THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

TRANSFIGURATIVE IMAGINATION: RECLAIMING MEANING AND AGENCY IN AFRICAN POLITICAL LIFE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2024

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | PRAISE FOR THE MANY HANDS

It seems to me that a thinker does not choose his questions. What he does, I suppose, is manage his turning to one or other of the questions that impose themselves. If I had to point to a time when this dissertation began, as an exercise in African philosophy, I would point to the summers of 2013 and 2014. Curious about writings in African thought, which were unavailable in my philosophy courses at a North American liberal arts college, I discovered a color to philosophy that spoke to my own lived experience. It is then that I properly met philosophy for the first time. Between then and now, it has been a continuous entry into that meeting. And I have many to thank for that continuation.

Nathalie Etoke for inspiring me to let the self be part of its own thinking. Andrew Pessin for encouraging the first steps into philosophy. Uchenna Okeja for ushering me into the community of African philosophers.

And my committee: for your patient guidance of my explorations. Jonathan Lear for giving me the wings to fly, Adom Getachew for reminding me to notice the surroundings in which I fly, and Dan Brudney for urging me to not lose sight of the ground from which I take flight. Professor Lear, you have encouraged a creative approach to a philosophy that seeks its own thought as it fixes attention on what to do next. Professor Getachew, you have allowed me to recognize the potential and limitations of one thinker's voice within a collective conversation. And Professor Brudney, you have showed me the practical importance of the questions I ask in relation to their historical and contemporary manifestations elsewhere. For these and all other unnamed gifts, I thank you.

To the institutions that have provided a nurturing home: among many, the department of philosophy at the University of Chicago for the possibility of seven years of unhurried study, the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture for furnishing a community, funding, and an office for multiple years, the Social Sciences Research Council for a fellowship funding to explore a dissertation topic, and the Higherlife foundation for the initial opportunity to find education beyond the limitations of my own native home.

To all wonderful humans who have cared for me in this specific project and in life, may these reflections show a glimpse of the invaluable and innumerable gifts you have bestowed upon me. And may they remain true to the requirements of an emancipated life for all which your care manifests.

As a Burundian proverb goes, *Ukubóko kumwé kurîyaga ntíkwīmára uburyí* / A single hand may scratch itself, but it will not sate its itch. Hence, the deepest gratitude is due to the many hands.

INTRODUCTION | AN INVITATION

There is a recurring question in contemporary African political life : How should we imagine the future? The questioners vary greatly, as the question is a mark of what it is to inhabit the present. It is a question both about the capacity to imagine the future beyond current reality and the form that such a future can take. The market woman asks it as she worries about the rising prices, young people at the age of work ask it from an anxiety about the scarcity of work, and the academic, taking himself to reflect with the market woman or the young person asks it in an overarching manner and the question becomes one not merely about prices or about work, but an abstract or more general version of the question to speak of post-colonial economics or politics for example, or even the very condition of African existence.

My entry into the dissertation with this question seeks to specify it as a problem worth philosophical attention. As a problem for thinking and as a problem for living. I take its focus on the future as arising from a dissatisfaction with the present, a dissatisfaction with current political life. As such, it arises from an interest in living well and demands that any adequate answer be directed towards the finding of resources for living.

The problem of political life takes note of the historical emergence of current politics on the continent. Contemporary African political life sits in the shadow of the foundational event which was colonization. And considering that the post-colonial relation to colonization is one that aims at liberation, the imagination of the future within our present becomes one that likewise

seeks greater liberation, or what Ernest Wamba dia Wamba has called "emancipatory politics."[1] As such, to imagine the future in this context is fundamentally a two-step process, a diagnostic of the condition and a prognosis of how we can move towards greater emancipation. The diagnostic approach sheds light on the various ways in which political subjects remain unfree. What is our present? It asks. And the prognostic approach traces a potential path out of the limitations to the freedom of existence. This approach asks questions that aim to provide a way into an alternative future where we can all flourish. These are no easy questions and they promise no easy answers.

To tie the issue of our present political life to the reality of colonization is not to stretch the problem beyond its space of relevance. It is rather a recognition of two essential elements: The recognition of the fate of an unfulfilled promise and a need to reset the promise onto its right course. To think from the perspective of unfulfillment is to highlight the failures at reaching the promise of independence from which contemporary African political life arose. More than sixty years since the period of independence across the continent, the anticolonial dreams for liberation, equality, social and economic wellbeing remain far beyond reach. It may be true that this is the fate of many a political project. But it does not thereby make it less of a problem from within the space internal to the political space of the project. Even beyond general interest in human wellbeing which must force us to decry our contemporary condition, there is the question of holding ourselves accountable to our avowed political aspirations. If the African nation state is a thing essentially designed as an emancipative object, then we must keep it accountable to what it is. This is not a project of purity that imprisons the political object in its original form. Rather, it is a recognition of the worthwhile project that such an original form, its principal interest in

[1] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Africa in Search of a New Mode of Politics," in *African Perspectives on Development: Controversies, Dilemmas and Openings*, eds. U. Himmelstrand, K. Kinyanjui & E. Mburugu (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1994), 249-261.

emancipation, embodies for the sake of good living. This recognition is what demands we reset the promise of emancipation onto its course.

This dissertation on political imagination in the African context carries forward a thinking that is attuned to the state of failure. Located within the space of the anticolonial promise for emancipation as a goal of politics (which is assumed as a worthwhile project), it asks the questions about the failures of that promise and its manifestation in everyday political living and contributes to imagining a possible overcoming that leads into spaces of greater emancipation within what is required for human wellbeing.

The motivation for the writing is political through and through by which I mean an interest in theorizing on social structures as a normative project. The normativity is located within the centrality of emancipation and wellbeing for individual and collective living. I pay careful attention to how individuals inhabit social structures that fail to manifest possibilities and resources for living well. I consider the heart of the problem to be one of agency and the limits to the capacities of imagination that sustain a well-ordered agential life. Within a democratic conception of politics—wherein politics takes the collective will of the people as the foundation for political organization and leadership—the failure of the emancipative project highlights the failure of the people's agency. This fact does not follow necessarily from the failure of the promise. It could be possible that the people themselves give the promise up for others or fail in their contribution to the fulfillment of the promise. The emphasis on the failure of agency is thereby an empirical point, i.e., it takes the reality of contemporary African political life as founded in the failure of leadership by political elites, a failure which is founded in an essential disregard for the people's will.

Recognizing the inefficacy of the people's agency, this project prioritizes that perspective. What is the condition of existing in a space of failure and how does it manifest in our active and imaginative lives? In what specific ways is agency made ineffective? What alternative forms should imagination and action take in this space? What limitations are there to such alternatives?

I argue for a theory of transfigurative imagination as what is needed in our context. This is a form of imagination which resets the project of meaning making by clarifying reality beyond the limits which are at the basis of the failure in living well in our context. It is a perspective which is meant to lead us into a translation of our imaginative visions into action. I argue that the forms of action with transformative potential in this context must recognize failure as a real possibility and reconceive the aims of agency in a way which allows the possibility of a meaningful measure of wellbeing even without success at the level of social structures.

The thinking done in this dissertation contributes to an ongoing conversation within discourses on African political life. Let me briefly highlight two intellectual inspirations that have led me both into this topic and the specific form that it takes.

What is the task of philosophy in contemporary Africa? Taking Africa's present as the failure of the emancipative promise for post-colonial life, Tsenay Serequeberhan has argued that philosophy, in this context, must respond to this fact in a transformative manner. In order to do that, Serequeberhan argues, philosophical thinking must aim at "inventing novel ways of comprehending social-political existence and, in this way, sensibly appropriating our past in view of a desirable future."[2] Such an approach recognizes a certain lack of comprehension of lived experience. It says that there is a need to reconceive our existence, to see it in a new light

[2] Tsenay Serequeberhan, "Philosophy in the Present Context of Africa," *Theoria* vol. 68, no. 3 (September 2021), 38.

so that we can move forward. That need, of course, is an indictment of previous ways of understanding the reality as having failed to lead us into a transformed future. This is, for Serequeberhan, the essential mark of an African philosophy that is serious, a philosophy which seeks the transformation of life as its object.

In line with Serequeberhan's thinking, Uchenna Okeja has called for a new African political philosophy which engages the fullness of the complexity of political experience in the context. If there is one aspect that captures African political experience, he argues, it is political failure. Rather than a failure of structural politics, this is a failure engrained in political experience. It captures "the reality that there are generations of Africans who have not experienced and will never in their lifetimes experience what it means for a society to be governed properly."[3] This reality bears a constitutive powerlessness "in the feeling by individuals that they can do nothing to change the social and political circumstances shaping their lives. The result is that politics is experienced as a meaningless performance outside the realm of 'normal' life."[4] Okeja places the implications at the level of understanding in what he calls "cognitive disorientation." What is at issue, most of all, is the political subject's self-understanding which is in crisis, a crisis so deep that it affects fundamentally what it is to live together, to make meaning, and to imagine the future.

The argument in this dissertation follows directly in the footsteps of Serequeberhan and Okeja. Recognizing the failure of the post-colonial promise as a definitional mark of African political life, I pay attention to the way we inhabit the failure. I respond to the crisis of self-understanding and the need for new ways to comprehend socio-political reality. My contribution

[3] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 4.
[4] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency*, 3.

in this regard is threefold. First, to draw attention to an existential perspective on what it means to live in the condition of political failure. Second, to conceive of a theory of imagination which I take to hold potential to open up new ways of seeing reality. Third, to suggest a form of agency that can be effective within the space of political failure. Whereas, for example, Okeja argues that the state of cognitive disorientation is so total that we cannot rely on individual thinkers or activists to lead the way (proposing instead a need for a collective thinking through deliberation), I insist on the individual or militant contribution into that collective project.

The dissertation is organized in four chapters. The first two chapters are primarily descriptive, with an aim at revealing the nature of political failure in the context of interest, and the last two trace normative paths for imagination and action.

In the first chapter, I ask the question of "what is our present?" Taking the perspective of political failure from Okeja, I break it down into three components, namely disaster, ruin, and ecstasis. This distinction seeks to connect the historical development of African politics (How did we get here?) with the reality of living into the present (How are we now?). I argue from the perspective of colonization as a disaster event in the aftermath of which we are living. The ruins name the aftermath. I argue that to answer the question of how we are now makes us recognize the existential condition of living in the ruins as one of pathological ecstasis. As a result of political failure which disregards agency and possibilities for living well, I show that the reaction is one in which individuals live in a political space which they do not properly inhabit. Taking the reality of migration as a paradigm, I argue that the person who inhabits the space of political failure exists in such a way that is removed from that very space and is turned towards an outside. This, as I advance, is a sign of something having seriously gone wrong in human living.

The ultimate aim of the chapter is to advocate for the important and difficult work of doing a philosophy that responds to this reality towards transformation.

Following from this, the second chapter specifies the problem of political failure as a problem of agency in order to start thinking up ways to revive that agency. Drawing from Frantz Fanon, I argue for a view of culture as agency in order to bridge the life of individuals and the life of the worlds they inhabit. This move allows a way to notice the parallel between the going wrong of a collective form of life and the going wrong of an individual life. I show how Fanon analyzed the colonial condition and its effects on and manifestations in individual life as well as his suggestions for what it would take to undo colonization from a perspective of agency. This provides lessons for our present, revealing the specific limitations on agency as well as possibilities for surpassing those limits. In addition to these lessons, the chapter provides a reading of Fanon's conception of culture which is heretofore unexplored in the literature on his writings.

Moving into a normative domain, the third chapter develops the theory of transfigurative imagination. A form of the imagination which through the provision of alternative ways of seeing reality (through storytelling as a key tool) does therapeutic work which seeks to get us out of limitations in our conceptual capacities. This chapter is centered around the question "how are we going to do?" I show how this question, when it shows up in everyday conversation in relation to politics, is assumed, to have no answer. I elaborate on the traumatic experience of which the question is a symptom, as a break in the process of living through meanings. The chapter draws from psychoanalysis and moral imagination to devise a way through and beyond the trauma. I highlight the potential of narrative work as a specification of the work of transfigurative imagination.

In the last chapter, I return to the question of agency to answer the following question: given that political failure announces political agency as doomed to fail in its search to transform social structures, what form of agency can we imagine as possible in that context and which gets us out of inertia? I argue that self-sacrifice, as a willingness to die in the pursuit of wellbeing, is the appropriate form of action in the context. This requires a reimagination of the aim of political action away from a singular focus on social transformation. Instead, I highlight the value of self-fulfillment as a project of living according to one's sense of wellbeing. I engage with writings on protest to show how a myopic focus on social transformation leaves this perspective of self-fulfillment out of view, in a way which can cement inertia and the idea that nothing can be done in the context of political failure. As a culmination of the project, the chapter argues that indeed something can always be done, but that the recognition of this possibility as well the motivation for acting on it require a change in our conception of the goals we seek when we act politically.

I recognize throughout this writing that we are faced with very difficult questions and that, as such, easy answers will not work. As such, the form of my writing here maintains a curiosity and an intellectual humility required by the questions it tackles. Ultimately, this is an individual contribution to an ongoing collective conversation whose destination cannot be decided beforehand. Therefore, let this writing be an invitation into one thinker's journey along this collective path.

ONE | POSTCOLONIAL NIGHTMARES

"You're just watching the ocean. You're not even looking at me." A young woman, Ada, admonishes her lover, Souleiman, as they sit on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The young man's gaze stares into the sea, which pulls him away from the immediate setting of his life and love, out on the shore. Moments before, Souleiman is in a truck, returning from work on a construction site in the city. At the construction site, we watch Souleiman and his fellow workers demand their four-month wage arrears, in vain. On the truck, the workmen sing a spiritual song, all lost in a sort of trance, heightened by the moving truck, the boys' heads that swing from side to side, voices that rise and fall to finally fade away as the city, now in the distance, gives way to the sea, the boys' voices now merging with the waves of the sea. Later, Souleiman and the boys leave for the sea, never to return in human form.

Above is a description of the opening scenes of the film *Atlantics*, by Franco-Senegalese film maker Mati Diop. The feature length film tells the now tragically familiar story of northward migration of African youth and the dreadful fate that often awaits them on the sea. What interests me in the film, and the reality of migration itself, is the existential perspective it reveals, which constitutes and makes migration a possibility. I would like, here, to think of migration beyond its overt materiality towards an existential philosophical reading. By existential is meant the experience of life through the mediation of concerns for freedom and meaning, with these concerns understood as final ends of all human striving. The familiarity of the film's story stands on its ubiquity on the African continent where a recurring dream and goal is to move out of Africa, a dream and reality of displacement, therefore, either literally through

migration or symbolically through the displacement of perspective and the resulting mimetic[1] reaching for colonial modes of life.[2] The reality of displacement, primarily of perspective, constitutes an essential element of pathological ecstasis, a definitional concept of contemporary African existence.

1. Aims of the chapter

What is our present? This chapter seeks to give an account of where we stand as we ask the question of how to imagine the future of African political life. Taking the perspective of political failure from philosopher Uchenna Okeja, I break it down into three components, namely disaster, ruin, and pathological ecstasis. In this distinction, I connect the historical development of African politics (How did we get here?) with the reality of living into the present (How are we now?). I argue from the perspective of colonization as a disaster event in the aftermath of which we are living. The ruins name the aftermath. I argue that to answer the question of how we are now makes us recognize the existential condition of living in the ruins as one of ecstasis. As a result of political failure which disregards agency and possibilities for living well, I show that the reaction is one in which individuals live in a political space which they do not properly inhabit. Taking the reality of migration as a paradigm, I argue that the person who inhabits the space of political failure exists in such a way that is removed from that very space and is turned towards an outside. This, as I advance, is a sign of something serious gone wrong in human living. The ultimate aim of the chapter is to advocate for the important and difficult work of doing a philosophy that responds to this reality towards transformation.

[1] "The symbolic and epistemic influence of the West remains prominent, so much so that the possibility to write oneself into the current times, and even more so into the times to come, seems only realizable through mimetism." (Translation mine) Léonora Miano, *L'Autre langue des femmes* (Paris: Grasset, 2021), 10.
[2] Singer songwriter Khadja Nin captures this, saying, "Everyone only wants the Western model." (Kila mmoja anataka tu modèle ya Ulaya) Khadja Nin, "Saves Us" Spotify, Track 2 on Ya pili…, BMG, 1994.

A foundational view in this chapter is the view that the contemporary African condition of existence should be understood in terms of its relation to coloniality. By coloniality I mean the fact of living in a political space that is an aftermath of colonization and in which political life maintains elements of unfreedom reminiscent of colonial domination. And within this relation, with the difficulties that it presents for thought and living, the question of interest will be, for me, on how not to imagine that future. In inviting our focus on three related concepts, namely disaster, ruin and ecstasis, my aim is to shift our attention toward essential difficulties in that work of imagination as a way to trace out beginnings for a theory of African postcolonial imagination. As an entry into the theme, I will describe – at some length – a case on African youth migration and the difficulty that it presents for subjectivity and meaning making—at the heart of which is imagination—as part of the larger difficulty of disaster. Thereafter I shall explore the question proper, give a brief history of the problem and provide an analytical story, and therefrom argue for the benefits of attention to disaster, ruin and ecstasis for the work of moving forward. As a note on method, the thoughts gathered herein have a normative aim, for "it is no doubt impossible to approach any human problem without partiality,"[3] not least because of the practicality and closeness to home of the subject matter for the author.

In the chapter I refer to ecstasis unqualifiedly or ecstatic living to mean pathological ecstasis—a sense of being removed from oneself and one's place of human living which is not conducive to living well as a human being.

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 16.

2. On ecstatic living

I would like to begin with a discussion of Souleiman and his gaze onto the sea. I do so because, it seems to me, there is something exemplary about it. As an individual and fictional example of something that is a reality for many people in the African political context. What we see in this discussion are various symptoms of a problem for human living. A problem which requires due attention for the project of human living to be set right onto its course. In this section I intend to provide a sense of the problem.

I start with the idea of an outward-looking gaze or ecstasis. The gaze at issue is Souleiman's which functions also as stand-in for a general African post-colonial gaze. This gaze manifests in a state of ecstasis, meaning a displacement, a movement outwards—here of the gaze of the young man. The displacement manifests a certain being put out of place. Ecstatic living then is a living outside of one's place, outside of one's standing (stasis). If standing, as a metaphor, is important to human life, in the sense that one's standing is an expression of one's dignity which is essential to what it is to live a characteristically human life, then a being taken out of its standing is a being that has lost the core aspect of its kind of life. Moreover, standing implies a ground on which one stands, a ground that makes the possibility of standing, a standpoint. A such, ecstatic living is groundless living. The lack of standpoint is a handicap in the meaning making.[4] Ecstasis[5] denotes various realities of loss, displacement, and degeneration. Ecstatic living is disfigured living. We have in front of us then a form of life that is disfigured, out of its place, without standing. The life of *ecstatics*, beings put out of their place. That is, beings who do not and cannot *in*habit their place – in the sense in which in-habiting implies a

[4] Uchenna Okeja reads African political life, through the perspective of political failure, as containing a serious "loss of a reference point for articulating meaning." See *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022), 29.
[5] Here in its relation to the Greek noun *ekstasis* and its mother verb *eksistemi*.

placement of oneself within the location of one's dwelling. This will lead to a reality of homelessness in one's very home.[6] And it is, as a result, also the life of beings who cannot inhabit themselves; in other words, uninhabitable humans.[7]

That is quite a lot. While all this requires unpacking, some of which I do in this chapter and some in the rest of the dissertation, I hope it provides a sense that we are dealing with a very serious problem. I am virtually claiming that something serious has gone wrong in human life within the specific context of relevance.

The fact that things can go wrong within human life, at individual and collective levels, is evidently not a radical claim. Human life is constituted, among other things, with a certain vulnerability to various forms of disruption. The disruption at play in the present case has to do with a relation between the individual and their environment. It is, in other words, a problem of culture, understood to sit in that relation.[8] My interest in the chapter is to give an account of the question of how we got here. To offer a brief genealogy of the problem.

In the initial reading of the gaze above, I am stretching it from an individual to a collective level. Let me, in the rest of the section, give more voice to that move, focusing on a material reading of the gaze and an interest in reading beyond the materiality in relation to African historical and cultural experience. By materiality I mean a fact of human life that relates to the needs for resources that make living possible starting at the biological level. Reading beyond the materiality allows us to say more about Souleiman's gaze in a way that makes room

[6] "The African, in other words, struggles paradoxically, as do the African diaspora, with being homeless at home." Lewis Gordon, "Decolonizing Philosophy," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57, Spindel Supplement (2019) : 16-36, p. 25. See also Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (New York: Orion Press, 1965) & Léonora Miano, *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (Paris : Grasset, 2020).
[7] I borrow this phrase from Bonaventure Mve Ondo in *A chacun sa raison: Raison occidentale et raison africaine* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2013).
[8] "The place where cultural experience is located is in the space between the individual and the environment." Donald Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 48 (1967), 370-371.

for facts and conditions that precede the moment of his gaze. It is a way to allow the gaze to become exemplar for the argument in this chapter.

