because Cornell saw a direct correlation to other gender minorities. She and Alonso Bejarno state, “The statist projects that brutally enforce control over our bodies through the illegalization of abortion are, for instance, deeply connected to the policies proliferating across the United States regulating the bodily autonomy of transgender and nonbinary people” (Ibid.). By identifying the state’s obsession with stripping away a person’s right over their body, whether it is reproductive or the identity of their body, Cornell saw kinship and allegiance by arguing for a framework that is non-hegemonic, anti-cis-centrism, and anti-racist.

Cornell’s work on reproductive choice doesn’t only address the ability to have a child but also the ability to live if one chooses to have a child. After all, “the United States has no parental leave, no federalized healthcare nor Medicare for all, and Black parents in this country face one of the highest maternity mortality rates in the world” (Ibid.). The infrastructure of the U.S. state does
not support those who choose to have children because it only centers a fiscal class that can obtain medical insurance and the ability to either stay at home or afford childcare. Even if Black parents can afford either or both, there is no guarantee that they will survive giving birth because of racist medical practices and beliefs regarding Black bodies. Cornell’s imaginary domain does not universalize white bodies. Instead, her work centers discourses on bodies that are minoritized.

To imagine is to take into full account the value and plurality of humanity. Doing so negates the urge to dominate and oppress other beings by imposing prescriptions of how to be or even what it means to be human. Unfortunately, the Western project in general, and the United States in particular, has yet to define humanity beyond the white heteronormative and capitalist imagination. Therefore, Blackness or being Black negates the definition of humanity altogether. At best, Blackness is confined to a prescription or script of being Black. Ironically, Blackness negates the prescription of Blackness because, by Black design, it isn’t white nor is it merely the total opposition to whiteness. Arguably, the relationship between scripted and actual Blackness creates a perpetual failure to perceive Blackness and those who are racialized as Black as more than a monolith.

Cornell’s work forces us to think of the intersecting factors that retain systems of power. We cannot just think of race but must also consider gender and sexual differences, sexualities, citizenship, and anti-ableism. However, creating a shared struggle to find and embody wholeness in response to the historical traumas of slavery, segregation, and systems of anti-Black oppression is fraught with tension. For example, theoretical frameworks, such as those that emerge from and inform Black Studies, Gender Studies, Feminist Studies, LGBTQ Studies, and Disability Studies, all claim to fight systemic oppression. Still, this has resulted in conflicts between elements of the Black U.S. struggle and those who are minoritized but lacking sustained involvement with the legacies of Black U.S. struggle. That tension often serves as a distraction from building a coalition to dismantle supremacist ideologies that retain systemic racist power.

For Locke, the negro has been more a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in [their] place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus [their] attention on controversial issues, to see
Both Alain Locke and Cornell are value relativists; they are concerned with the way things ought to be and won’t stay stuck on the way things are. Therefore, they are beyond the Levinasian notion of “il y a” and want us to think of “ils sont.” To think of “ils sont” is to think of how things ought to be, or who they/there can become. For Locke, the question is oriented by the negro or the question of the negro. Arguably one could read the translation of Levinas from “he” to “they” which, on the surface, goes from male to plural. However, philosophy is traditionally man singular to men plural. Yet, it does allow slippage for a non-male non-hegemonic body or bodies to be both legible and philosophizable.

For Cornell, it isn’t just the negro, it is the marginalized, expansively defined. Whether they are sexuated, racialized, migrant communities, non-ableist, or sexual minorities, an emergent, collective we drives her work.

The current prescription of being or simply existing in a dominant oppressive system is a prescription that erases those who do not fit in a gendered or sexual expression outside of a white supremacist patriarchal normative binary. I see Cornell’s work, which is often housed in feminist philosophy and legal philosophy, as moving the needle beyond intellectual binaries of male/female, Black/white, native/non-native, heteronormative/homonormative, able/non-able (to name a few) as a way to think broadly of how to do Black Existentialism and Africana Philosophy. The argument may focus on one aspect of marginalization but it does not erase or demean other marginalized communities because they are the rhetorical and philosophical focus. Perhaps, it is why Cornell’s work often includes the philosophy of ubuntu in either stating the word ubuntu or her references to South Africa as anecdotal methodology—she gave another name to her use of the collective we (Cornell 1998).

To conclude, Cornell’s work asks us the following: What would it mean for people who are racialized as non-white and other minoritized communities who affirm their identities to say, “I want to be free”? “I want to be whole”? “I want to live my life without the prescriptions and projections of how I should be”? “I want beauty because I am beautiful!” What would it mean for them to live in the imaginary domain of individuated and collective freedom? What would it mean to think of one’s self and community beyond the binary of joy and sorrow?

Could it mean that Black people and those who are racialized as Black could drive to work without fear that a routine traffic stop could end in death, that a jog could end in death, or that, when their car stops and they knock on a door for to ask for help, that could end in death? Could it mean that, when they
arrive at a hospital, they’re not told that they will be fine and subsequently die because they’re believed not to feel pain? Their doctor does run the necessary tests after they’ve given birth so they do not lose their life when septic shock took over? Could it mean that artist Aya Brown, with whom I opened, will have the same rights as anyone who is cis-gendered and heterosexual because her openly queer identity is celebrated as much as her art?

Our task as we remember the presence of Drucilla Cornell is to imagine a future beyond our individual and collective imagination. That future includes Black and minoritized people so fully that its reflection as an image can be seen as art and not an insult.

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**NOTE**

1. My emphasis of an inclusive pronoun instead of the historically patriarchal “he/his.”

**REFERENCES**