One might read the displaced gaze, at least as it appears in Diop's film, as merely material in both origin and effect. Indeed, the film's sequence allows this view. The men claim their wage arrears in vain. Then later comes the ocean and Souleiman's gaze towards it. The interpretation then could be as simple as the unfolding of material failure, which is economic ("That money is our due", "I'm so in debt that… I wait for it to get dark before I go home.") and social ("remember that we have families. Our fathers, mothers and brothers depend on us. They are the reason we work"). Material problems would then call for solutions in like kind. From this perspective, the sea, too, emerges as a material space, or at least as a pointing towards such a space. By this I mean that the sea becomes a space in which one seeks to satisfy the material needs. The reality of migration which it prefigures in the film becomes one whose goal is material self-improvement for migrants.

The point is not that there is something wrong with the material reading. It is, however, that a singular focus on the material might keep certain things hidden from view. In the material sense, Souleiman's displaced gaze is no more than that which previously beholds the stone and concrete at the construction site, no more than that which claims wage arrears in vain. The gaze turns outward, away from the conflict of the construction site and its surrounding (Senegal, Africa), to an elsewhere. But the turning elsewhere retains the same material character. Souleiman simply wishes to make a living and that is all we can say.

What if we push our thought past the material reading? What more might appear and of what use might it be to us? What if this displaced gaze were constitutive of lived reality for a sizeable number of a whole continent's inhabitants? What might it mean to inhabit the world

primarily through such displacement? And how might that inhabitation propel itself in time, through past and present towards the future?

These questions, as a start, attempt to reveal what lies deep in the world of Diop's *Atlantics*, or within the contemporary reality of African youth migration – as Diop's film is a commentary on life. Another founding event, a disaster, predates the men's gaze towards the sea and, as a counterpoint, away from the continental ground—that is, their turn towards Europe and away from Africa. The ability to turn the gaze and to turn it towards the sea requires a prior possibility that shapes meaning making in the world and the particular constitution of human agency within it. The point is not that the story transpires within a historical plenum. But it is, more crucially, that a specific history makes the story what it is (as reality, beyond fiction) by closing and disclosing possibilities for being and for acting. In other words, we must ask how the sea-as-Europe[9] presents itself not just as a possibility, but as *the* possibility.[10] As a possibility, on the one hand, the sea could present itself as one among many options which are properly open to the agents. In that sense we could speak of the sea as an avenue for material improvement as previously suggested. This, however, is a surface level reading. As *the* possibility, on the other hand, the sea-as-Europe presents itself in a mode that excludes other possibilities, i.e., closing off others in order to disclose itself all-consumingly. Here Europe becomes ground and its peripheries groundless. In this presentation is an encounter that makes the sea more than just what meets the eye.

[9] This is to mean the sea in its function as a symbol for Europe. The men do not look to the sea as what lies before their eyes, i.e., the large expanse of water, but for what it opens up beyond itself. In other words, it is not the sea proper, but Europe, which fascinates, averts the gaze.

[10] I am aware that African migration does not take a singular European route. And in fact, what interests me in the whole dissertation stands more on the unstable relation to the local space than to the final destination of those who migrate. Still, I believe there is room to argue for the European direction as important in the genealogy of the problem. It allows the visibility of colonization as an imminent piece of the puzzle as a key source of the cultural instability. In this manner it allows a diagnostic clarity in answering the question of how we got here.

The effect begets what Joseph Tonda has called "*éblouissements*" as forms of dazzlement of sight, with sight understood as a tool for meaning making and imagination. This dazzlement, a handicap for the faculty of sight, implies outward-directed fascination, which distorts the lived expression of authentic subjectivity.[11] It manifests a displacement of being and, most immediately, of the gaze. In our paradigm, with the men looking out to the sea, the gaze diverts and displaces subjectivity and the possibility of its primordial expressions through love, spirituality, etc. This is a diversion in origin, meaning the location of the beholder, i.e., the ground which has become ungrounded, groundless. As for the direction of the gaze to the sea, the gaze also operates through diversion. The reason the men look out to the sea and, in the end, go out to it, is their placing of possible ground on the groundless sea. In other words, they see beyond what there is to see. Immediately, the sea points to Spain, to Europe, or, conversely, out of Africa. But this operates, as the film will come to reveal, as a deception, a diversion from the course of life as livable. There is, in reality, no ground, no beyond. In this way, the gaze operates on the level of a dystopia. Within the film, the gaze prefigures annihilation, total annihilation. "A storm whipped up the sea… We were cast into the depths." What was once a dream turns into a nightmare.[12] Here, we might borrow Tonda's "afrodystopic," to denote the state of living someone else's dreams, removed from one's way of being.[13] This kind of living yields, and forms part of life in the ruins of colonial disaster.

The gaze is a valuational gaze and, as such, a vertical one. The latter pronouncement designates the aims of the look. The look takes its start from a place of loss, of disadvantage, of

[11] Joseph Tonda, *L'impérialisme postcoloniale: Critique de la société des éblouissements* (Paris : Karthala, 2015).
[12] Viewers of the film will appreciate the dimension of the nightmare, as the men return posthumously and inhabit their girlfriends' bodies who turn into zombie-like creatures that sleepwalk to extract revenge and payment of the wage arrears – with success.
[13] Tonda's interest is in the dream of the Other (*rêve d'Autrui*), with the other understood as value which manifests in various abstractions such as money, death, the state, but also places like Europe and America in their abstracted or imagined state. (Joseph Tonda, *L'impérialisme postcolonial*, 244)

anthropological poverty.[14] And, as such, ecstasis seeks redemption as the goal of acting, of becoming. The former emphasizes the hierarchies of value that are at the foundation of and result from the diverted gaze. In the foregoing, I conceive of dream and nightmare, its underside, as metaphoric. In the first sense as against the literal dream or nightmare, foregrounding waking life. We are dealing with real life. Here, we mean the purpose of ecstasis and its expected fulfillment which are part of the lived condition. Second, and following from the first sense, I mean metaphor as a carrying from one place to another.[15] Here the dream as metaphor functions, at the same time, as a displacement, insofar as it unroots the dreamer from her place towards another place – which, as it turns out, is a nowhere.[16] Herein is a confusion of the subject, its thrownness into a state of unresolved and potentially irresolvable perplexity. The displacement then is a suspension of placing, and since place functions here as standpoint, what is displaced is the very ability to stand, to think, to imagine that demarcates the agent as stander/thinker/dreamer as the one to whom the act belongs, and which defines the action as fully so.[17]

This preliminary exploration serves as entry into the larger problem that concerns the current project, namely, how to imagine the future of African postcolonial subjectivity within a reality of disaster, ruin and ecstasis. Disaster denotes the event of colonial encounter, ruin the world status in the aftermath of disaster, and ecstasis the lived condition of the inhabitants of colonial ruins. What is presented here should, I hope, reveal some important difficulties for the work of imagination. Indeed, if it is tenable that there is a substantial displacement of perspective

[14] Engelbert Mveng and Benjamin Lipawing. *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines: Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africaine* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1996).
[15] From the Greek *metaphora* (μεταφορά), a carrying from one place to another, also alteration.
[16] Note that the dream, as utopic or dystopic, is also in a state of suspension, is nowhere (Tonda, 49).
[17] In the sense that an action has to be understood fundamentally in its relation to a conceivable agent as its (efficient) cause (Aristotle, *Physics* II, 3; *Metaphysics* V, 2).

or the viewpoint of the subjects who are to imagine this future at issue, then one has to envision limitations to the act of imagining. I will gather these limitations in the following reflections. I have three goals in what follows. First, to present the question by showing how imagination becomes a concern for African postcolonial thinking. Second, to reveal disaster, ruin and ecstasis as historical and analytical issues. I will conclude with a brief argument on the importance of foregrounding these in our contemporary imaginings of the future.

3. The question

3.1. Something happened to us

Something *happened* to us, and we do not seem to *shake it* off. The problem announces itself thus. A problem of happening as event and as becoming. A problem of relation between interiority and exteriority. A problem which, in its appearance already presupposes a solution. The happening will give way upon the shaking, it promises. But the promise is taken back as soon as announced. For the ground of possibility on which it stands, is stolen from under it. Something happened to *us*, and *we* do not seem to shake it off. And now the subjects come announcing themselves. The way one reveals one's condition to a healer with a therapeutic hope: something has happened to me.[18] Something needs to be done. But I, it seems, cannot do it. And, perhaps, I am not even responsible for such doing. For, remember, "something" happened to me. Or, I have tried to do this something but I keep failing over and over and over… Out of exasperation, some of "us" will exclaim "Is Africa cursed?"[19] This is not a question, to be sure, but a revelation of the self from within existential exhaustion. A self which will risk its final

[18] Thinking about the future therapeutically is a common approach in African thought. See for example the title of Hamidou Anne's book *Panser l'Afrique qui vient* (literal translation: To heal the Africa that's coming) (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2019).
[19] Moussa Konate. *L'Afrique noire est-elle maudite?* Paris : Fayard, 2010.

breath to ask a semblance of a question, with no expectation for an answer. But the truth remains this: something happened to us and we do not seem to shake it off.

Soon, when exasperation subsides, the question proper arrives: how to imagine the future? On a preliminary level, the question comes to us naturally. For it is a question that marks the kind of beings we are. Beings that understand their existence in relation to time. Beings to whom the present appears within an essential passingness of things which necessitates looking back at what has gone and forward to what is to come. A natural question, then. This question, as any for that matter, requires a background that makes it possible, a "problem space"[20] that constitutes it as a question.

From an abstract view of the question, the relevant background is the fact of being human. It becomes a question that we ask from the ground of our humanness. And the key elements, and perhaps the only relevant considerations from an abstract point of view, are human temporality and the related transcendence that constitutes the being of a human. This constitutive transcendence, as existential philosophy maintains, is the heart of the freedom of human existence. Although related to specific situations at each moment, the human will always be in search of transcending the situation and the moment. In other words, she projects herself into an ever-coming future. This is not to mean a simple movement through time, but also the ability to move from one lived condition to another as time passes, ideally towards freer conditions. In this way the future is posited as open-ended and that is of essence to the freedom to act and become that we ascribe to the human agent. Transcendence on this existential view will have limits in death on an individual level (the human being comes to die and the moment of death becomes the end of the future). But on a collective level, save for ongoing conceptions of the

[20] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial* Enlightenment (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

Anthropocene and their suggestions of the end of the human collective, the future remains endlessly open. We are dealing here with a subject who is, at the core, radically free.[21]

And now we return to our problem space: something happened to us and we cannot shake it off. What subject, what becoming, what temporality are at issue, we might ask? Here, the problem space becomes more than a merely human ground from which we think our relation to time and the expression of our freedom. The problem space is properly speaking a problem for human living. That is to say, as something which gets in the way of the project of human living. The subjects appear as already in relation to an outside, thus a relation between an interiority and an exteriority.[22] The something that happened came from an outside. In the announcement, the subjects bemoan the relation and as such speak of a certain tragedy in that relation as a form of unfreedom both in the relation to happening or event (something happened to us: our agency was not essential in the happening) and in terms of becoming or transcendence (we cannot shake it off: our agency fails in its attempt to surpass the event). As the latter prefigures, becoming is no longer a space of open-ended futurity. Here the point is not one of exhaustion of possibilities for the future, but the future as bearing a fundamental limitedness of possibilities which is beyond the normal constraints to human freedom. From within this problem space, we come about subjects that stand in a problematic relationship with time and becoming. To answer our question, then, at issue are a subject whose agency appears inactive, a becoming which lacks the promise of self-evident transcendence, and a temporality that is somewhat arrested.

[21] This existential idea of radical freedom has received important critiques (see, for example, Angela Davis, *Lectures on Liberation*) but the foundational freedom of human existence remains part of the story.
[22] This is not presented as against the "existential view" in the previous paragraph. The theory provides ample room to think subjects in relation with one another and as related to a lived condition or situation. The point is to progressively reveal the complexity of the situation of interest to us here.

Of the question "how to imagine the future?" in light of our specific problem space we ask further questions: what kind of question is it? Staying with the idea of question as such, we notice that questions do the work of a certain revelation. That is, in asking a question, what we hear and what we mean is not simply what is said but what lies behind it and makes it a question. This is the problem space which makes the possibility of asking a question, makes certain questions possible or relevant or pertinent and others not so.[23] The revelation of a context, in other words. In a context of oppression for example, questions of freedom, of subjectivity, will become more relevant than others. Within the problem-space, moreover, once certain questions become relevant, or possible or pertinent, a separate but related element with regards to the nature and aims of the questions is a revelation. What does the question aim to reveal? In speaking of revelation, we also have in mind its underside: opacity. Insofar as a question fundamentally aims for clarity, then it is such thing as arises out of an opaque space of thought. As though what we seek to do in asking a question is to unveil thought and the reality it takes as its object. In addition to asking what the question reveals, then, or in asking the very question of revelation, we are also asking what background of opacity the revelation aims to unveil. As a question attains its answers, it births a certain sense of completeness related to a certain opacity as the absence of (certain) questions. Revelation, as a process of unveiling, then aims for a reveilation.

3.2. Africa and the future

At the end of the film *Atlantics*, Ada looks into the camera and says, "My name is Ada, to whom the future belongs." While the statement announces the possibility of becoming beyond the many

[23] For a related conception, see Michel Ralph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

limitations to that project we see in the film, it also references a wider intellectual interest in Africa's relation to the future. That is to mean to history making as a project both internal to the continent but also related the global world.

In order to show the aims of our question on the future, let us refer to a couple framings of that wider intellectual context in which it appears. Writing on how Africa appears in development thought, Felwine Sarr says the following:

> "From now on, the future will be African. […] Since Africa is the future and it will be the future, this rhetoric claims, implicitly, that Africa presently doesn't yet exist – that Africa's co-presence with the current times rings hollow."[24]

To ask the question of how to imagine Africa's future, from a place where the continent still appears in discourse as modern historical absence – as a not-yet space – is to ask a question about temporality. The natural response from those of us who do not hold the continent in contempt is to show that Africa is already present in modern time or as capable of entering in it. On either version of the response, one also asks about the mode of such presence or capacity. Sarr's procedure, shared by all whose aims are not the time old Hegelian placement of Africa outside of history, is to frame Africa as already within history. The aim of his larger argument is to frame the mode of Africa's presence within history as an original rather than mimetic position. As such the imagination of the future of Africa will also be original – as exemplified in his account of an Afrotopia, a sociopolitical utopia in distinctly African garb. Without falling into the ahistorical view, one can ask a different question, and it is the question that interests me. For this, let us dwell on the last sentence of the quote, namely that "Africa's co-presence with the current times rings hollow." In relation to the two alternatives, the question I seek to ask adopts

[24] Felwine Sarr, *Afrotopia*, x-xi

the capacity for Africa and Africans to enter history. In the opening case, I laid out the reality of what I called "ecstasis." One key aspect there was to think about the kind of subject that inhabits Africa's "current times." And there I showed how it is a subject disconnected with himself that lacks full agential perspective, a homeless subject at home, etc. The question then for us is "how to imagine the future from a place where the imagining subjects lack a proper perspective from which to imagine?" The question is not about Africa as a general geographical space where history happens. For history may unfold in a space where (the majority of) its inhabitants have little to nothing to do with that unfolding—and here, the key word is "to do" as a pointing towards the agency of the subjects as playing a meaningful role in the efficacy of the unfolding. If the point on ecstasis stands, it is not a farfetched suggestion, I hope, to maintain that from that point of view, "Africa's co-presence with the current times rings hollow" indeed. This claim does not seek to place Africa as an object "apart from the world."[25] Rather, the goal is to question "the worldliness—or being-in-the-world of African life forms."[26] So, the question reveals this particular subject with a conflictual relation to time and seeks to ask about how to awaken the agency that enables the relation to time.

The relation to time above speaks of "current times," the present. What of a relation to the future? Insofar as the main question of interest is on how to imagine the future, it is the relation, not only to the present, but also to the future which is of primordial importance. Still, it is clear that while imagination takes the future as its canvas, so to speak, the hand that holds the brush stands in the present. On the depiction of African relation to the future, we read:

> "Africa is absent from the future. In almost every future, dystopian or utopian, there is a continent-sized hole in the story."[27]

[25] Mbembe & Nuttal (2004), "Writing the World from an African Metropolis", *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004), 348.
[26] Ibid., 347.
[27] Laura Pereira et al., "Wakanda Phambili! African Science Fiction for Reimagining the Anthropocene" in *Futures*, eds., Sandra Kemp & Jenny Andersson, OUP, 2021:1.

In a similar fashion as the view from Felwine Sarr on the "current times", we are here brought forward into the future (in this case through fiction) only to notice that Africa is, once again, absent. The Africa that was supposed to be the future is not it, it turns out. The writers' goal in this reading is not to affirm the "hole in the story." It is to uncover the problem in such discourses. It is to tell a different story which fills that hole. To replace the noted absence with evidence of presence. On the above insistence that Africa is present in the current times, here is added the notion that Africa is must be present in the future. While not contesting the view, which is correct and liberatory in its refutation of any discourse that places Africa outside of time and history, in this case in terms of a history of the future, one must once again move away from the ease of such a reply. In other words, drawing from the not-so-obvious relation to the present expressed above, there also comes a shaky relation to the future. In the same way that a solid perspective and an active agency are required for one to relate to one's present, the same requirements remain for when we are thinking of the future, for the simple reason that it is through the present that we make the future what it is to become.

One notes that, from Sarr to Peira *et al.*, we have shifted from reality to fiction in the sources that we discuss. And one might ask whether that shift can be taken at face value. That is to say that the shift raises a new question within our question on how to imagine Africa's future: Are we speaking of a fictional or real future? And the immediate answer is that it is reality which concerns us whether past, present, or future. Still, there are at least two uses of the shift. First, as a way of addressing external discourses on Africa which Sarr and others address from an avowed internal perspective, it is notable that absenting of Africa from the current times goes also with the same from the future times. That may be the very nature of the relation of present and future, the idea being that it is the present that births the future. If the inadequacy of these external

discourses is at issue for the writers (and indirectly for us), then, it serves us to also think with fiction. Second, if our question centers imagination, one must note that there is a thin line between reality and fiction therein. The very function of imagination is to allow thought to reach what is absent, what is not there.[28] And insofar as it is the imagination of the future that concerns us, our task involves conjuring up a relation between what is and what is to come. In this sense, fiction, too, retains its use.

It may seem counterintuitive and perhaps even counterproductive to engage with these time-old characterizations of the African continent. Instead of the negative claims that Sarr and Peira *et al.* make—negative in the sense that in each case the views are expressed only to be refuted—would it not be of greater importance to address the positive claims in their work? Indeed, the work of each study contributes meaningfully to the imagination of African futures through reality and fiction. To refuse the characterizations of the continent as outside of history is laudable work. In addressing the negative claims, however, what interests me is to trace a genealogy of a question or concern, that is, Africa's relation to time. It is remarkable that such a concern has been at the center of discourses on Africa for a long while. What is more remarkable, however, is what lies beneath: why is temporality so central to discourses on Africa? And this is not a trivial question. For to be sure, the relation to time is a feature of all human existence, on both individual and collective levels. From this perspective then, the question of temporality for Africa is not a very interesting one. But one cannot but notice the recurrence of the questions and debates on such temporality in our context. From the colonial civilizing mission guided by the expressed goal of ushering Africa into modernity (read: history), to these more recent reflections on the future of contemporary Africa as we see in Sarr and others. To

[28] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary : A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

address the concern therefore becomes unavoidable from a dialectical point of view. In order to think of Africa otherwise, one must relate whatever new sparks of thoughts arise to the dying ashes of the same, even if the goal be to transcend the old and to make way for the new. From this point of view then, our question on how to imagine the future is centrally a question about temporality since it takes itself to intervene in the same discursive field.

But the positive views themselves do hold importance for the foregoing discussion. To recall, for the writers quoted above, the method of relating to the relegation of Africa outside of history and time is to claim the opposite and proceed to show how. To the question of Africa's co-presence with current or future times, the writers seek to refute any claims to the opposite. However, in the provision of such a response, and the subsequent re-veiling of the initial question, the approach covers the problem-space where there is (much) more to say. One reason, already shown in light of ecstasis, such temporal presence of African subjects is not a given. Thus, while not making any absurd claims on ahistoricity, one can seek to reveal complexities that we might overlook. Such is the task of the foregoing reflection on disaster and imagination. The reflection stems from a conviction of a need to be attentive to the lived reality of Africa's subjects in order to make informed claims about the possibilities and limits for imagining the future.

To sum up, the question "how should we imagine the future" in this context, is a question of a relation to time. It is also a question of agency. It is, finally, a question about transcendence. The centrality of time, as will be shown below, relates to an essential temporal fissure constitutive of coloniality. Agency seeks to center the subjects and their culture, which is a material manifestation of that agency. And the transcendental aspect recognizes the tragedy of

coloniality and the driving goal of moving beyond it. This multifaceted question is asked from within a condition of ecstasis in the ruins of disaster as the "something that happened to us."

4. Naming our affliction

The question we ask, namely, how to imagine the future, we ask it from within a condition of ecstasis as a result of the "something that happened to us." The something that remains with us. It is a situated question because there is a need for human reasoning, especially when freedom or transcendence are concerted, to be rooted in the real difficulties of the human life at issue.[29] And this rootedness requires that the question name these afflictions. The heart of our difficulty, which I have been gesturing at, is the reality of disaster in the ruins of coloniality. Below I give voice to the concept of political failure and show the importance of thinking it in terms of disaster, ruin, and ecstasis.

4.1.Political failure

In the novel *Ambiguous Adventures*, Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane, writes that at the advent of colonization, "[s]ome among the Africans…brandished their shields, pointed their lances, and aimed their guns. They were allowed to come close then the cannon was fired. The defeated did not understand." What is key here, and which I would like to return to, is the relation between defeat and understanding.

Uchenna Okeja's book *Deliberative agency* takes the reader at the heart of this relation between defeat, or failure, and understanding. If there is one single aspect that captures African political experience, the book argues, it is political failure. Whereas the concept might bring to

[29] For a related thought, see Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *La Crise du Muntu : Authenticité Africaine et philosophie* (Paris : Présence Africaine, 1977), 226.

mind the failure of the state in Africa, the book highlights a different perspective: one of political experience. Its focus is on "the reality that there are generations of Africans who have not experienced and will never in their lifetimes experience what it means for a society to be governed properly."[30] In the face of this reality lies a constitutive powerlessness. "The powerlessness in question manifests in the feeling by individuals that they can do nothing to change the social and political circumstances shaping their lives. The result is that politics is experienced as a meaningless performance outside the realm of 'normal' life."[31] There is a constitutive disconnect between what is considered to be relevant to the concerns of living and the concerns of politics.

Okeja places the implications of this reality fundamentally at the level of understanding in what he calls "cognitive disorientation." In this sense, the approach to political failure which he qualifies as "cultural" stands in contrast with two other ways of reading the same reality, one which he calls "the failure of politics" and, another, the "failure of government." The failure of politics denotes the failure of a particular political ideology of political praxis. Say, for example, the failure of democracy as ideology or as practice. And the failure of government refers to the failure in the functioning of institutions of political governance. One can think of the often-discussed problem of corruption and how it cripples the well-functioning of state bureaucracy as falling in this category. In opposition to these two senses, Okeja argues that the relevant sense at issue is one of "political culture," as "a situation where the self-understanding of a people is in deep crisis."[32] And the crisis is such that it affects fundamentally what it is to live together, to make meaning, and to imagine a way forward.

[30] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 4.
[31] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency*, 3.
[32] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency*, 29.

The importance of Okeja's argument is that the analysis of political failure is one that reveals a problem so fundamental, so global that it cannot be located in any particular area alone, and not in a combination of these areas, but in the realm of meaning making. Cognitive disorientation as conceived in the book refuses easy solutions.

I think it useful to break the concept of political failure into three elements: disaster, ruin, and ecstasis. The motivation for this is for explanatory potential.

The problem of migration is a problem of political failure—this is not a view on the problem of migration as such, but as lived in the contemporary moment. It is migration, not as founded in the freedom of movement, but a certain lack of freedom that forces movement. We think of forced displacement due to political conflicts or dire living conditions, the migration that produces political and economic refugees. That such a form of migration is a problem of political failure is an apt description. Political failure names more than what I have called the "material reading." It refers to more than formal political structures, as it takes an ampler view, which includes agency and meaning making, two related concepts that are at the heart of ecstasis.

In order to seek more clarity, I would like to read political failure as related to an event (disaster), a world-status (ruin) and an existential condition (ecstasis). Below I give voice to the three elements, with an emphasis on disaster.

4.2.Disaster, a historical reality

4.2.1. Of a unified concept—beyond particularity

"Places where disaster happens have a name," argue Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, "'disaster areas,' places left, as it were, in ruins."[33] Disaster is a name for an event (something

[33] Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, *Of Divine Warning: Disaster in a Modern Age* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 4.

happened to us) in the aftermath of which we find ruins. The event and the ruins are not separate; we understand the ruin in light of disaster and vice versa. The ruins refer to forms of continuation of the event of disaster. The work of imagination through disaster is a work that takes place amid ruins. For considerations of coloniality, in the ruins we find ruined subjects and ways of life. That the logic of coloniality continues in the post-colonial moment, is a generally accepted view. Below I will refer to some arguments to that effect. The goal in this exercise is to help ground the relation between the contemporary moment and the experience of colonization.

As a start, there is a question of the generalizability of the lived condition for Africa as such. The worry might be this: since colonization unfolded differently in different places on the continent, it follows that its aftermath, too, is place-specific, making it difficult or even impossible to make a claim that is generalizable enough about the aftermath of the event. All the more as one seeks to describe contemporary African reality as such, as marked by the event of disaster. This is a substantial concern. Olufemi Taiwo has urged that we pay close attention to how colonization actually unfolded. Focusing on West Africa and British colonization, Taiwo emphasizes two main moments of colonization in that area, one ushered by Christian missionaries and another by colonial administrators. This distinction is essential for his interest in the main claim that the first moment brought modernity to Africa, with the missionaries' cultivation of markers of modernity such as individual freedom of choice, whereas the second moment thwarted whatever development there was towards modernity. With this attention to specificity, Taiwo argues that "it is necessary to shift the focus away from a monolithic characterization of colonialism to a different understanding of it."[34] The call is important and should be taken seriously. Indeed, there are evident differences between places where

[34] Olufemi Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

colonialism involved settlement and places where it did not, and various colonial powers undertook their colonial projects in different ways. The fact that most of the continent experienced an exploitative form of colonization without settlement might seem to suggest potential for generalization. But that too, to remain with Taiwo, may be too hasty a generalization.

Without refuting Taiwo's analysis, it is important to maintain the usefulness of generality, which does not mean homogeneity, for the sake of discourse. And this is not to trivialize discourse. After all, we still make claims about such a concept as Africa, knowing fully well its historical formation, the myriad differences on the continent in terms of politics and cultures.[35] Insofar as colonialism is concerned, we must also be able to make general claims while still leaving space for difference. The general claim of relevance, as we explore the reality of ecstasis, is to consider the logic of colonialism, i.e., coloniality, as a generalizable one. If one were to insist on Taiwo's distinction between missionaries and administrators—and I do not suggest such insistence, for various reasons, one of which is that the claim that missionaries fostered individual choice is a debatable one if we are to probe the missionary missions' hierarchical views on the human or the fate of traditional forms spirituality—one should clarify that we are concerned with the administrator form of colonization. Indeed, colonial administration with its political and economic structures is what effected essential transformations of the colonized territories. There is, therefore, a generalizable logic of colonization. Of this logic, Michael Onyebuchi Eze advances that it was mostly the same across the various forms that colonialism took in Africa.[36] "Mostly" here is an acknowledgment of the

[35] Valentin Yves Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).
[36] "[T]he logic of coloniality in most of Africa was the same." Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Politics of History in Contemporary Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 48.

obvious reality of difference, while providing ground for generality. Central to this logic is domination, both of ways of seeing the world and the self, and of the material conditions of existence. Similarly, Achille Mbembe has argued for a general idea of "colonial rationality"[37] which he terms *commandement* to denote relations of subjection which constitute the sovereignty of the colonial state through various forms of violence. Of these forms, Mbembe enumerates three, namely a founding violence which made conquest possible, a legitimating violence that legally justified the colonial state, and a third violence, which I might call a violence of "continuous creation"[38] whose aim was the "maintenance, spread, and permanence" of colonial authority.[39] For the foregoing argument, I consider these two accounts sufficient on the notion of a general logic of colonization although others abound, both on continental and global levels.[40] Beyond the discursive ease that generality affords us, of note also is the ability to transcend usual geographical demarcations, such as sub-Saharan Africa[41] With this generality comes an ability to speak about colonization and its afterlife (disaster) as a general African condition of existence.

As a logic colonization has its underside in the lived realities of the colonized. Domination and the forms of violence associated with it are lived. To say this is to shed light on the perspective of those on whom the logic operated, the subjugated. In the work of Martinican anticolonial thinker, stateman, and poet Aimé Césaire, we are given a fictional account of how this logic manifests in the lives of the colonized:

> "I, my lord, think of the forgotten. We who were dispossessed, struck, mutilated—those who were addressed as inferiors, whose faces were spat upon. Cookboys, chamberboys,

[37] Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkely and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 25.
[38] This refers the idea within the philosophy of religion according to which the world as God's creation requires continuous creation to continue to exist. In a similar way, the violence at issue here, appearing in myriad and daily forms, has the goal of keeping the colonized in check and coloniality in existence.
[39] Mbembe, *op. cit.*
[40] Among these, one can cite for example Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), Albert Memmi, *Colonization and the Colonized*.
[41] Olufemi Taiwo, has argued that such distinctions are vacuous. See Taiwo, "Doing Philosophy in 19th Century West Africa"

> laundryboys, we were a people of boys, a people of 'Yes, Bwana', and whoever doubted that man could be not man had only to look at us. Lord, all suffering that can be suffered, we have suffered it. All humiliation that can be drunk, we've drunk!"[42]

It is the lived reality, such as described, which constitutes the ruins of coloniality, a reality of suffering, or humiliation, dispossession, mutilation, etc. And it is this same reality that presents difficulties for the imagining of the future, for the simple fact that it is the living breathing post-colonial subject whose task it is to do this work of imagination.

4.2.2. Of continuity—beyond rupture

Essential to the ruins is the fact of continuity, the process which connects a before and an after in such a way that they stand for substantially similar realities. The process is not contained in the fact of colonization, such that we would assume colonization remains (even if it does) as an *a priori* fact. Rather, it is the outcome of a historical process that allows for the remaining[43]. At play is a history of failure. The end of colonization was supposed to be one devoid of colonial-like domination. Albert Memmi would present a view according to which the very logic of colonization contained its demise within it: "Contemporary colonization carried an inherent contradiction which, sooner or later, would cause it to die."[44] On this view, colonization's very logic foretells of its end, from a general view that the relation between the two protagonists, colonizer and colonized, is not a stable one. Beyond this analytical view, and more importantly, anticolonial movements harbored the dream of revolution which became manifest in material and

[42] Aimé Césaire, *A Season in the Congo*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), 29.
[43] In a recent book, Olúfémi Táíwò (2022) argues against the continuity of colonization, suggesting that what comes after the historical moment of independence cannot and should not be captured by coloniality as a concept. (Táíwò, *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously*, London: Hurst) Taking up the book's argument requires more space than available here. A reader interested in a dissenting perspective can read Taiwo. My thinking here joins him in part, at least, on the general interest in taking agency seriously.
[44] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Trans. Howard Greenfield (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd, 2003), 190.

often armed struggle against the colonizer. The dream, at least as it was framed, was for the end of the very logic of colonization. Two promises, then, two dreams, one analytic another agonistic, both failed.

It has been argued that the relation between the colony and the post-colony is one of a passive transition rather than one of revolution, the latter implying total change.[45] A quick distinction between the two can be gleaned from an exchange between two protagonists in Aimé Césaire's play *A Season in the Congo,* Kala-Lubu, fictional first president of independent Congo[46] and his prime minister Lumumba. Of the relation between the before and after independence, Kala Lubu, addressing his countrymen, says:

> "As for you Congolese, my brothers, I want you to know, to understand, that Independence, friend of the tribes, is not here to abolish either law or custom; it is here to complete them, to accomplish them, to harmonize them."[47]

On the face of it, that is quite an insightful statement, if it means to recognize the newness of the world in which this independent nation comes to life, a world that holds an unshakeable shadow over the old. Indeed, part of the interest in thinking disaster is this very recognition. However, as the other protagonist reveals, the law at play puts the possibility of harmony into question. Is the newly independent Congo to accomplish this old law, the very law that mutilates, humiliates, dispossesses? As Mbembe's analysis of colonial violence has shown, colonial law is in essence violence whose goal is to uphold and make the effectiveness of colonial government.[48] Kala

[45] I am borrowing the idea of the "passive" from P. Chatterjee who, writing on the case of India, argues that "'passive revolution' is the general form of the transition from colonial to post-colonial national states." Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 50. The choice to not use the full phrase, i.e., "passive revolution", is the conflict that I read between the two terms, a conflict of an almost contradictory nature.

[46] The name is a slightly modified version of the name of the historical first president of independent Republic of the Congo, Joseph Kasa-Vubu.

[47] Césaire, *A Season in the Congo,* 30

[48] Of this government, David Killingray has argued that the law sought the fulfillment of two goals, namely, the maintenance of colonial administration and economic exploitation for the sake of that very administration: "Effective colonial government rested on two basic pillars: firstly, the maintenance of law and order to uphold the authority of the administration; and secondly, the collection of adequate revenue with which to finance the running

Lubu's proposal describes passive transition which takes the law and the custom (standing in for customary law, culture, and tradition) just as they are and seeks to move forward with an easy amalgamation of the two. It is with the recognition of the function of colonial law and colonization as such, as well as a critical outlook on custom, that Lumumba's vision differs greatly from this proposal, announcing his own revolutionary one:

> "Comrades, all is to be done, and all is to be redone, but we will do it, and we'll redo it. For Kongo! We will take them up, one after another, all the laws, for Kongo! We will revise them, one after the other, all the customs, for Kongo! Tracking injustice, we will take up, one after the other all the parts of the old building, from top to bottom, for Kongo! All that is bent will be straightened, all that is straight will be pulled up. For Kongo!"[49]

Redoing all, revising all, colonization and custom included. That is the revolutionary vision. Key to this vision is the outlook of critique motivated by self-interest, the latter aspect being constitutive of the very notion of revolution.[50] The motivation here is "For Kongo" as the entity the good of which will guide the critique and the form of the revisions which are to take place. Whereas Kala Lubu suggests a harmony of what is, *as* it is, Lumumba's proposal is one that promises new structures, new institutions with no commitment to sustaining the old world.[51]

Where Africa is concerned, it is passive transition of the Kala Lubus that has carried the day. While the moment of independence meant much hope and opportunity for change, what followed with the endless military coups and dictatorships, many of which survive to this day,

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of the colony. Whichever way colonies were gained, whether in 'a fit of absence of mind' or by calculated conquest, and by whatever principles and methods they were governed (directly or indirectly), these two essential features predominated." David Killingray, "The Maintenance of Law and Order in British Colonial Africa," *African Affairs 85, no. 340 (July 1986): 411.*

[49] Césaire, *A Season in the Congo*, 30-31.

[50] Using a reading of Marx, Allen Buchanan shows the centrality of self-interest for revolutionary action. Allen Buchanan, "Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1979), 52-82.

[51] This lack of commitment to the old, too, is central to revolution as opposed to reform (passive transition). For an argument on this, see Matthew Noah Smith, "Rethinking Sovereignty, Rethinking Revolution", *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 405-440.

belied that hope and opportunity.[52] Whereas the anticolonial hope was for new structures, the "postcolonial state would find its legitimacy by inhabiting the very colonial structures that mediated a revolt for independence."[53] New structures would have meant the end of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, to use Memmi's terms. Instead, what transpired was a reformation of the relations of subjection, this time on a global scale.[54] In light of this, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba would write of "the decolonization phase of the colonial state" as "a transformation within the colonial state and not the latter's destruction *per se*."[55] What is remarkable, Wamba dia Wamba's argument is not simply of a failed decolonization. Instead, he argues, the decolonial struggle itself harbored a goal of inhabiting the colonial machine, in which "the occupation of the machinery of the enemy rather than its destruction and the deployment of a different machinery, was seen as the content of politics."[56] This was achieved through the work of the colonial state which, at the closure of anticolonial struggle, favored nonradical factions, to whom the state machine was entrusted. Here's Belgian king Basilio of Césaire's aforementioned play: "Glory to the founders! Glory to the Continuers! In the end, gentlemen, for you to put in place again this state, our creation. […] I say it to you without boasting, today we remit to you a machine, good. Take care of it, that's all we ask of you." And the continuers did continue as asked.[57]

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[52] See Elias Kifon Bongmba, *The Dialectics of Transformation in Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), Robert H. Bates, *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[53] Eze, *Politics of History in Contemporary Africa*, 60.
[54] Léonora Miano, *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (Paris : Grasset, 2020), 108. On the continued colonial relation see the recent study of the France's still ongoing domination of its former colonies in *L'empire qui ne veut pas mourir: Une histoire de la Françafrique*, eds. Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoit Colombat, and Thomas Deltombe (Paris: Seuil, 2021). The title of the book translates as "The Empire that Refuses to Die," a apt reference to the seemingly eternal nature of the colonial relation.
[55] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Africa in Search of a New Mode of Politics," in *African Perspectives on Development: Controversies, Dilemmas and Openings* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1994), 251.
[56] Ibid.
[57] The result has been what Eze (2010: 171) and Elias Kifon Bongmba (2006: 23) have called "bandit statehood" and "the prodigalization of the state," respectively. All this to the detriment of the people's interest.

4.2.3. Of permanence—beyond parenthesis

This continuity, just like the logic of colonization, is a lived one. The citizens of these "continuer states" live the continuity of coloniality on a daily basis. What does it do to a person to live the condition of a failure on a daily basis? What does it do to the politically conscious citizens to watch election after election be rigged in favor of a seemingly eternal autocratic regimes? What happens, we ask, when inhabitants of some of the richest countries on earth in terms of mineral resources see the national economy never improve amid an ever-booming mining industry? At some point, they must wonder if this is it. They must wonder, and we indeed do wonder, if this daily misery is here to stay. This is not to be cynical about the possibility for change, as some incremental change can be seen here and there.[58] But it is, first, to recognize an existential fact of living some sort of an eternal recurrence of the same.[59] Whether this be grounded in some justified convictions, life in such conditions does something to the living. Something that substantially shapes the very idea of human agency, which here manifests as absence, potentially permanent absence.

What does it mean to speak of coloniality as permanent? In the first instance, it is a statement about the condition of the living. Permanence is in this case not a concept that pronounces a final word on what is to come. The truth of it says we have lived the same miserable conditions over and over and over… and nothing ever seems to change. One might say that "we live in times that are devoid of the future," where "waiting for what is to come is no longer hope but anxiety."[60] This is an anxiety, not of ignorance of the future, but of the dread of it, the anxiety of the conviction that this future, whatever form it takes, will be nothing but

[58] I think for example of the "Y en a marre" political movement in Senegal which was critical in ousting President Abdoulaye Wade through the sensibilization of the youth toward voting.
[59] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[60] Phrase adapted from Simone Weil, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 30.

repetition. At the risk of such a conviction lacking solid foundation, that is, if experience lacks predictive potential, the permanence of coloniality does not require such a foundation. From a purely analytical point of view, much of the damage of colonization is of the order of the undoable. We think the invention of Africa, the destruction of languages, cultures, traditions, we think the collective trauma. Permanence from this perspective is at least one step ahead from the experiential level. It is the realization that even if, by a miraculous turn of events, the future were to belie the expectation for repetition, coloniality would not be done with us. Precisely for its undoable aspects.

Against this gloomy view stand recurring discourses on coloniality as a condition of crisis. An entity is in crisis when its way of essentially being what it is or doing what it does becomes internally questionable.[61] As such, crisis is "a rupture into the normal order of things,"[62] a period of discontinuity. When social structures or forms of life are concerned, moments of crisis call for a reassessment of the foundations of those structures. Crisis is then the loss of a stable foundation, a loss perceived from within the entity itself even when external causes may be at play. From this initial definition, the African condition of existence could qualify as a crisis. Indeed, the African subject's way of being has been put in question and a new way of being has not arisen that reestablishes the loss of an old one. Etymologically, however, crisis implies the possibility of a decision. One could think of crisis then as a momentary unseating of a way of being or doing whether short or long. This view is confirmed also by the everyday usage of the term, which has become ubiquitous as a designation of all periods of mostly social unsettlement. Of the African political condition, Wamba dia Wamba advances that we are

[61] Here I am drawing what Edmund Husserl's discussion in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. by David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970.)
[62] Didier Fassin and Axel Honneth, eds., *Crisis Under Critique: How People Assess, Transform, and Respond to Critical Situations* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022) 23. Kindle Edition.

"living in a period of political crisis"[63] and that unless a new politics comes about, we have "a prolonged crisis" ahead of us. Faithful to the etymological reading, Wamba dia Wamba's claim proceeds from the perspective in which crisis calls for critical action whose aim is the end of the crisis and the coming of a new structure. It is from this point of view that we can decry the prolongation of the crisis, absent of the salvific critical action.[64]

However, because fundamental to a reading of reality as crisis is the possibility for transcendence through critical action, the concept cannot easily capture realities of permanence, which refuse an embedded possibility to transcend. Disaster, I contend, contains aspects of the permanent and, as such, distances itself from crisis. This is not to minimize the reality of crisis which is deeply devastating for individuals and societies and often leads to social transformations. But the reading of permanent realities requires a different concept, which I suggest in the form of disaster and its remains. Otherwise, the danger we run—through the suggestions of our reading of the African condition as crisis—is one of a blindness to the permanence and a likely trivialization of the reality. Through an analysis of African demography and migrations, Mbembe argues that "Africa is in the thralls of what it is suitable to call its 'great transformation' – a movement in light of which the colonial episode will appear, in historical hindsight, as a *parenthesis*."[65] We go from crisis to parenthesis, which although removed from crisis as such, may be more faithful to the promise of transcendence central to crisis. The trivial

[63] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Africa in Search of a New Mode of Politics," in *African Perspectives on Development: Controversies, Dilemmas and Openings*, eds. U. Himmelstrand, K. Kinyanjui & E. Mburugu, 249-261 (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota, 1994.)

[64] Indeed, critique is essential to the very reality of crisis, which is not a given but requiring intellectual interpretive work to reveal the discontinuities at play. "Crises frequently stem from critique, and critique generally emerges from crises." *Crisis Under Critique, 23.*

[65] Achille Mbembe, *Sortir de la grande nuit* (Paris : La Découverte, 2010), 173. The translation is mine. In the English translation of the book *Out of the Dark Night* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2021), this claim was removed, perhaps suggesting a correction along the lines of my critique. A similar claim can be found in J. F. Ade Ajayi, "Colonialism: An Episode in African History," in *Tradition and Change in Africa: The Essays of J.F. Ade Ajayi*, ed. Toyin Falola (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 165–74.

element is that a parenthesis, in terms of its etymology and usage, is a putting besides.[66] The image denotes, like in its usage in a sentence, an unbroken continuation of something. Indeed, a sentence with a parenthesis is meant to remain more or less complete when a reader skips the parenthesis. Mbembe's goal in the quote fits in our question of imagining the future and suggests that the future is already on its course of becoming in such a way as unseats colonization as permanence. It employs a parenthetical logic which brackets coloniality in order to imagine the future of contemporary Africa or, more accurately, it is that the future already upon us makes the bracketing manifest.

In his speech on June 30th, 1960, Patrice Lumumba (the historical figure rather than Césaire's fictional character) asks: "In the end, who will forget the shootings that killed so many of our brethren, or the prisons where were thrown those who did not want to submit to a regime of a justice in oppression and exploitation?"[67] Read from our contemporary moment, the forgetting at issue is not a fact of memory, but of repetition. With him we can ask who will forget the multiple coups d'états orchestrated or supported by the former colonial powers, throwing the countries in interminable instability and poverty? Who will forget the seemingly eternal dictatorships creating unspeakable misery for the masses? Who will forget the theft of natural resources, the innocent millions killed and maimed in the process? The fact that Lumumba makes a speech like this the very day the Congo is supposed to become independent is a telling reminder that even as we gaze at the horizon of independence and the possibilities of self-sufficiency and self-governance, we could not for a moment consider the past as gone, as the parenthetical logic would have us do. Such a perspective remains valid for us who live in the

[66] From the Greek *parentíthēmi*
[67] Patrice Lumumba, *La pensée politique de Patrice Lumumba*, ed. Jean Van Lierde (Paris : Présence africaine, 1963), 199.

permanent remains of such past in our present. And it is all the more telling that Lumumba's speech comes right after the Belgian king Baudouin, similar to Césaire's Basilio, exalts the benefits of colonization (infantilizing the formerly colonized peoples, speaking of civilization and the help that he hopes to continue offering to the Congo as a kind benefactor). Against the language of crisis and toward greater attention to disaster as permanence, what we need, according to Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, is a "vigilant memory" as the "refusal of any blind attachment to, of compact trust in the immediacy of that which goes without saying."[68] It is the parenthetical logic here which goes without saying, as the permanence of coloniality is so entrenched that it has been argued convincingly that most forms of tragedy in contemporary Africa have a substantial relation to it.[69] It is because such entrenchment is not self-evident that the work of vigilant memory, or what I will later call transfigurative imagination, is necessary. It recognizes that to address the repetition in the present of colonial ruins requires attention to the lived historical experience of that repetition as well as to the dangers and limits it poses.[70]

4.3.Disaster, a philosophical problem

The historical account of disaster, as a condition of permanence of the remains of coloniality, has emphasized the lived condition. What in that fact presents an issue for the human being? What

[68] Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis : African Authenticity and Philosophy* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2014), 150.
[69] "No war, no conflict, no tragedy in Africa can be perceived, dissected without deconstructing this colonial link which has left traces increasingly imperceptible." Alain Mabanckou, *Huit leçons sur l'Afrique* (Paris: Grasset, 2020), 191. Translation mine. See for example the relation between ethnic conflict and coloniality in Mahmoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Le defi de l'ethnisme: Rwanda et Burundi 1990-1996* (Paris: Karthala, 1997). The argument is not that coloniality gives sufficient justification for the conflicts, but rather that within these conflicts are remnants of coloniality which we ought to pay attention to in order to understand the conflicts fully.
[70] "Vigilance is heightened awareness of dangers and limits." Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 197.

essential issues present themselves and how to they matter for philosophy? The following reflection seeks to answer these questions and think of disaster as a philosophical problem for existence, analysis, and imagination. The last two of the three dimensions follow from the first, but I address each separately. By the idea of a problem for philosophy is meant only the difficulty for being and thinking. In other words, if one were to write a philosophy of the colonial remains, what kinds of issues might one have to elucidate? I present some of them below. The importance of such questions arises, not from the point of view of pure thinking, but from the perspective of an "animate and particularized reason,"[71] to mean thought insofar as it is an intellectual exercise of a living being whose sole object is its specific lived condition.

4.3.1. Of existence

"The most serious blow suffered by the colonized," says Albert Memmi, "is being removed from history and from the city."[72] Removed from history. What does this mean? The argument cannot be that the colonized are literally taken out of history. Indeed, the history of colonization requires their presence for the colonial relation to take effect. Such presence is one which seeks to fulfill one side of the relation between colonizer and colonized. In what sense, then, are they outside of history? As we look closer, the presence within history as colonized is also a form of absence. Indeed, the logic of colonization seeks the annihilation of the colonized. It is an annihilation of the colonized, not strictly as colonized since the colonial relation manifests a process of annihilation already in motion. It is, instead, an annihilation of the African subject. Coloniality, the logic of colonization, erases the agency and freedom of the human subjects. Since these

[71] Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 227.
[72] Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 135. The translation uses "community" for the word "cité" which I keep here as "city" as clearer reference to the idea of the *polis*.

aspects of the subject are expressed within history, such an erasure functions as a proper removal from history. From this moment on, what takes place in the colonized city is seldom ever the making of the colonized. With the argument on permanence, this reading extends to the contemporary moment, not with the intention to attach the concept "colonized" to the contemporary African subject—even as an argument to that effect might stand—but to recognize how the new forms that coloniality has taken in our current times may still suffer from the same difficulties that Memmi enumerates. Today masses of citizens still live under the yoke of autocratic governments that erase their subjectivity in substantially like fashion as colonial violence proper. These citizens are placed outside of history, as they are forced to live a history of which they are not makers.

The removal from history, as discussed earlier regarding the nature of the question of imagination, is about the relation to temporality. Coloniality introduces a temporal fissure for the colonized, one with still felt and indelible effects. In a word, the object of that temporal fissure is African cultures or ways of life. Building up from the central notion of agency, I define culture as a complex of will, action, and world. At play are three elements, a social world, agency, and the form that such a world takes through the working of the agency. Since agency operates through time, the historical, temporal fissure that affects culture is of a temporal kind. The blow of historical removal then becomes the problem of ruined cultures which still stand in need of replacement so that subjectivity can regain its force and efficacy.[73]

The cultural ruin carries deep implications for the being-in-the-world of the postcolonial subjects. The ruin is of such magnitude that it exemplifies a form of "anthropological poverty," a concept that Engelbert Mveng uses to describe a deep loss occasioned by colonization and its

[73] "What is real and verifiable is that the colonized' s culture, society and technology are seriously damaged. He has not acquired new ability and a new culture." Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 158.

aftermath, a loss which affects the reality of what it is to be human in Africa after the colony.[74] The discussion of ecstasis, as an example, emphasized the loss of perspective manifested in the reality of migration. Equally concerning in this regard is the above loss of political agency. In such a state, the fullness of what it is to live in the world, in community, as a human being suffers a sort of poverty which goes at the heart of what it is to be human. Indeed, Eugen Fink has argued that the loss of culture occasions a state in which the human being "is cast into an uncanny confusion, where he knows neither path nor bridge."[75] Similarly, Simone Weil would describe colonization in its aspect of cultural ruination as an operation that seeks to turn human beings into "human matter."[76] Matter lacks agency as it is acted upon and, as such the image brings home the loss of political agency through coloniality.

I speak of the work that such cultural ruin calls for as one of "replacement" as opposed to retrieval. The choice is measured, against the long debate on culture within African philosophy, a debate which within the reality of ruin asks whether or not the future rests on a return to the past.[77] In relation to the debate, my usage of culture is agnostic on the guiding question and as such stands substantially outside the space of the debate. The ruin at issue is one of agency as a form of mastery on the world. As such, the problem in the ruin is one of ecstatic living which at core is a living devoid of such defining mastery. A mastery expressed through the mode of agency and its expression in time. The problem with disaster is this mastery that remains to be regained.

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[74] Engelbert Mveng and Benjamin Lipawing. *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines: Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africaine* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1996).
[75] Eugen Fink, *Play as Symbol of the World and Other Writings* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 185.
[76] Simone Weil, *Écrits historiques et politiques* (Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1960), 369.
[77] For an overview of the debate, see Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022) and Olufemi Taiwo, "Rethinking the Decolonization Trope in Philosophy", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57 (Spindel Supplement, 2019): 135-159.

Removal from the city, another dimension of the blow. Exclusion is the mode of colonial politics, a politics which relegates its subjects outside the *polis*. The polis understood as a space of political community, thus a space where politics function primarily in the mode of inclusion. The colonized live in a state of ecstasis, being disconnected from the life that they live. African politics in its state of failure in the contemporary moment has continued this exclusion. The blow which Memmi expresses remains a reality. How do we imagine politics in the shadow of this double blow? Ecstasis names the condition of existence within that blow and reveals key problems for human existence.

4.3.2. Of analysis

Prefigured in the idea of loss of direction from within ecstasis is a problem for thought. Indeed, Eugen Fink speaks of "confusion" a term which brings home the unclarity of thought which, when it is not just momentary but a continuous state, reveals not just the momentary work of thinking but the very working of thought.[78] The condition makes the reality unthinkable in substantial ways. I would like to discuss this confusion in terms of three ideas: mystification, opacity, and the difficulty of reality.

Are there lived realities which resist thinking in important ways? Consider the idea of "difficulty of reality" developed by Cora Diamond.[79] In one of the introductions of this idea, Cora Diamond studies the idea of death. Reading a poem about a photograph of a group of young men, alive and smiling, taken moments before they died, Diamond argues that there is central to what it is to think the photograph, something that elides the mind's very ability to think. The

[78] Fink, Eugen. *Play as a Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, trans. Moore I. A. and Turner C. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016).
[79] Cora Diamond, "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy", *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 1, no. 2 (2003): 1-26.

difficulty of reality, for Diamond, captures the "experience of the mind's not being able to encompass something which it encounters." As Jonathan Lear has argued, this is not a psychological problem.[80] One could imagine that the inability to think the two thoughts, alive and dead together has to do with our own mortality and the anxiety that accompanies our attempts to think it. It is, rather, properly something about the relation between the mind's capacity for thinking and the object that it takes up for thought, a relation which, within the difficulty of reality, is cut short. And it is a cutting short which is experienced as painful. The point that the mind fails to encompass is one that it is normally equipped to encompass, but such ability fails in the specific case at issue. The general idea is that our concepts fail to do their work sometimes. We might call this, an analytical difficulty. It concerns the relation between usual concepts and usual realities, which fails unusually in particular instances. Lear, taking the argument in a different direction, has also argued for what one might call a historical difficulty. Studying the case of the loss of social world for Native Americans through settler colonialism, Lear argues that with the loss of the world comes also the loss of concepts.[81] The idea is that concepts make sense within a particular world, forms of life develop through experiences within a particular world and the human's task to both make sense and shape that world. From this point of view, the loss of a world does not leave intact the concepts that were the foundation of that world. Lear's view is that, though the concepts may still be around, they lose their efficacy in providing meanings they once did provide. They become, so to speak, unthinkable. And with them the world in which the people now find themselves, for which the concepts are no longer inadequate.

[80] Jonathan Lear, "The Difficulty of Reality and a Revolt Against Mourning," *European Journal of Philosophy* (2018): 1-12.
[81] Jonathan Lear, *Radial Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

Immediately, the historical element of the loss of concepts speaks to our reality of disaster and the colonial ruins. The permanence of coloniality implies, among other things, that there is an old world which is no longer. Between the old and the new world is a historical rupture, creating a disconnect between the old and the new. Within that rupture is the loss of culture in terms of its associated agency. The problem is not one of change. Cultures change. It is the rupture that occasioned the change at play. The rupture is one of a foundational violence which undid and displaced the old, as opposed to the idea of natural change over time which lies at the heart of all forms of life. At the heart of a culture and the agency that makes cultures, are concepts through which the world is made meaningful. With the loss of culture or the arrestation of the internal processes of change within culture[82], also comes the loss of the efficacy of the concepts to make sense of life. If the permanence of coloniality stands, then the difficulty of reality in the loss of concepts is a problem for the African postcolonial subject. The condition becomes one which is unthinkable. Albert Memmi speaks of coloniality as also a process of "mystification" which functions as a necessary anchor of colonization, a process by which the colonized is posited as illegible, first from the perspective of colonizer (thus the recurring ascriptions of irrationality, for example), and, consequently and more importantly, from the point of view of the colonized themselves as a process of self-mystification as the process of mystification takes effect. This makes colonial reality and its violence opaque to those who live it. Consider that the everyday realities of the African condition of existence today do not carry an obviousness as regards their ties to coloniality. The difficulty of this hiddenness, while not revealing an unthinkability of the kind that the loss of concepts occasions, still presents a

[82] Olufemi Taiwo speaks of "sociocryonics" as a colonial method in which cultural forms were frozen in time and touted as African traditions which were incorporated into colonial administration (e.g. in the forms of indirect rule that were created in various colonial areas). Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa*.

difficulty of the not-yet-thought. To truly think the mystification, and perhaps also to think ourselves out of it, requires hard work of analysis. And the potential success of such work is not self-evident. Boulaga has suggested that even the notion of independence is not thinkable outside of material conditions of independence, emphasizing the impact of lived realities for the ability to think certain concepts fully.[83] This is a difficulty of reality concerning the absence of concepts to think the realities, either because old concepts have lost meaning or because new concepts are not in view. The postcolonial condition is one that combines the two aspects of the difficulty.

At the heart of the difficulty of reality in coloniality is the horror of it all. During colonization proper, it was the everyday violence (the violence of continuous creation) which exemplified that horror. And it was a violence which, within the ruination of worlds, is difficult to think for those that are subjected to it.[84] This horror is also an unthinkability of the conceptual order, albeit of a different kind. One supposes that violence often speaks to those it subjects under it in a language they can understand. That is precisely how it achieves its goal of subjugation and marches towards its ultimate aim of annihilation. Césaire's Lumumba speaks of processes of mutilation, dispossession, humiliation, as experienced by the "mutilated," the "dispossessed", and the "humiliated" who clearly understand what is happening to them. Not all violence is self-evident, especially with the reality of mystification, but a lot of it is. In this light, the violence is thinkable. One feels humiliated, one watches on or fights as one is being dispossessed or mutilated. But the horror of it all leaves some essential questions unanswered and perhaps even unanswerable. Why? Why us? Why now? What has led to our defeat? These

[83] "To think political independence is to recognize and realize that the possibility of saying what it is and of causing the human being to emerge by measuring up to what there is depends on the abolition of social relations whose substance is to render the human being unable to comprehend his own condition." (Boulaga 1977 : 108).
[84] Writing on a slightly different disaster (the advent of Transatlantic enslavement in Africa), Leonora Miano (*Season of the Shadow*, Seagull Books 2018) narrates the unthinkability of the end of a world and the coming of a new one in the horror or capture and ruination. The kind of destruction in this context is substantially similar to that occasioned through the disaster of colonization.

are the kinds of questions expressed by Moussa Konate's question "Is Africa cursed?" as an appeal to extra-rational reasons, from a recognition that rational explanation fails to elucidate the horror of coloniality both in the disaster of colonization and its permanence since the end of the official disaster. And these are questions which remain unanswerable even by the most concise material account of colonial history its origins, aims, and effects there could be. They are dimensions of life within colonial ruins that resist thinking.

5. Conclusion – Towards imagining life in the ruins

Faced with the reality of colonial disaster and its ruins, the postcolonial subjects ask: how do we accommodate defeat and loss?[85] The recognition of such defeat and loss and, especially, of the permanence of that loss leads one to ask this question, as a way of tracing the work of imagination. In asking the question thus, one delineates the space of the possible. I suggest that the study of colonial disaster leads one to this framing of the question of imagination, not as a way of solving the issues raised by life in the ruins but as a way of raising them and making them the center of the work of imagination. In this center lies an awareness that to ask the question of "how to imagine the future of Africa?" is not only to ask about the forms that such future can take (forms that must deal with the limits occasioned by the permanence of disaster in the ruins), but also, and fundamentally, to ask about the forms that the very imagination can take. In the latter is a reaffirmation of the difficulties for thought that are at the heart of the lived reality. In these reflections I have sought to dissect the question of imagination and the reality it addresses. My hope is that it has given a sense, either intellectual or simply a feeling, of the problem—that disaster presents difficulties for the work of imagination in our context.

[85] Boulaga, *Muntu in Crisis*, 71

At the risk of appearing to paint a hopeless condition, I would like to express that the need to think disaster rests in a space that entertains the possibility of hope. But it is such hope as insists on sitting in the ruins and informing the rebuilding of selves and social worlds from this space. Essential to this hope is the core truth that colonization failed.[86] Even with the permanence of it all, even with the eternal recurrence of the same, even with the living in ecstasis, even with the confusion of thought and living occasioned by the loss, colonization failed. It is only total annihilation, rather than anthropological poverty will would embody total success. The work of imagination, amid the various difficulties, is a work that situates itself within this failure that gives foundation for the struggle from within defeat towards something else—both without pre-supposing transcendence as given and keeping in view what is made possible by the failure that makes defeat incomplete. Only then can our imagination get a glimpse of the cracks[87] within coloniality from which alternative futures can arise.

Centering the reality of ecstasis makes colonization and its ruin exogenous affairs, and this bears the risk of oversimplification. In fact, it is not uncommon for writings on Africa to displace coloniality in a move to offer an accurate reading which takes note to not blame everything on colonization—the idea being that the opposite approach claims such total blame.[88] While this approach considers its opposite as an oversimplification, the charge is a better fit for the very approach itself. Indeed, complicity of the oppressed within systems of oppression is a common fact that provides a lasting foundation for the systems. It is for this purpose that processes of mystification (one of whose aims is to create false consciousness) are essential to

[86] Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus : Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
[87] Catherine Walsh, "Decolonial Praxis: Sowing Existence-life in Times of Dehumanities" in Júlio Cézar Adam, Valburga Schmiedt Streck, Claudio Carvalhaes, eds. *(De)coloniality and religious practices: liberating hope*. IAPT.CS 2 (2021): 5–14.
[88] Olufemi Taiwo, "Rethinking the Decolonization Trope in Philosophy", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 57 (Spindel Supplement, 2019): 135-159.

any such systems. Ecstasis in its emphasis of exogeneity seeks first of all to describe the effect of disaster and the condition of living in the ruins. It is not by accident that this condition manifests as a projection of the self to an outside. The foundational violence of coloniality was itself an exogenous affair at least in the sense that it functioned as an appearance of sudden external forces that created drastic and lasting changes, as disasters do.[89] In the aftermath of the disaster, new and lasting hierarchies of being were created, making ecstasis a condition, not just of looking outward, but also of looking up. To say any or all of this is not necessarily to take a position on the question of responsibility except on the responsibility of coloniality itself, as attention remains on an analysis of the colonial relation as well as the lived condition it occasions. That the agents of the coloniality be Europeans or Africans matters for imaginative strategy, of course, but it does not take away from the exogeneity of the condition.

My ongoing interest in disaster, ruin, and ecstasis is propelled by the belief that there is something to be learned from the negative aspects of reality. Beyond the embedded need for an accurate reading of the reality, there is a related need for courage to look ourselves in the eye and see the postcolonial reality that we live. Life in the ruins is not fun, but it is by recognizing the ruins that we can claim to imagine possible futures—and there is no fun in that work either. Life in the ruins is not a romance, it is a tragedy and, as such, it requires a tragic form of imagination rather than a romantic one.[90] The former recognizes the limitedness of possibilities in the ruins and, like Boulaga's vigilant memory, refuses easy tales of transcendence. Against the anticolonial dream form of imagination, we who imagine the future today do so from the position of the dream deferred, the nightmare in other words. From there, the forms of possible futures

[89] Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 21.
[90] David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial* Enlightenment (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

that the imagination will take may be varied but perhaps it will joyfully surprise us. But the joyful surprise requires the not-so-joyful looking closely at the ruins. Such, I suggest, is the task that postcolonial imagination in Africa must take on.

Two | AGENCY IN THE RUINS

In this chapter I would like to consider agency in the context of political failure and the resulting state of inertia. I would like to do this work with an explicit reference to the notion of culture in a minimal sense. To this end I will consider cultural experience as a tripartite complex of will, action, and world. This proposal appears at once too reductive and too expansive. In the first instance, one can point out the absence of aspects of transmission and historicity central to conceptions of culture. What the concept of tradition often captures allows an understanding of culture – and cultural experience – as substantially involving the sharing of forms of social behaviors, worldviews, skills, and artifacts that shape what is the heart of culture. In this sense there is a constitutive historicity that makes the possibility of cultural experience. One who stands in the present receives from the past, conserves, or transforms, and potentially gives to others in the future. It is in this light that to speak of cultural experience through the workings of will, action, and world appears too reductive. In the second instance, the interest in a minimal picture of how the individual inhabits and interacts with the world has the unintended consequence of providing not a picture of cultural experience specifically but of human experience generally. The tripartite complex, in other words, seems to describe a general process of human agency. And the workings of agency are obviously not limited to our everyday understanding of culture. This suggests that one would have to say either that all processes that involve the minimal picture of agency are part of a definition of culture or clarify the usage of this expansive view that does not lead to an all-encompassing view.

To speak of agency to refer to culture, a view which I will make explicit by the phrase "culture as agency," my usage is strictly a *pars pro toto* synecdoche naming the whole by the

part. The tripartite complex is thus formulated with no intention that it provide an exhaustive account of culture. It is, by that fact, intentionally reductive, but in a sense which does not exclude what is left out of the formulation. It is assumed for example that an individual's interaction with their world would include relating to other people in ways that allow the transmission of history and social behaviors often associated with a conception of culture. While the form of the synecdoche clarifies the relation between the use of agency in reference to culture, it does not on its own justify the usage of agency specifically in relation to culture. For the liberty to use a part to refer to the whole opens up as many options as there are parts to the whole. Of terms already mentioned, history, transmission, tradition, interpersonal relations could be candidates when culture is concerned. Agency holds a privileged position in relation to the context of political failure and to the chapter. As will become clear, I consider agency as central to cultural experience in ways that justify giving it privilege over other parts of a conception of culture. The expansive nature of the tripartite complex, while it does not aim to capture all human experience, allows my thinking in this chapter to proceed from a double move of reduction and expansion. The reduction by an entry through culture allows an understanding of what happens to agency when culture is negatively affected. It will appear that the effects go beyond cultural experience towards a disturbance at the heart of what it is to be a human being. This then justifies the move of expansion by a pursuit of agency beyond the space of culture as a reclaiming of agency that rehabilitates the human. Therefore, what starts in a space of culture in a minimal sense concludes in a space beyond culture.

Consider culture then in the tripartite complex of will, action, and world. Consider also that cultures change either through the agency of the people or through unfortunate circumstances. When something goes wrong with culture what goes wrong? And what is an effective response

to that which has gone wrong? This chapter presents the experience of political inertia – the relative stagnancy of political agency in response to political failure – as a cultural problem and proposes a possible cultural response to it. This characterization follows easily from the description of the problem as one which, though starting in a political sense, bears deep implications to the forms of life of the people it affects. In speaking of ecstatic living, I argued that it affects the deepest aspects of human existence. Since culture has also at times been conceived often as encompassing the fullness of human existence,[1] my argument implicitly puts itself in the cultural context. I would like to make this connection explicit. Thinking along the lines of culture serves also as a useful way to engage with proposals for what is to be done in relation to the living condition of concern. I will focus here on one such proposal from Frantz Fanon which I believe provides us with much insight. Additionally, such characterization allows one to participate in a rich tradition of writing about (post) colonial experience and culture in a way that moves the conversation forward. As an example, grief is an appropriate response to what colonization does to culture. Indeed, the imposition of a different form of life and the reluctant disavowal of previous forms of life is at the heart of colonial projects everywhere, even as the degree of such imposition and disavowal differs depending on specific historical conditions. Therefore, the thought of culture in this context confronts the reality of loss and agony and can naturally adopt a grieving mode. Such thought has its use and relevance. Instead of grieving what happens to cultures, which is a backward-looking perspective, I seek to highlight, through a forward-looking approach, a possible response to the problem of political inertia. Moreover, some discussions of culture and colonization make erroneous assumptions about what culture is and the errors can appear more easily through the tripartite conception of

[1] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 31.

culture and an engagement with Fanon's view of the same. At the contact of colonial violence, some have declared the death of culture. The disappearance of languages and traditions is a noticeable element in support of that view. Others point out, in light of the failure of the project of colonization, that cultures are still vibrant even as they have been transformed through the colonial contact. For example, the success of African literature in formerly colonial languages serves as support of this view. In both cases, the location of culture seems to be on what happens to the world in the will-action-world complex. In relating to Fanon, my aim is to give their due place to will and action, or in other words to agency, in the experience of culture.

The aim of the chapter is twofold: first, to discuss an example of cultural response to the problem of political inertia and, second, to probe into an important but not as yet explored aspect of Fanon's writings, namely the place of the individual in the experience of culture. In relation to the latter point, my approach will not be merely a textual analysis. Thinking postcolonial life in our contemporary moment must be attuned to the uniqueness of the moment in its difference from the decolonial moment of Fanon's generation. Whereas the concern for this earlier generation was the problem of foreign domination whose solution required the recovering of indigenous self-determination, our concern, as I see it, is a double violence of encounter. The double violence presents itself at two levels, local and global. At the local level, an experience of political failure, repeated political failure, creates political inertia, making agency ineffective. This is not simply in the usual sense that speaks of the failure of the African nation state, but concurrently of the failure of the citizens of many African countries to effect needed changes. Within the political inertia is a certain removal of the political agent from the city, the polis, and thereby a removal from history making. Within this failure lies another violent encounter of the colonial and neocolonial nature that grounds the repeated failure of the state, as much research in

political theory shows. At the global level, lies the violence of impossible promises. From within the space of political failure, the African subject is bombarded by the reality of what is possible elsewhere. Europe, America, Asia, "really anywhere but here" we say. And the appeal of the promise is not entirely or mainly in its being fulfillable. It is in its ability to detract attention from the local space by producing a faulty sight that creates a sort of blindness and uncritical reception of images of promise coming from the global north to the global south. Instead of textual analysis, I use Fanon as inspiration for what a useful response to our condition might look like. The analogy between our condition and that which concerned Fanon is made possible by important similarities which I will highlight.

1. Political inertia as a cultural problem

Culture is a remarkably difficult concept. It has been used to mean the whole life of a human collective,[2] the sharedness of social formation,[3] dialogue,[4] or, especially in the colonial context, the depository of human productions in knowledge and artifacts. Despite the difficulty, the concept retains a meaningful usage in various discourses. Although alternative concepts are available, the choice to think with the notion of culture is one which recognizes the concept's privileged ability to elicit certain histories and discourses. In places where colonization wreaked havoc, the term will evoke loss and agony, for example. Furthermore, as culture is an important keyword in postcolonial thought, retaining the concept puts one in the company of a widely

[2] T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 31; Edward B. Taylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 1, *The Origins of Culture* (London: John Murray, 1920), 1; Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 76.
[3] Alan Patten, *Equal Recognition: The Moral Foundations of Minority Rights* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 51-52.
[4] Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.

recognizable literature. Lastly, the use which I hope to make of culture in this chapter is not satisfied by other alternative concepts of which I am aware.[5]

In exploring culture as a complex of will, action, and world, I would like to highlight an essential aspect of culture which I believe cuts across the various usages of the term. This move does not provide a definition of the concept, as the synecdoche suggests, but rather spotlights individual experience of culture. In other words, my thinking with culture, rests on what it looks like to inhabit culture. And, to add the specificity of the context of political inertia, I ask what a meaningful and liberatory inhabitation of culture might look like. Leaving open the question of definition might appear to be a shortcoming of the foregoing analysis. However, the will-action-world complex is a necessary albeit insufficient element of what makes culture what it is.

The will-action-world complex presents agents involved in an ongoing process. Whether it be a process of social formation or one of dialogue, individual participation in that process relies at least on a simple picture of agency. There is here a recognition of an inner and outer life, represented by will and world respectively. There is also what connects the two, action which creates contact between the will and the world. By world, I mean the ensemble of things, whether material or immaterial (e.g., objects, language, discourses, relations) outside the individual as well other individuals. This latter aspect allows the appearance of the collective element of culture. When things are going well in this process, the movement of the will through action finds fulfillment in the world. When things go wrong, this movement is arrested somewhere along the process. And this going wrong could take place at the level of will, action,

[5] Rahel Jaeggi, for example, has proposed "form of life" as a "de-essentialized and a de-substantialized alternative to the concept of culture." In *Critique of Forms of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 41. The proposed concept is one which, rather than focus on individual experience, emphasizes collective formations with a habitual character. My interest in usage of culture is one which seeks to emphasize individual agency and therefore, cannot be satisfied by the concept of "form of life" as defined by Jaeggi.

or world. Political inertia is a problem that takes place in the contact between action and world, in a way that suffocates action and cripples participation in the process of culture.

Political failure, as a definitional mark of African contemporary existence describes the reality of a repetition of political disasters in many countries, famously in the form of dictatorships and a resultant agony of social, political, and economic life. Within this reality, and especially in the fact of repetition, individual or collective agency is experienced as ineffective. This inefficacy is not one of essence but of experience. It is not the case that inhabitants of these countries imagine the political failure as forever resistant to their attempts to change things for the better. Nonetheless, decades of repeated failure leave their mark on the experience of agency. This mark is one which manifests as inertia – the immobility of the subject in the face of the tragedy. This is not global immobility – as political life still continues but directed away from the space of local politics. It is, more specifically, an immobility in relation to any action that aims to change the repetition of political failure. It is the form of immobility that says, "there is nothing I can do about this" even as individuals are not literally motionless.

To proclaim, of a situation one lives on daily basis, that there is nothing one can do about it, bears effects that go beyond a simple picture of inefficacious action. Since a life that is going well requires an agency which is also going well, the effects of the inertia permeate all of life. The effects of inertia so conceived are felt in the whole complex. What happens to the will that is walled inside the agent, in the sense of not finding outlets for realization into action and to shape the world? What happens to action that again and again up comes against a world that resists responding to it? Or what happens to a world that refuses being transformed in a way that harbors life and wellbeing for its inhabitants? Whatever happens has essential consequences for

what it means to be a human being and has implications for what a productive response to the problem might be.

In painting the foregoing picture through a centering of action, I am pursuing a certain view of culture as agency. Once again, this is not a definitional conception but an underlining of an essential element of culture, however we might define it. This framing is not one that is merely given in the presentation of the will-action-world complex. Indeed, one can conceive that something goes wrong with culture, for example, when the world is disturbed in substantial and indelible ways. Think for instance about the death of languages or the loss of specific artistic and storytelling skills through colonization. This is, of course, an issue for the culture complex insofar as it affects the cultural experience of the individuals. But the definition of the problem also points to what a possible solution would be. If the problem is one of agency, so will the solution be of agency. If the problem if one of lost worlds, the solution might suggest a certain mode of recovery of world remains. My engagement with Fanon's thought puts these two perspectives in conversation.

2. Fanon, a diagnosis of colonial agency

2.1. A material conception of culture

In a discussion of racism in the context of colonization, Frantz Fanon defines culture as "the combination of motor and mental behavior patterns arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man."[6] There are a few striking elements of this definition which I would like to stress as pertains to the interest in culture in the context of political failure and

[6] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 32.

inertia. The first element is that culture is primarily an individual rather collective reality. It is in the behavior of the individual that culture is located, and the behavior is understood in a material sense. Culture is not, as one might say, a reality of a certain consciousness or mental disposition. It is rather, Fanon claims, one of actual behavior that involves a mental element, but also an element of bodily movement. Or, put differently, it is the mental element translated into action. The second element is that to think of culture one does not think of single actions but an ensemble of actions and their patterns. This, one notices, allows a claim of historicity that is inscribed in the behavior of individual persons. It is this historical element that might allow this conception of culture, which is explicitly focused on individuals, to not be a rejection of alternative conceptions that emphasize collectivities. For it is through such collectivities that history is transmitted[7] and thus individual patterns of behavior will often draw from collective patterns. Fanon provides this notion of culture in a speech at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, and one assumes—from the concern with racism in a global sense which targets groups rather than individuals—that his overall interest is in the collective. The choice to spotlight individual behavior as the site of culture therefore gains a significance of an unapparent nature. Third, the patterns of behavior that make culture what it is are generated by an encounter between an individual and the world around them, a world which also includes other individuals. This is an expected outcome of the centering of behavior. For patterns of behavior arise as a process of learning by the agent.[8] As the individual poses different actions onto the world, they observe the result of such actions. Actions that fulfill their goals are stored as patterns as the individual moves around the world over time. This view of culture, especially for its emphasis on

[7] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behavior* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963).

behavior in its mental and motor elements is likely influenced by Fanon's training as a psychiatrist.

The specific encounter that concerned Fanon was the colonial encounter, even if the conception of culture provided above is general. On the surface, all that it says is the location of culture, without further claims on what it means for the cultural experience to go well or the opposite. In it is implied the fact that cultures change. As individuals encounter the world, they adapt their behavior patterns as a result of that encounter. As the seasoned psychiatrist that he was, however, Fanon's interest in culture is not simply a description of how cultures are formed. Since cultural experience is a response to the world, what happens to the world has ramifications for individual wellbeing. The discussion of culture is at the heart of the interest in colonial experience, for which the thinker is well-known. In this context, his analysis of culture serves two main goals: first, to explain what goes wrong with culture as a result of colonial domination and, second, to propose a cultural response to the reality. Even as the current interest in political failure and inertia is substantially distinct from colonial reality, the double aim of Fanon's cultural analysis bears important lessons for the contemporary moment.

2.2. Colonization's impact on culture

What does colonization do to culture? According to Fanon, it occasions a disaster close to cultural death. "Not with impunity…does one undergo domination. The culture of [a subjugated] people is sclerosed, dying," he argues. "No life any longer circulates in it."[9] As a historical reality, colonization changes the way individuals encounter the world and, as such, it also affects what it means to have a livable life. This occurs in multiple connected shocks. The first shock is

[9] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 41-42.

the problem of "a direct and sudden assault of different cultural patterns."[10] Since colonial domination involves an imposition of the colonizer's worldview (realized for example through education, religion, and political organization), colonized individuals come up against a different way of inhabiting the world which is introduced with suddenness and through force—the latter is what gives the "assault" character of the encounter of the cultural patterns. The ramifications of this shock go beyond the sphere of what could be called an epistemic conflict (in the battle of different conceptions of the world) towards a conflict in the wholeness of individual and collective life. "The enterprise of deculturation," Fanon says, "turns out to be the negative of a more gigantic work of economic, and even biological, enslavement."[11] The friction of worldviews, therefore, is really the manifestation of a much deeper enterprise of subjugation which affects the deepest aspects of human existence. Considering Fanon's description of behavior in motor and mental terms, it is no surprise that he considers colonial domination to have biological consequences. This emphasis of economic and biological ramifications of the cultural shock recalls the materiality of his conception of culture.

The cultural death is, however, not consummated. What occurs, instead, is a deep and continued agony.[12]This agony manifests through inertia (the arrestation of agency as response to defeat and continuous violence) and the disappearance of the agent from the public sphere.

As a response to colonial violence, culture closes in on itself instead of being alive and future directed.[13] This closing-in-on-itself of culture is to be understood not as separate from the individual behavior patterns that are at the heart of Fanon's conception of culture. Expressing it under the terms of "cultural mummification," Fanon advances that it occasions "a

[10] Ibid., 31. See also Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1994), 40.
[11] Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 31.
[12] Ibid., 34.
[13] Ibid.

mummification of individual thinking."[14] More than just thinking, however, the effect of the continued agony appears at the level of agency. For alongside the arrestation of individual thinking, Fanon also mentions inertia[15] as a logical result of the agony. This arrestation of agency is the second, and more important, cultural shock. Because the colonial system discounts individual experience and agency, the individual reacts in a sort of disinterestedness and an active removal of self from the public project of colonization. And since, for Fanon, the human being can only evolve in a world that "recognizes him and [that] he decides to assume,"[16] the state of inertia expresses the halting of the normal process of evolution. This disinterestedness might carry an unintuitive character about it, i.e., in the face of colonial violence, why does the individual not react through revolt rather than a lack of agency? This is an important question in general and even more so within Fanon's writings, which are known, among other things, for their emphasis on the uses of violence towards liberation. It is crucial to note that inertia comes about not from a disinterest in fighting but from a sense of defeat in the face of colonial violence.[17] This is a stage earlier than the revolutionary struggle which will require a radical transformation in the reaction of the colonized to colonial force. At the current stage, faced with the reality of force which not only conquers peoples and lands, but also successfully commands submission, the colonized comes to the realization that he and his people have been defeated. To exist in a zone of defeat has bearings for what action one is willing to undertake if any. As it turns out, the defeated will conceive of action that does not directly confront those that defeated

[14] Ibid.
[15] Elsewhere Fanon expresses this in terms of cultural silence/muteness. Op.cit., 115.
[16] Ibid., 34.
[17] "Having witnessed the liquidation of its systems of reference, the collapse of its cultural patterns, the native can only recognize with the occupant that 'God is not on his side.'" Op.cit., 38.

them. Herein lies the logic of a certain redirection of active life from the public towards the private sphere.

In direct connection with the language of movement in his conception of culture, Fanon analyzes this inertia as a form of immobility. Whereas individual cultural experience resides in behavior that has motor characteristics, colonial violence compels the colonized "to not move."[18] It is a compulsion so fundamental to the colonial project for Fanon that he maintains the "first thing the colonial subject learns is to remain in his place and not overstep its limits."[19] Fanon's analysis of dreams in his psychiatric practice allows him to interpret a recurrence of muscularity in his patients' dreams as the corollary of the prohibition of movement in waking life. This is one example of how active life is relegated to the private sphere. Other such examples include family and spiritual life. Fanon's analysis of this immobility attains the height of its expression when he says that, in the consciousness of defeat, the colonized "accepts the devastation decreed by God, grovels in front of the colonist, bows to the hand of fate, and mentally readjusts to acquire the serenity of stone."[20]

But just as it is of the culture that is dying but does not, and cannot, literally die, so it is of agency. Even with the expression of colonial agency in the form of inertia, agency still remains, albeit in a clandestine mode. This yields an anonymity of agency. In his claim that there is no life that circulates in a culture of the dominated, Fanon maintains that "the only existing life is dissimulated."[21] Because colonial violence requires adherence to its order, the only possible life for the colonized is whatever has an ability to escape the notice of colonial power. There is

[18] Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris : La découverte, 2002), 42. Translation is mine (the used translation overlooks the importance of the words referencing movement).
[19] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 15.
[20] Ibid., 18.
[21] Ibid., 42.

thereby a progressive retreating from the public into the private sphere. A substantial transformation of subjectivity ensues. For Fanon, the colonized constitute an "anonymous population."[22] Since a fully functioning human life requires a good measure of both private and public aspects,[23] what is possible in this context is no longer life per se but, rather, "fragments of life."[24] Fanon considers this move away from the public sphere as emerging from the very nature of colonial occupation, which is not just occupation of lands but of the very lives of the people. Occupation even of the people's breathing, which becomes "occupied breathing."[25] It is from this fact that the people retreat into the private sphere and live their active lives clandestinely. While this is a strength on the part of the dominated as a survival tactic, their liberation will require a resurgence of their energy into the public sphere.

The retreat of agency into the private sphere implies, among other things, that effective political action is no longer possible insofar as it concerns the public sphere. This is not to say that political life is altogether impossible. For colonial systems function necessarily through the workings of effective relations of power that subjugate the colonized and require the participation of the latter in their subjugation. And, in fact, such retreat into the private sphere serves the maintenance of the colonial order. This is because the energy that could be directed at colonial power is invested elsewhere. For example, Fanon discusses how the uses of spiritual seances in the colonial context diffuse the participants' restless relation to the colonial violence

[22] Ibid.
[23] "What is true is that under normal conditions, an interaction must exist between the family and society at large. The home is the basis of the truth of society, but society authenticates and legitimizes the family. The colonial structure is the very negation of this reciprocal justification." (Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, 66)
[24] *Wretched*, 42.
[25] "There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction. Under these conditions, the individual's breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing. From this point on, the real values of the occupied quickly tend to acquire a clandestine form of existence." (Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, 65).

and afford them a stillness which assures "the stability of the colonized world."[26] The essence of colonial subjugation is that it prohibits a truly active response of the colonized but rather requires silent acquiescence and obedience, at the risk of violence. In this way, colonial domination does not recognize the subject's agency and the subject is not given a choice in accepting its terms. So long as the colonized remain in the space of inertia through defeat, their agency is not *actional*. This is a term Fanon employs to describe the workings of agency in a context where one is affirming what is essential to human wellbeing, such as freedom, love, and generosity.[27] In the colonial context, in which the wellbeing of the agent is effectively threatened, his action lacks the actional aspect thus conceived. The form of subjectivity that arises is what one can call an *inactional* subjectivity.

2.3. A cultural response to colonial domination

True to his material conception of culture, Fanon proclaims the struggle for the liberation of national territory to be the highest expression of culture in the colonial context: "We believe the conscious, organized struggle undertaken by a colonized people in order to restore national sovereignty constitutes the greatest cultural manifestation that exists."[28] There are different ways

[26] "[I]n actual fact, these are organized seances of possession and dispossession: vampirism, possession by djinns, by zombies, and by Legba, the illustrious god of voodoo. Such a disintegration, dissolution or splitting of the personality, plays a key regulating role in ensuring the stability of the colonized world. On the way there these men and women were stamping impatiently, their nerves 'on edge.' On the way back, the village returns to serenity, peace, and stillness." (Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 20) Fanon believes that the liberation struggle will require the redirection of this energy out of the private into the public sphere, in the open. "Colonial exploitation, poverty, and endemic famine increasingly force the colonized into open, organized rebellion." (Ibid., 172) "In the liberation struggle, however, this people who were once relegated to the realm of the imagination, victims of unspeakable terrors, but content to lose themselves in hallucinatory dreams, are thrown into disarray, reform, and amid blood and tears give birth to very real and urgent issues." (Ibid., 19)

[27] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 173 & 119. The opposite of actional is reactional, to name an action or attitude which is focused on the Other (as colonist or as racist white person in colonization and anti-Black racism respectively). Fanon considers this to be action of a lesser moral degree.

[28] *Wretched*, 178

to understand this statement. The first noticeable element in the claim is the emphasis on the restoration of national sovereignty. And this is a restoration of the national territory, which includes the land and the people.[29] A likely interpretation from this realization is that the liberation of the colonized territory is a necessary condition for the life of culture. Recall that the occupation of land for Fanon goes along with the occupation of the whole life of the people, save for clandestinity. In this sense, the foregoing interpretation would be that the struggle is what traces a path for culture. A different interpretation is that the struggle itself is a cultural phenomenon, i.e., culture in action. It is this latter view which is more strongly justified by Fanon's writing and which I would like to pursue under the formulation of culture as agency. To get there, it is important to place Fanon's conception of culture in relation to another conception of the same in the postcolonial context, namely in the work of Cameroonian theologian Engelbert Mveng.[30]

Writing on the misadventures of culture through colonization and calling for a cultural response, Mveng defines culture as "the conception of the world, of the human being, and of God specific to a group of people from which they try to organize their daily lives, the world in

[29] On Fanon's use of national territory to refer to the people, see *Wretched*, 82.

[30] In his reflections on culture, Fanon puts himself explicitly in conversation with the negritude movement, brainchild of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon-Gontran Damas, all three poets and statesmen from Senegal, Martinique, and French Guyana respectively. The movement, which was largely poetic in expression, advocated for a revaluation of African traditions as instantiations of a unique form of existence and a unique contribution to world heritage. Fanon's critique of the movement is well-known and is in the company of various other critiques of the same. He paints the movement as barren in its conflation of culture and tradition, its continental (and at times global) focus, and in its return to the past rather than move towards the future. For my current interest I would like to shift our attention elsewhere, and this for two reasons. First, because the negritude movement has no unified theory of culture, even as it may employ a unified method in the revaluation of African traditions, it makes any critique of the whole movement as theory difficult. For example, Aimé Césaire's conception of culture is largely consistent with Fanon's own, in its emphasis of creativity as the heart of culture (See Aimé Césaire, « Culture and Colonization, » *Social Text* (2010) 28 (2 (103)) : 127-144). Second, for its emphasis on the African contribution to universal culture, rather than on how the African worldviews can do away with the colonial condition, it holds no evident ability to rival the conception of culture that Fanon imagines. For these reasons, I turn to Mveng who exemplifies a cultural view and a method similar to the negritude movement but whose conception is unified and holds potential for liberation in a Fanonian sense. Engaging with his thought reveals the depth and difference of Fanon's contribution.

which they live and their own system of thought."[31] In contrast with Fanon's conception of culture, we notice the emphasis of the collective rather the individual. Moreover, culture is understood as a worldview in epistemic rather than behavioral terms. The main idea is that there is a collective worldview which serves as the foundation for the making of the material world. For Mveng, whose work is generally known as a theology of life, the Black African worldview is an essential tension between life and death in which the reigning goal is the victory of life over death.[32] Against this background, colonization is conceived as a project that aims at death.[33] It seeks what Mveng calls anthropological annihilation, a radical undoing of the core of being of the colonized in what they have, what they are, and what they do (history, culture, rights, creativity, etc.).[34] The process of annihilation was not complete, but the postcolonial life which bears its marks is no less tragic. The real outcome is a state of anthropological poverty, in which the people are stripped of the attributes that give them a properly human kind of being.[35] At the conceptual level, the danger of colonial domination is not its aiming at death, since the chosen conception of culture already allows, even requires the tension death provides in the service of life. The danger rather appears through the historical turn of events. The actual defeat of the colonized by the colonial system marks a reversal of the people's worldview and thereby its downfall. Whereas this worldview maintains the victory of life over death, its defeat signals the opposite in the victory of death over life. Such a tragic reality is obviously cause for lament. For Mveng, it also signals an equally obvious way out: Life must triumph. It is a response which

[31] Engelbert Mveng and Benjamin Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines: Dialogue sur l'anthropologie négro-africaine* (Paris : Présence africaine, 1996), 57. All translations from this text are mine.
[32] Ibid., 130-131. Mveng states the principle of the victory of life over death as a fundamental ontological fact of the kind that "being" holds within European philosophy.
[33] "It is not an exaggeration to say that the specific worldview of imperial civilizations excessively champions the victory of death over life." Ibid., 40
[34] Ibid., 94-95.
[35] Engelbert Mveng, « Paupérisation et développement en Afrique, » *Terroirs* 1 (1992), 118.

champions a return to the traditional worldview and calls it forth to ignite a struggle that seeks the demise of colonial ideology: "For us the struggle for liberation is a fight of life against death and our anthropologies and cosmologies advocate for the victory of life over death."[36] The process of revolution is an ideological battle. This is not to mean that political revolution is merely an ideological revolution. For the process of liberation must reach beyond the space of the political, social, or economic wellbeing. Colonization's worst outcome is a cultural wound and one must attend to culture for true healing. Mveng's analysis does not specify the relation between the cultural and the political and this leaves open the question of what he means by struggle. What is evident, however, is an unshaken concern for the real lives of African individuals within deeply dysfunctional political structures. From this fact, one assumes the idea of struggle he has in mind must also be one that attends to the everyday life of the people.

Read alongside Mveng's proposal, Fanon's own view of culture gains useful clarity. Mveng's conception of culture relies on the historicity of a worldview whose equilibrium is troubled by colonization. Anticolonial liberation, in this sense, seeks the restoration of that equilibrium. The struggle for liberation functions thereby in a mode of return. Such a move is problematic in multiple ways. Besides the anthropological question of whether the worldview of a triumph of life can be generalized on a continental level and how it is lived concretely, the mode of return, paradoxically, does not take fully into account the advent of colonization and what it implies for liberation—since liberation is a future-directed project. To say this is not to raise any fault within projects that call on us to return so as to enact a conception of the world that privileges and protects life. What is worrisome is the statement of the possibility of return without elaboration of the difficulties of that project of return and an explication of ways in

[36] Mveng & Lipawing, *Théologie, libération et cultures africaines*, 40.

which the move into the future through liberation might necessarily undo certain realities of the past. For example, Fanon, in his writing on the place of women in the struggle for liberation, shows how the urgency of real struggle requires an unforeseen practical equality among men and women.[37] Fanon's conception of culture, in emphasizing agency leaves open the question of specific worldviews that the colonized might have inherited or might come to adopt. This is in part because of his diagnosis of the problem of colonization which creates the state of inertia, affecting agency most of all. The struggle for liberation must therefore seek to activate agency, to retrieve a sense of actional subjectivity.

In his discussion of culture, Fanon places himself in a conversation between a political and intellectual view of culture, the latter being of the kind that Mveng provides. Fanon's interest is to bridge a gap between politicians, who are concerned with the real lives of the people and the intellectuals, who are concerned with history: "Whereas the politicians integrate their action in the present, the intellectuals place themselves in the context of history."[38] It turns out that the cultural approach of the intellectuals does not fulfill its avowed interest in history. This is for two reasons. The first is a denial of difference in favor homogeneity. And the second is a denial of change in favor of fixity.

Framed as a response to colonialism which is a totalizing and dichotomous ideology with the colonized on one side and the colonists on the other, and with a racialized element between white and black, the intellectuals' view of culture reverses the same ideology. That totalization places its claims on the continental level and, at times even on the global level (e.g., through cultural coalitions between continental Africans and African Americans). Approaches like

[37] Frantz Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism*, 35-67.
[38] Fanon, *Wretched*, 147.

Mveng's proceed by an "unconditional affirmation of African culture"[39] which is the underside of what colonization requires, an unconditional acceptance of its worldview. Attention to historicity reveals that the real problems are heterogeneous and can only be fully analyzed historically at a smaller scale. And that scale for Fanon is at the level of the nation.

Mveng advances a unique African worldview in a philosophy of life. There lies in this claim a concern for historicity which goes beyond the question of difference. The latter question is still present here as well. For one may need to think about how different African traditions conceive of that philosophy of life in their specific nuances. Beyond this question, however, there arises another one which belittles the impact of history on people's worldviews. If it is true that individuals inhabit a world which since colonization spells disaster, a world which fails them at every turn, should one assume the survival of a philosophy of life? It is possible, even likely, that an individual who lives in that world comes to reject whatever philosophy of life she may have inherited as a result of contradictory evidence. If Fanon is right that an encounter with the world shapes the behavior patterns that come to make up worldviews or cultures, it is not evident that centuries or decades of colonial oppression and its remnants will leave the previous worldviews alive.

As critical as he is of this intellectual culture, Fanon finds it useful and necessarily so. But the necessity is not a historical one, but rather a logical and psychological one. The colonial insistence on negating all that the colonized has, is, and does (cf. Mveng) requires a response that revalues these things for the wellbeing of the colonized. However, this stage must be overcome because it is the manifestation of a reactional subjectivity that refuses to let go of the otherization

[39] *Wretched*, 151.

of the colonist. This overcoming should arise by a turn to an actional move which he proposes through his emphasis of agency.

How does agency bridge the gap between history and the material life?[40] By focusing on individual experience in the conception of culture, history becomes a lived reality in the present. No need therefore to look to ages past. The revaluation of history becomes the same thing as the revaluation of the agent. Here the material life takes precedence over the symbolic, without denigrating the latter. Whereas the intellectuals seek the dignity of the colonized through symbolic means, Fanon insists on real material needs in the present such as food, shelter, and education.[41] Because colonialism cannot satisfy these needs, the motivation for struggle towards the demise of colonization is for the individuals to provide for themselves via the nation. Thus, to attain a dignified material condition, according to Fanon, "the muscle had to replace the concept."[42] The concept refers to the symbolic interest of the intellectuals whereas the muscle recalls Fanon's interest in motor behavior as part of his conception of culture. The replacement is not one that discounts the concept, but one that notices that the worldviews of the people are the result of something deeper, of "a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal."[43] And the replacement suggests that the symbolic should be employed in the service of the material. It is in this light that Fanon praises poetry that calls the people's agency into struggle.[44] The traditional

[40] I translate "réel" as "material." Chevalier's translation uses "present" instead, pointing out a temporal distinction between past and present which is important in Fanon's analysis. What I find more important is the way Fanon speaks of the present in relation to that past, emphasizing practical necessities for bodily life: "Hence once again, no need to waste time repeating 'Better to go hungry with dignity than to eat one's fill in slavey.' On the contrary we must persuade ourselves that colonialism is incapable of procuring for colonized peoples the material conditions likely to make them forget their quest for dignity." *Wretched*, 147

[41] "I concede the fact that the actual existence of an Aztec civilization has done little to change the diet of today's Mexican peasant. I concede that whatever proof there is of a once mighty Songhai civilization does not change the fact that the Songhais today are undernourished, illiterate, abandoned to the skies and water, with a blank mind and glazed eyes." *Wretched*, 148.

[42] Ibid., 157.

[43] Ibid., 160.

[44] Ibid., 162-167.

view of culture, like the one proposed by Mveng, is a deteriorated version or a residue of the real culture which is to be found in the agency of the people. To focus on the former at the expense of the latter is to betray the people.[45]

And now, I believe, it becomes clear why Fanon conceives the struggle as the highest manifestation of culture. I proposed above two different ways to interpret Fanon's view of culture, in relation to what the claiming of national territory does. The first view is that the nation is a condition for the reactivation of culture which will come in its wake. The second is that anticolonial struggle itself is culture in action. Although both views can be supported by the text, I argue that the second is more in line with Fanon's definition of culture as well as his analysis of what happens to culture in the context of colonial domination. The definition emphasizes individual experience understood in terms of agency (mental and motor behavior). Colonial domination affects that agency in a way that requires a sense of fixity and a relegation of any vibrant cultural life into the private sphere. This clandestinity halts political life that is played out in the public. The struggle for liberation, in its very manifestation, undoes the clandestinity and the fixity of agency. By fighting for the liberation of national territory, the colonized arise from the private life and redirect their active energy into the public arena. If the clandestine aspect of agency in the colonial context was the worst effect of colonization on culture, then struggle in its essence already makes culture most alive. The struggle is, of course, not aimless. It seeks the liberation of the national territory because colonization occupied that same territory. Fanon shows that in addition to this occupation of the land there is also the occupation of the people's deepest forms of existence. Thus, the struggle already liberates the cultural elements of that existence. In the struggle there is a reappearance of individual agency and the undoing of the

[45] Ibid.

state of inertia towards an actional type of subjectivity. Were the struggle not to achieve its professed goal to create the nation, it would still create a fundamental transformation of the colonized. Within it is the creation of a new form of human existence.

3. Lessons for the present

More than six decades after Fanon's writings, African postcolonial existence suffers from similar ills. The emphasis on similarity takes care to move away from arguments on sameness. Attention to political history forces the notice of relevant distinctions between the present moment and the eve of African national independences during which Fanon was writing. In view of the perspective of national independences, what becomes immediately apparent is the transformation of the problem of the liberation of the national territory which was central to Fanon's thinking on culture. No African nation today is considered under foreign occupation. And that is evidently no small feat for an entire continent once under the shackles of European domination. What is not evident is the implication of that fact for the problem of culture. The temptation is to conclude that the problem of culture, formulated from the perspective of national territory, is solved once and for all. If one is to maintain, as I do, that this is not the case, there are different available paths. Either to argue that the national territory was not liberated in the relevant sense or to admit the liberation of the national territory but disentangle culture from the nation. The task is made easier for us by the relevant sense of Fanon's interest in the nation. The goal of the struggle for liberation is to undo colonial, i.e., foreign domination. More than the question of foreignness which is simply an accidental element of the reality of colonization historically conceived, it is the question of domination which bears greater importance as the essence of colonization. In this sense, the success of the struggle for liberation is to be witnessed, not in the absence of foreign

domination, but in the absence of political domination tout court. It has been argued that this approach stretches colonization beyond what the reality stands for.[46] To seek the absence of all forms of political domination, the view goes, is too high a standard for anticolonial political struggle. For historical attention may require that we give enough credit to the foreignness of colonial domination in such a way that national independence becomes the endpoint of the national struggle. This is a defensible claim. But it is such a claim as requires a different formulation of the problem. My interest in this chapter is not in what marks the end of colonization once and for all. And there is a formulation of the problem of colonization that might allow the claim to stand true. Instead, what I am after and what motivates my turn to Fanon is his formulation of the problem of culture in the context of colonization. Granted, with the centrality of the problem of culture to colonization and Fanon's framing of the liberation struggle as the highest conceivable manifestation of culture, to pose the problem of culture in that context may amount to nothing less than posing the problem of colonization as such. Be that as it may, the conception of culture at issue, in its emphasis of agency requires a different way of conceiving national territory and its impact on either successful decolonization or cultural wellbeing. The claim that I seek to defend, and which allows me to employ Fanon's formulation of culture as agency does not arise from the perspective of the end of all political domination. It is a more modest approach but which, in this chapter, stands on the striking similarity between Fanon's description of what happens to culture in colonization and my own analysis of what happens to agency in the context of political failure. It is in light of this fact that Fanon's proposal for what is to be done gains relevance even in a different political context.[47]

[46] See Olúfémi Táíwò, *Against Decolonization: Taking African Agency Seriously* (London: Hurst & Co, 2023).
[47] My general view extends beyond this comparison of the way the question of agency arises in Fanon and in my own context. The problem of colonial domination, even posed without reference to culture, does not find its solution

3.1. Political failure and the agony of cultural life

In chapter one, I presented the reality of migration away from the African continent as emblematic of a general existential reality which I called ecstatic living. I would like to explore this reality in terms of culture as agency so as to show the relevant similarities with Fanon's analysis of culture under colonization. This exploration starts from the cause of the problem which I locate in the reality of political failure. I discuss the similarities along the axes of inertia and clandestinity.

3.1.1. On the genealogy of inertia

Within the tripartite complex of culture in terms of will, action, and world, the reality of political failure signals a resistance of the world to the agency of those who inhabit it. Since it is the political rather than the natural world at issue, the resistance of that world demands a conception of agency in a way that privileges some human perspectives over others, as part of the essence of the chosen system of political organization. The reality is that political failure is the result of the efficacy of the agency of some that shapes the world against the wellbeing of others who inhabit the same political space. In Fanon's colonial context the division was between the colonized natives and the foreign colonists. In our context it is between the rulers and the ruled. In thinking about the difference between the rulers and the ruled, there is an obvious fact of numerical difference since the few rule over the many. And from that perspective, political failure becomes a problem of majority vs. minority, with the assumption that a well-functioning political system should at least ensure the wellbeing of the majority. As a general claim, this seems perfectly reasonable as a necessary even if not sufficient condition of a good political community. Rather

if it is replaced by political failure of the kind witnessed in the contemporary African context. But in this chapter, it suffices to argue from the perspective of comparison rather than continuation.

than a problem of a tyranny of the few over the many, what is central to political failure is a form of delinquency, understood as a serious falling short of the requirements of political life. A democratic conception of political rule, perhaps more than in any other conception of the same, requires a privileging of the perspective of the ruled over that of the rulers. And given that most, if not all, postcolonial African nations adopted the democratic form of governance (even in its socialist form, whose privileging of the wellbeing of the ruled is arguably greater), a delinquency that reverses the structure of privilege is one that attacks the very essence of political life. At the level of description of structures, political failure marks the death of political life in a democratic sense.

For those who inhabit the political space of concern, the recognition of the delinquency of the state is not merely a conceptual recognition, but one that affects cultural experience. Cultural life goes well through a harmonious relation between will, action, and the world. Even as I conceive this picture of cultural experience primarily from the perspective of the individual, there is room, given the democratic perspective, to allow a conception of a collective sense of will and action. In this perspective it is understood that the people's will decides the outcome of political deliberations. Elections, as the prime example of the deliberations, should ideally respect the voices of the voters for deciding elected officials as rulers. The continued reality of autocratic rule even under the guise of democratic processes runs counter to that ideal expectation. And this failure is not simply one that denies proper representation. It is, in other words, not the autocratic form of governance that is the heart of the issue, even if that itself would be a deep political problem. It is rather the reality of a misery even in economic and social arenas that creates an even deeper existential problem. If the wellbeing of the people is what is to be privileged, one can imagine a benevolent autocracy that comes close to fulfilling the

requirements of that wellbeing. Indeed, the provision for material needs such as good education, good shelter, good nutrition, and good health are not the sole purview of well-functioning democracies. In the reality of African postcolonial life, the material life is one of undeniable misery for the many. The misery is heightened by the people's recognition that the issue lies in the hands of the rulers and the inefficacy of the available processes that are provided for changing the rule, i.e., through voting and the resulting political representation.

With the centrality of agency to cultural experience, the experience of a continuously resistant world transforms how individuals conceive of action and the relevance of their will to the world. The overarching will is one that reaches for wellbeing everywhere and in everything. This is not unique to the current context, but a general truth of human existence. When the imposition of that will on the world through action fails repeatedly, there is a devaluation of both will and action as they relate to that particular world. A deep sense of inertia arises from an apparently irresolvable collision between individuals and their world. In a world that is resistant to change, those who inhabit it give up any attempts to change it. As counterproductive as that may sound, it is a logical response from the perspective of cultural experience. This understanding is aided by Fanon's conception of culture as behavioral patterns that arise in response to an encounter with the world. Just as a well-functioning agency learns to recognize the world's response to it and stores that in patterns for easy retrieval, in the same way, a resistant world forces agency to learn to try other forms of action. Except that in this context there seems to be no action that would elicit the world's response in the desired direction. The giving up is therefore an arrestation of agency, as a recognition that it has no ability to change that world. The tragedy is consumed in the recognition that this world is not just any world but the very world in which one is supposed to make one's life. This is an issue of thwarted will but

also of the lack of possibility. In the first instance, assuming a world in which individuals are free to move and live wherever they please, it is reasonable for such individuals to not harbor any interest in movement. The fact of growing up in a particular country surrounded by specific traditions and geographies can develop a fondness for particular locations in which to make one's life. In this sense, the refusal of that world to admit the possibility for one to satiate that fondness is tragic, especially when that refusal is not to a few individuals but to the majority of the inhabitants of a particular location. In the second instance, the reality of contemporary life and the materiality of national borders means that there is no such easy option for movement. And this is where the issue of possibility comes in. Being denied possibility to make one's life where one finds oneself and, in addition, be forced by circumstances to remain in that space results in a state of imprisonment which constantly calls for resolution but finds none. This is the crux of the state of inertia.

3.1.2. On ecstatic clandestinity

It is at this stage that the desire for movement manifests in the reality of migration. What it informs us about inertia is that it is not the absence of movement or of an interest in it. It is rather a specific recognition, in relation to a specific world, that action has no efficacy to bring about desired wellbeing. In reaction to this fact, individuals will desire to leave that world behind and go elsewhere. Against continuous political failure, that desire to leave becomes a mark of what it means to inhabit that world. And the form of inhabitation becomes one of a negative character. One inhabits this world only in the sense that one is committed to leaving that world behind. Paradoxically that world is inhabitable exactly in the measure in which it is uninhabitable. This form of inhabitation is what founds the reality of what I have called ecstatic living. A form of

living whose energy for life comes from and is directed towards the possibility of leaving one's current place of living. I mentioned that the possibility of movement is made uneasy by restrictive global political structures that create a state of imprisonment. However, ecstatic living implies also that most, if not all, who are able to leave do so. The fact that some leave reveals that the state of imprisonment is not total. But the fact that most who desire to leave cannot solidifies the state of imprisonment. And those who harbor this desire in this existential condition includes everyone subject to the two forms of violence I argued are foundational to the contemporary African postcolonial life, namely political failure coupled by the allure of global impossible promises. The impossibility of the promises of livable life elsewhere lies in the fact that, given global political structures once again, not all who attempt to leave their misery are able to attain that livable life touted by images of obscene wealth elsewhere. In addition to this, the perilous journey that results in literal death for many emphasizes the tragedy of movement, both in its impossibility (for those unable to leave) and also in its possibility (for those able).

In relation to political life on the ground, migration and ecstatic living manifest a form of clandestinity similar to the one Fanon notices in the colonial context. In the colonial context the state of clandestinity is a direct result of a sense of defeat and the reality of continuous violence, and it manifests in a disappearance of the agent from the public sphere. In our context, the reality of defeat is accounted for by political failure at the level of description. The violence at issue appears at multiple locations. There is a constitutive violence in the functioning of agency as well as in the overall cultural experience. It is the violence of the misery that refuses transformation. There is also literal physical violence or the threat of it that maintains autocratic governments. The killing of protestors, the disappearance of political opponents, the maintenance of a state of terror are clear examples of this.

The case of protests is particularly insightful as relates to the retreat from public into private life. The reality of protest is a manifestation of clear will that is translated into action and revolts against a specific aspect of the world. The employment of physical violence such as in the shooting of protestors gives a very clear message. The state demands the agents leave the public space. And the punishment for disobedience leads to the agents' demise. In reaction to this violence and terror, one can observe a protest dying out. And the process of that dying out is one that plays on the distinction between public and private space. Immediately, the protestors will leave the streets and return to their homes or hide in other people's. This move from the public into the private is present beyond the space of protest. Under the reign of terror, it is common for people to keep their opinions of the ruling powers to themselves or express them under the assurance of confidentiality among friends or family. We notice here the privileging of the private space of family and friendship for the full expression of people's agency and their discontents as agents. It has also been argued that the religiosity noticed in many postcolonial African countries satiates the people's need for an outlet of energies they cannot express politically.[48] All this points to a progressive clandestinity of agency as a result of political failure. The reality of migration is the highest manifestation of this clandestinity. Within the imagined or real success of migration, the agent is not simply removing their agency from interaction with the world they live in. She removes herself altogether. This migratory removal may not appear as directly related to a private space. For whereas the other forms of clandestinity manifest a certain move from outside within, migration seems to operate differently from within to an outside. But the direction of this movement itself is not of importance. They key element is what is considered the public space of political life in the world at issue. In this sense, running away

[48] Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié* (Paris : La Découverte, 2016), 45.

from the misery of one country in the hope of fortune in another removes the runner from the public political life of the country of origin. Political inertia coupled with this clandestinity necessarily arrests political life.

3.2. Towards an agentive response to political failure

The problem of political failure as formulated in this chapter suggests two responses: to inertia a reactivation of agency and to clandestinity a reappearance into the public space.

The reactivation of agency within the experience of defeat is a difficult task. In the claim "there is nothing we can do about this" must be heard and confirmed the validity of an attentive human experience. One that is not merely disinterested but one that speaks out of exhaustion after hitting a wall over and over and over again. From this exhaustion one recognizes a strong will that demands change even in circumstances that refuse the possibility of the desired change. The arrestation of agency therefore does not bear a mark of a shirking of individual or collective responsibility. In proclaiming defeat, one announces that one has done all that one can in the fight against the opponent. Because agency is still alive, even in fragmentary forms, the claim of defeat is not one of total annihilation. On a battlefield, declaring defeat is also to mark a threshold as a way of saving the remaining fragments of agency and life against annihilation. The requirements of political responsibility in this context admit a reasonable threshold in annihilation, which the agents reasonably decide not to cross. That decision is not merely theoretical but agonistic. It faces violence, witnesses it acted upon the self or others. Consider the case of protests and the retreat of agency into inertia. A protester on the streets witnesses bullets flying over their head, hitting the fellow protester whose hands she holds. Her decision to seek shelter, tend to the wounded, and remove herself from the protests arises not merely as a measure

of her unwillingness to fight and face the violence but also as a judgment about the world. It is the realization that as far as one can tell, the degree of violence or the threat of it surpasses the available power of agency that seeks to transforms the situation. The reactivation of agency thus must consider at least two aspects: a reimagination of the situation and an insistence to carry agency even into and beyond the threshold of its very annihilation. I suggest a method for the former in what I will call transfigurative imagination and the latter in self-sacrifice. Transfigurative imagination allows a different way of seeing the world. Its aim is to turn *ecstatic experience*, or what once exceeded the agent's conceptual and actional abilities, into *object experience* which the agent can think and transform. Self-sacrifice more crudely calls agents into a willingness to die in order to live. It is only this willingness, as a violence to the self, which can rival the continuous violence at the heart of political failure. I explore these two considerations in later chapters.

The transformation of clandestinity demands a reappearance of political agents back into the space of politics, in the public. Because the clandestinity is a sheltering away from the violence or the threat of it, its transformation necessitates a neutralization of the violence. That neutralization is one that will take place through the working of transfigurative imagination and self-sacrifice. Following Fanon, struggle is the form of the reappearance. Where there was once an impossibility of political action, struggle incorporates the aliveness of real material political action. The emphasis of the struggle signals the importance of fighting beyond an assumption of victory, as was also the case for Fanon. This consideration makes space for the reality of self-sacrifice which not only does not assume victory but stands ready for annihilation. In this attitude lies an elevation of agency above the mere survival of a life in fragments. In place of fragments the reappearance creates a cohesion of the individual in their full human life that demands

freedom or nothing. There also comes a new cohesion between individuals towards a revival of the collective. The privatization of agency, in its flight into the spaces of friendship, family, and spirituality, disintegrates a sense of an explicit political community. Ecstatic living bears a progressive hyper-individualization of life in which each person is on their own, or in the corner of their small private circle. The reappearance into the public space therefore moves the individual back into the company of others. A protest is a prime example of how this cohesion is born among individuals who often do not know one another but become unified against a unified enemy on the field of battle that the protest constitutes. I am not suggesting the protest as the only form of such reappearance, but as a form that brings most into view the working of clandestinity and the possibility of its undoing. I suggest protest as a form that holds the logical response to political inertia.

4. On the significance of the perspective of agency

Having conceived political failure in terms of defeat, the turn to agency in the form of protest is inevitable. The origin of political failure is in the multiple violences that create the situation of helplessness noticeable in the African postcolonial life. The focus on the violences expresses a value judgment for anyone interested in locating blame for the tragedy at issue. We will have the culprits on the one hand and the victims of the other. The delinquent rulers on the one hand and the abandoned citizens on the other. Moreover, my insistence on the continuation of a colonial form of domination in the contemporary reality could appear even worse as a displacing of due blame in local politics towards the maintenance of a foreign enemy. To be certain, the intricate nature of global politics and the tangled relations between former colonies and former colonizers legitimizes the pointing of a finger at the colonial enemy that never left. Against all this, the turn

to agency lulls anyone worried about an exaggerated externalization of responsibility. Whoever the culprits are, it is up to the people to reclaim their dignity through a reactivated agency, even as that might require courage of an almost foolhardy nature—in a protest form that crosses the threshold of annihilation through self-sacrifice. The move to agency, therefore, highlights potential for transformation within the suffocating tragedy of defeat.

The thought of agency in terms of culture, however, is not so inevitable and, in fact, can resemble an unnecessary detour. The turn to culture is not a conceptual necessity. One can make sense of the concept of agency and its connection to defeat without reference to culture. However, the exploration of agency in terms of culture provides existential illuminations. First, it emphasizes various ways in which agency is lived both at an individual and collective level with an emphasis on the former. Second, it diagnoses, thanks to the Fanonian interest, the workings of that lived agency when it is stifled by various forms of domination. Third, the conception of culture in terms of agency allows a response to ongoing and seemingly endless debates about the loss and retrieval of culture in the postcolony. The move to culture is therefore a strategy that provides needed clarifications in order to leave culture behind.

At the risk of placing too much potential in the agency of the defeated, it is important to not lose sight of what causes the defeat in the first place. The repetition of political failure which sometimes clothes it with an eternal quality is no small matter. The defeated do not proclaim defeat out of pure will, but out of a certain fatigue of the will. To pose actions onto a world that resists that will is exhausting. One must keep in mind, therefore, that the potential in the return to agency must stay vigilant of the reality of exhaustion even in the attempt to awaken active life out of its acquired clandestinity. That is the heart of the issue for transfigurative imagination and self-sacrifice to tackle.

THREE | TRANSFIGURATIVE IMAGINATION

This chapter develops a conception of the imagination as a way to open up new ways of seeing reality. I have, in the previous two chapters, gestured at imagination as a key faculty both in terms of what goes wrong within political failure and in light of the appropriate ways to respond to the problem. I would like now to focus on this faculty in detail.

I gather my thoughts around one question: How are we going to do? Taken from daily life in various African locales, it is a question which is essentially the cornerstone of this whole project. Indeed, the very problem of political failure arises from the difficulty to answer this question. Inertia in that context is an expression of the absence of efficacious ways of acting against the situation. And ecstatic living is an attempt at projecting oneself into an alternative external space in which action can regain its efficacy.

How are we going to do? In the midst of the excess of political failure, in the repetition of that failure that leaves us helpless, how are we again going to do? I argue that this is at the core an impossible question, to mean a question which the speakers repeatedly fail to answer. It is not that the question is altogether unanswerable. Rather, the unanswerability is an internal feature of the cultural situation. Answering the question is not my goal in this chapter. Instead, I seek to develop a mechanism which might lead us into acceptable answers to the question. I show what the question reveals, i.e., trauma in meaningful living, and then argue for various ways of dealing with that. I develop a view of what I call transfigurative imagination as a mode through which we (the speakers and hearers of this question) can be led to a point where we can answer the question in a meaningful albeit incomplete manner. How does one get a mute people to speak?

And who is such a "one" to give us the words? As this muteness is also an expression of inertia, a form of silence of action, this is also to ask how does a static people regain an ability to move?

As one goes through these reflections, it is important to keep in mind that the object of the present writing is a specific cultural situation—in the sense of culture as agency developed in the previous chapter. In this manner the impossibility to answer such a simple question as "how are we going to do?" will lose its prima facie strangeness. And the collective unconscious will appear as a built-in cultural mechanism of inheritance which in this case demands a resetting so that we might move through and beyond the question. Within the cultural situation, the repetition of the question "how are we going to do?" is the manifestation of an acquired response to the world and our inability to answer it is a failed attempt at rethinking agency in a manner which makes our lives meaningful within political failure (I return to agency in chapter four).

Since I am among the inheritors of this cultural situation, my writing here is, in a sense, a practice in written form of the kind of transfigurative imagination I seek to conceive. From this fact, the possibility to answer the impossible question and thereby to regain a sense of meaningfulness, is not a given. What I am offering here can be read as a questioning of the question. Might it be possible to answer the question? Or perhaps might it be possible to move away from this question via a process of dissolution to make space for other questions? This is to ask whether it might be possible to live otherwise. My answer is a tentative yes. Tentative because the question is such that one cannot know for certain that it is answerable until it is. Tentative also because I write within a place of recognition that the ability to live our lives otherwise depends on a collective effort to which this writing is merely one individual's conceptual contribution.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: In section 1 I explore the need for healing of the trauma which the impossible question expresses. This is the main goal of the writing, i.e., to think ourselves out of the trauma expressed in the repetition. It is a therapeutic aim in the sense of seeking new ways of thinking that are amenable to living well. I return to the question in Section 2 to reveal its implication for meaning making and becoming. While it is in many ways an expression of the trauma and of an essential stuckness, I also show ways in which it reveals a form of sociality and a dedication to the therapeutic goal. Section 3 gives substance to the idea of the collective unconscious at the heart of the impossibility of the question. The work in that section is to think of the idea of the collective unconscious in a manner in which it can be amenable to change and therefore to our ability to answer the question. Section 4 theorizes the concept of transfigurative imagination in relation to adjacent notions, and Section 5 argues for this imagination's ability to help us articulate answers to the question through its playful response to the collective unconscious.

1. Our Need for Healing

Writing on the deplorable political condition of his country, Gabonese parliamentarian Séraphin Akure-Davain recently expressed an urgent need for what he calls a "mass psychotherapy."[1] A medical doctor by training, Akure-Davain wrote a searing diagnosis of the country in the form of an ailing political body with specific symptoms requiring specific treatments. The aim of the suggested psychotherapy, according to Akure-Davain, is to pull the country "out of the torpor and stagnation in which it is plunged,"[2] as a result of past political failures. This major symptom

[1] Séraphin Akure-Davain, *Le Gabon est malade : Diagnostic et Traitement* (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2023), 104. Translations are mine.
[2] Akure-Davain, 104.

which is manifest in an interconnectedness of inertia—or the people's political inactivity—and its characteristic immobility marks a certain defeatism in the "collective unconscious."[3] The resignation is expressed for example in a popular phrase "On va encore faire comment?" (How are we again going to do?) which announces a question to which the speaker expects no answer. I return to the question in the next section. Akure-Davain's proposal is for the recognition that there are indeed answers to this seemingly unanswerable question. Answers the arrival at which will require a process of mental restructuring, so as to reveal what often lies unavailable to the people's articulated conscious awareness.

Although I am not as confident as Akure-Davain on the availability of answers to the question, I find the call for therapy to be a worthwhile project. Indeed, the point of therapy is to make way for new ways of seeing reality towards a betterment in the manner in which we live. That, it seems to me, is a process which the condition of political failure welcomes, insofar as it manifests a failure in meaning making (i.e., seeing the world through concepts) and in living well.

In his review of the book which he reads as a "medical sociology of the body politic,"[4] Joseph Tonda returns on the relation between the two essential parts of this body, namely the people and their leaders. Tonda emphasizes that this illness of the body politic stems first and foremost in the illness of its leadership. A leadership which is experienced by the people as absent, a leadership "whose agenda is beyond the concerns of the '*social body*', i.e. the people."[5] The result of this dissociation or absence, as Akure-Davain remarks, is the formation of a perspective on the world that is not conducive to the possibility of change in the political life. It

[3] Akure-Davain, 105.
[4] Joseph Tonda, « A propos du livre de Séraphin Akure-Davain, » *Gabon Media Time*, November 8, 2023, https://gabonmediatime.com/joseph-tonda-a-propos-du-livre-de-seraphin-akure-davain/ Translation mine.
[5] Joseph Tonda, « A propos du livre de Séraphin Akure-Davain. »

is a perspective on the meaning of political life and its implication for action, individual and collective. The repetition of failure accustoms the people to a seeming impossibility of change, a habit which ensures the continued repetition of the failures. From the perspective of defeat occasioned by the repetition of failure, political life is experienced as an excess. As exceeding our ability to process it meaningfully and to engage with it adequately in our active life. This is both an intellectual and a practical problem, intellectual in its implications for meaning making, practical in terms of its relevance for action. The therapy Akure-Davain has in mind calls for a resolution of the intellectual problem of meaning making. It is a form of re-education of the political sensibility of the people so as to "prepare them to the freedom to choose their leaders and teach them to say 'no' when reason and good sense demand it."[6] From this we can read the ultimate aim of this procedure as one of behavioral change, which gives purpose to the intellectual project of therapy.

The therapy has two professed goals. It must help the people "understand and integrate the fact that a change of political regimes is possible."[7] The point gains critical weight when seen through the political context of Gabon whose leadership was, since its independence and until recently, led by the Bongo family dynasty, with father then son as heads of state. The work of imagining possibility proceeds in contrast with this reality of a continuity of the self-same. Not only is the therapy to allow the people to conceive the possibility of change, but it must also lead the people to prepare and plan for said change. The therapy addresses the conception of

[6] Akure-Davain, *Le Gabon est malade*, 105. Note that, in focusing on the ability of the people to choose their leaders, Akure-Davain imagines political life out of failure in a representative democratic form. While I do not question this view here, I do not think it is the only or the main response to political failure. The focus on representative democracy, while it may signal a specific form of political organization, is also an expression of a form of politics in which the agency of the people matters. It is this point which is essential and which I carry throughout the project. Without the mattering of agency, we cannot even begin thinking up new forms of political organization.
[7] Akure-Davain, 104.

possibility and its translation into a political project. And, since the therapy targets a problem whose major symptoms is a faulty way of speaking, its work must proceed by making new speech possible. Only then can we know that the therapy has done its work.

Following a similar path as Akure-Davain, this chapter conceives a form of imagination which I call transfigurative imagination. It is a form of imagination which seeks to allow a conception of possibility in spaces where change often seems an impossibility. Transfigurative imagination takes the excess of political tragedy as its object. I trace the fundamental failure of the project of meaning making, and of imagination, to an overwhelming sense brought on by the political condition that is so stifling that it, on its own, leaves no room for the work of conceiving alternatives. The following reflections show the potential of this form of imagination to lead from an ecstatic experience in which the individual reacts to excess via a propulsion of self away from the excess (i.e., via ecstatic living) to an object experience in which the individual manages to face their tragic experience and process it for the sake of transformation. This transformation, I argue, occurs through narrative tactics towards the formation of a new political feeling which I call articulate indignation. It is a feeling in which the individuals are able to express their discontents with a previously unavailable clarity alongside a continued refusal of submission to the status quo at the heart of current defeatism. The feeling is an epiphenomenon of the work of a renewed imaginative capacity beyond usual ways of being stuck. Through the articulation of familiar experience in new ways, new speech is made available. Armed with this speech, we are then able to talk about our political condition in a way which portends the possibility of efficacious action.

The chapter engages mainly with writings in psychoanalysis and moral imagination, united by a shared concern for human flourishing. The common thread will be the formation of

individual and collective consciousness in relation to lived reality towards transformative visions of human wellbeing. This focus demands that we pay attention to the lived situations of concern to notice whether the project of human flourishing is going well and, when it is not, to envisage means towards a resetting of that project onto the right course. The problem in our lived condition, as expressed above through the words of Akure-Davain, is unequivocally one which arises in an interplay between an individual's experience (alone or as part of a collective) and the wellbeing of his mental or psychic life. This is what is suggested by the reference to collective consciousness. I take it to be true, in conversation with psychoanalysis, that there are such experiences that not only maim our daily living, but also impair our psychic ability to make sense of them such that we are stuck in a repetition of these experiences. This is all the more so in a political context where our agency is of especial salience in the changing or maintaining of our lived conditions. Psychoanalytic tools can therefore be useful for our context. I take it to be true also, in conversation with literature on moral imagination, that there are times in which we fail to make sense of our lives and actions, and that we can train our moral sight to perceive ongoing social realities differently. I follow these lessons in an elaboration of the possibility for a re-creation of meaning and the formation of new sensibilities to reality in the contemporary African context.

Despite its overtly clinical language, one does not need to read Akure-Davain's suggestion of mass psychotherapy in that technical sense in order to grasp the seriousness of the call and the political problem it seeks to remedy. A literally clinical form of the therapy has its place and I suppose that it can, if feasible, do wonders in the context at issue. However, it will be understood that my reflections here follow no such clinical approach, not least because the reflections are located in philosophy rather than in any clinical discipline. In fact, Akure-

Davain's own reading of his proposal is more political than clinical, suggesting that the work of the mass psychotherapy is to be heralded by political elites and leaders of opinion. Thus, what appeared at first as a strictly clinical move is brought closer to what social movement theory calls consciousness raising. Simply put, the call is a recognition of a need for change in common ways of thinking and a mission for thinkers (as poets, narrative workers, militants[8]) to conceive new ways of perceiving reality that are more amenable to social transformation in the group of concern.

And despite its specific focus on Gabon, the case of Gabon is not unique. As such, I refer to Akure-Davain's words as an example of what I take to be true of the reality of political failure which, as I have argued in previous chapters, is at the heart of contemporary political experience across Africa. One could use the same expressions to describe political experience in other African locations where political failure is a general reality. It is with a view to that general context that I conceive of transfigurative imagination.

2. How are we going to do?

Allow me to dive into the major symptom which Akure-Davain's proposed therapy seeks to remedy: the question "how are we going to do?" Turning to the symptom allows a proper way to diagnose the problem and to think of the desiderata for an efficacious therapeutic process. If there is need for remedy, it is because there is something bad about what the question expresses. The badness is not really in asking the question since it is a perfectly healthy question to ask towards living and acting. The badness is rather in our being stuck in the question. The repetition

[8] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba speaks of the militant as one whose work is "to make a public statement after investigation for debates in various sites of politics. The militant clarifies rather than confuses issues." Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in Africa," *Quest: An International African Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 6, no. 1 (June 1992), 29-42.

signals various things, among which an expression of the importance of the question in relation to our conception of life, a manifestation of trauma as a break in the continuity of life, and a relentless attempt at answering the question and thereby healing from the trauma. In our stuckness, we find ourselves unable to answer a question which we recognize is essential to our very ability to go on living. I think of what is wrong about this stuckness around three main axes: sociality, wellbeing, and imagination.

On va faire comment? So, the question goes. It is a call of distress. A call which gets no answer but its own echo. *On va faire comment?* In normal circumstances, we expect a question to function as a door or a bridge to something beyond it. As we answer a question, we enter into the world to which it opens, we cross over to the other side of conversation and meaning. Not so here. *On va encore faire comment?* We are stuck in the question. What can we mean in a repetition of a question with no answer? Quite a lot, it appears.

2.1. A sociality of defeat

A starting point is to notice the question as expressing a form of sociality with undesirable outcomes.

Friends meet in the street, throw their arms in the air in the form of a greeting and as an expression of shared defeat. Defeat as they learn about the eternal president's new attempts at silencing political opposition.[9] Defeat because we live in hellish conditions in countries with

[9] Immediately on my mind is a recent news report on Equatorial Guinea where a prominent member of the opposition was threatened by the president and his vice president son (a family dynasty in power for over forty-five years) through blackmailing and assassination attempts. « Chantage, sextape et menaces: entre les Obiang et Juan Carlos Ondo Angue, la guerre est déclarée. » *Jeune Afrique*, April 8, 2024, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1554619/politique/chantage-sextape-et-menaces-entre-les-obiang-et-juan-carlos-ondo-angue-la-guerre-est-declaree/

undeniable potential for paradisiac life.[10] But what is this sociality founded on an impossible question?

In her book *Melancholia Africana*, Nathalie Etoke argues that the question *On va faire comment?* "emphasize[s] possible modes of action…but calls for no response on the level of action."[11] In asking, "how are we going to do?" the speaker asks for something like a plan of action. She points to the reality at issue and requests a communal response to the reality. But the speaker knows that those of her community who hear the question will respond with a mere repetition of the same. Given the insistent and collective expression of the question, we must acknowledge that something on the level of community occurs in this form of communication. Those who utter the question recognize the communal nature of their distress. Anyone who utters the question recognizes that she is not alone. Moreover, in asking the question together, the speakers affirm a requirement for a collective response. Each instance of asking the question is a plea for communal response, out of an understanding that the individual attempts at imagining adequate responses have failed. Thus, the requirement for collective response cohabits with an essential resignation. "In this context," as Etoke advances, "to question is to resign oneself."[12] And as such the collective becomes a community of the resigned. A community whose cohesion is partly assured by the collective consciousness of resignation. In this context, "[l]ife is replaced by survival, punctuated by the phrase which has taken root in everyday life: 'On va faire

[10] "Being a prisoner is hard enough but being a prisoner in paradise is even harder. And I assure you that Cameroon, that miniature of Africa, has all it takes to be a tropical Garden of Eden." Florian Ngimbis, "Cameroun: On va faire comment? » Jeune Afrique, May 14, 2014, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/133362/politique/cameroun-on-va-faire-comment/ Translation mine.
[11] Nathalie Etoke, *Melancholia Africana : The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition*," trans. Bill Hamlett (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 64.
[12] Etoke, *Melancholia Africana*, 64

comment?' A phrase which carries with it the resignation of an entire people in front of its shattered dream."[13]

We notice thus the sociality born of the question as one which is at once good and bad. It is good that individuals realize that they are not alone in their distress. It is good also that we reach out to others for assistance in moments when we fail as individuals to make sense of our own lives. But a community of the resigned is a stagnant community and as such a community without life, insofar as the life of a community requires its members to lead active lives through which they maintain and transform the community.

2.2. A break in the project of wellbeing

More than a call to impossible action, "how are we going to do?" is also a questioning of the people's well-being. Indeed, "how are we going to do?" is a near future form of the question "how are we doing?" which addresses collective wellbeing. The unanswerability of the question thereby also implies an uncertainty about the fate of our wellbeing in times to come. We know the tragedy our current life, but what does the future hold for us in relation to this tragedy? In asking the question we admit that we cannot know. Our political wellbeing is obviously related to our capacity for action. It is therefore expected that an uncertainty in the realm of action comes with an uncertainty in the realm of becoming as well as in the realm of meaning. This evoked link between action, becoming, and meaning is in relation not just to any action but stands on the recognition of the state of inertia which is a general impossibility of transformative action. In other words, in failing to find an answer to the question of what can be done to remedy our condition, we acknowledge that our becoming is halted, or at least remains at the mercy of

[13] Ngimbis, « Cameroun : On va faire comment? »

circumstances outside of our control. We lead passive rather than active lives. Our ability to live intelligible lives depends substantially on our ability to act in pursuit of our projects of becoming. In this light, meaning making suffers as a result of the inability to answer the question on action and becoming.

2.3. An interrupted imagination

Our failure to answer the question already points to a serious limitation of our intellectual capacities as human beings stuck in this specific question and the situation from which it arises. As a question addressing future possibilities, "On va faire comment?" pertains also to the domain of the imagination as that intellectual capacity of relevance. An imagination of what we are to do and what we are to be. The impossibility of action and of becoming is therefore one that refers to our creativity, within limits, to devise alternatives to our current lives. As commonly understood, to imagine is to bring to mind what is not present. It is, in general, no easy task.[14] To imagine is thus a struggle. The difficulty occasioned by the question of how we are going to do is thus, as a question of the imagination, not foreign to the general way we think of our capacity to imagine. It makes general sense to us as humans familiar with the work of the imagination. Still, it gains its own added measure of difficulty in the specific cultural situation. Our difficulty, in the impossible question, spells a serious interruption of the work of imagination.

It is the sort of interruption which reveals the lived experience as exceeding our current capacities to deal with it. The impossibility of the question manifests most clearly the excessive nature of the experience. This is, for the most part, an expected result of the repetition of the

[14] It is for this reason that Descartes referred to the faculty of the imagination, in opposition to thinking or intellection, as requiring an additional animi contentio, an extra exertion of the spirit or extra psychological tension. (Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Part 6, Paragraph 73.)

tragedy of political failure. The question, as a response to this reality, highlights the acuteness of the problem. In proclaiming the speakers' helplessness in the face of it, the question reveals that the experience exceeds the ability of the speakers to process it meaningfully. The unanswered question is thus a ritual of rehearsal of this excess. Perhaps in the hope that, somehow, we might chance upon an answer. Until then, asking the question is a demand that we keep it alive, and ourselves therewith. The question acts as a witness to the impossible lived condition and the impossible lives we lead in it.

2.4. Trauma and Repetition

Drawing from psychoanalytic theory we discover the question as expressing trauma, understood as a "break in life's continuity"[15] or as a "rip in the fabric of life."[16] I take these two formulations from the work of Donald Winnicott and Jonathan Lear respectively. Although these phrases are formulated in relation to childhood trauma, they hold some truth for us as we think about trauma in our context. It is an intuitive point that life is lived in such a way that those who live it expect it to go on uninterrupted, as it were. I take trauma to name the breaking down of this process. If life is a project for living well and if central to this project lies our ability to make sense of our lives, then our being stuck in the question is a traumatic event.

From this perspective of trauma, repetition gains new meanings. Indeed, trauma is usually thought to be in relation to a process of repetition, or what Freud called a compulsion to repeat, primarily as a way to master traumatic experience. I will return to the question of mastery in a discussion of play later. For now, it is important to note that the repetition of the question

[15] Donald Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 48 (1967), 369.
[16] Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 92.

"how are we going to do" is an expected reality of the question when understood as an expression of trauma. When repeated, the question is an expression of both failure and a sort of success. Imagine a situation in which every attempt to ask the question "how are we going to do" is supplied with an adequate answer. In that situation, there would be not need for repeating the question. Granted, the question could be evoked to address different situations and therefore require some kind of repetition for each situation. This is a different kind of repetition than the one at play here which recognizes the situation as unchanged in such a way that the repetition of the question addresses the same general situation. Therefore, when we ask the question "how are we going to do?" we are expressing a failure to answer the question in connection with the repetition of a familiar experience. At the same time, however, those who utter the question express a relentless attempt to surpass the threshold of the question, to pierce through their collective stuckness. The specific exertion involved is not merely in the impossibility to imagine but also in the repeated attempts to accomplish the impossible. Attempts which confirm an unshaken commitment to success. This is itself a kind of success. The commitment ensures that life does not stop altogether and in addition makes future success at answering the question possible. This is what I mean: if people were to stop asking the question, simply because they did not find an answer to it, the discontinuity of life, i.e., trauma, of that situation would be worse. Borrowing from Lear's work, we are also able to read the repetition as a "self-disruption in an already disrupted life."[17] The repetition of a question which is an expression of a traumatic experience is a repeated expression of the trauma, which is willed by the speakers of the question. It is a self-disruption therefore in a way which, if it remains in the space of repetition,

[17] Jonathan Lear, *Happiness, Death, and the Remainder of Life*, 93.

signals an impossibility at arriving at an answer, if the question is all that we repeat over and over.

What we need is a way of getting out of the repetition. A mechanism for piercing through the question so as to reveal something beyond the question itself.

2.5. Desiderata of a therapeutic process

In order to think beyond the question, what is required is first and foremost a hypothetical position of thought through which we read the question as answerable. It is this position which gives us permission to search for answers to the question.

In thinking of the impossible question and the stuckness it occasions, we adopt a perspective internal to the speaker. Describing any experience with useful clarity requires this entry into a situated point of view. It is an exercise in which we recognize the experience as a singular instance within a specific form of life. Beyond clarity, attention to the singularity provides legitimacy to the truth of this lived condition. In describing the experience with such attentiveness, we give it a certain validity within the larger context, for example in our reference to how it arises in that context. We admit, in this light, the seriousness of the question which is not a game. Akure-Davain takes it from daily conversations in Gabon, in the same way that Etoke takes it from Cameroonian experience. The question is thus an expression of a form of life, whose seriousness must, at a descriptive stage, be taken at face value. At this stage we pay attention to what people say, the political context in which they say it, and the meanings we can gather from their utterances. I have suggested above that this attention reveals, among other things, a problem for the imagination.

However, as already gleaned from Akure-Davain's call, beyond description lies the important work of therapy. The work of transfigurative imagination requires the revelation of a falsity within the reading of impossibility in our question. This is not a falsity of experience, since that is generally not questionable, but one of articulation. Here we move from the perspective of singularity to a general point of view. If we must push the work of imagination beyond the threshold expressed in the question "on va faire comment?", we are forced to concede, if the work is to have any hope of success, that the threshold is after all not final. Only after this can we begin the work of imagining alternatives. We remain unsure about the future. Our intelligibility retains its difficulty. But to keep pushing, like those who ask the impossible question, is to express the commitment to the excess not being final. The work of the imagination in this mode is essentially one of pushing against limits which, however real, are not completely insurmountable. I would like to poke holes in these limits through a discussion of the formation of collective consciousness, a more precise delineation of the work of transfigurative imagination, an exploration of the role of play, and a suggestion of the essential work of narrative. Attention to the formation of consciousness in a social setting reveals the perceived impossibility as a reality that leaves alternatives in view. The visualization as well as the reinforcement of these alternatives is made possible through processes of play in the private sphere as well as by a continued practice of narrative refashioning of shared experience.

In addition to the hypothetical position, the diagnostic attention to the symptom which is the question gives us a couple things to look for in a therapy which seeks to get us out of the question: (1) it must be such that it allows the possibility of action beyond defeat and thereby the possibility of a new form of sociality, (2) it must be able to reboot the project of living well and allow it to proceed past its previous discontinuities, and (3) it must take a form which gives new

life to our intellectual capacity for imagination. The view of transfigurative imagination which I develop here embodies these desired features, with the greatest focus on intellectual capacities out of which the other desired features come forth.

Before we develop this therapeutic mechanism, we must understand the problem further. Akure-Davain names it a problem of the collective unconscious. Making sense of this claim will create a path towards the therapeutic mechanism of transfigurative imagination.

3. The collective unconscious

The problem of our present concern is of a collective nature. To recall, this is the problem of inertia as a result of political failure. An inertia which is sometimes expressed in the question "how are we going to do?" Although our approach to address the problem might often foreground individuality, it remains a collective issue. And the collective element is what makes it a problem for political life. As Akure-Davain remarks, not only is the problem collective, but it is also one which manifests and persists in an unconscious manner. What does this mean?

I would like to explore the problem of a collective unconscious from the perspective of the question, "how are we going to do?" There are two aims to this endeavor. First, to understand what the claim means. What does it add to our conception of the problem? Second, to formulate the claim in a manner amenable to the kind of therapeutic mechanism we are in search of. This second aim, while relying on a series of writings on the collective unconscious proceeds in a manner which creatively leads us into a formulation of this claim such that it can be useful for us. That creative progression moves through writings from Carl Jung, Frantz Fanon, and Susan Babbitt, each of whom provide an additional dimension of the useful sense of the collective unconscious. Specifically, I am interested in an exploration with a view to recognizing the

processes of the formation of this kind of problem to reveal its mutability. If indeed the question "what are we going to do?" is one to which no one has an answer, at least as gleaned from a perspective internal to the way the question circulates in conversation, then there is a risk of going from this way of thinking to the view that it is altogether unanswerable. The formulation of the problem as one of a collective unconscious can, from a certain perspective, add to that sense of unchangeableness. I think Akure-Davain's reference to the collective unconscious is a nod to the possibility of a movement from the unconscious to consciousness through the work of therapy.

To think of the resignation of a people as a problem of collective unconscious itself poses problems. The view that it is a collective problem is self-evident. Its unconscious character not so much. Why should we assume that the resignation circulates in an unconscious form?

Let us return once again to the question. "How are we going to do?" Those who ask the question, as we have seen, express a sense of defeat. As such they claim that there is nothing they can do about the situation. This claim is taken to be a claim about how things are. A claim on the state of the world which at the same a claim about our life in that particular world. At this point there is nothing that requires appeal to the unconscious to make sense of what is going on. For it is perfectly reasonable that the sense of resignation be reached via a conscious process of deliberation at individual and collective levels. That is, we consciously consider political reality and our agency within it to come up with the view that there is nothing we can do. We ask the question again and again only to arrive at the same sense of impasse.

And yet, Akure-Davain charges the people with a failure to notice the possibility for change which is apparently always there. This is a charge that there is something which fails the notice of the people. It is, in other words, a claim that what we think we see is not all there is to

see. A claim which asks us to go beyond what we take to be our conscious relation to reality. To turn to the unconscious. What does this turn imply and what more can we see through it? Before I give detailed substance to what I take the collective unconscious to be in conversation with Jung, Fanon, and Babbitt, I would like to give a sense in which Akure-Davain's claim is supported by experience.

The first place in which we can locate an unconscious is in the repeated circulation of the question. The question is employed as the final speech we can utter about the situation. It is broken, interrupted speech, but it is still all we can say. If we need to say more, we can simply repeat what has already been said. That is what the perspective internal to the question shows. The idea that the question is the final speech we can utter proclaims a certain truth about the social circulation of the question and also about individual uptake of the question. If the question appears in speech as one which only calls for repetition, it becomes such a question as most people no longer seek to answer once the linguistic practice is set. However benign that might seem, and whatever the truth of our inability to answer the question, the circulation of the question in this linguistic practice implies that individuals no longer sit with the question and try to answer it for themselves. Instead, the question's unanswerability circulates as a cultural fact. (I will give more detail on the circulation of culture through Fanon below.) What we see thus far is that an unconscious element arises from the manner in which the question circulates.

But we need to say more. The unconscious aspect, seen through the fact of repetition, suggests that there is a shared interest in the linguistic practice in which the question remains an impasse. To borrow, psychoanalytic language, there must be fantasies which explain the interest in keeping the question in circulation without a related interest in answering it each time it appears in conversation. Without delving much into fantasy territory, we know from Freud that

fantasies are tools for a "correction of unsatisfying reality."[18] Conceived in this way, fantasies essentially move us away from reality in a way which fulfills our wishes which are unsatisfied by reality. How does this show up in the circulation of our question? I have argued above that the repetition of the question implies that individuals no longer sit with the question, no longer seek to answer it. Consider this: to sit with the question means that one may find an answer that calls for action, and action which may be very costly to the agent. As I will argue in chapter four, the current situation calls for an action which requires a willingness to give up one's life. That is certainly not an easy answer to welcome from our interest in being alive. It is possible, therefore, that we keep the question stuck in repetition so that we might not face the call of agency into annihilation. I do not claim that this is the reason for the repetition, but a possibility suggested by thinking with the concept of fantasy and an additional element to the unconsciousness in the question.

The idea of the collective unconsciousness does not imply that literally everyone is unable to think of the question consciously. The very possibility of getting out of the collective unconscious requires the possibility for some of us to take the lead and light the path. For Akure-Davain, such pathbreakers are political elites whose task is to lead the masses. In this chapter, and in conversation with Jonathan Lear's work, I speak of narrative workers, poets, and militants as holding the role that role of leading the way ahead of the rest of us.

And now I turn to Jung, Fanon, and Babbitt to develop a working definition of a collective unconscious for the rest of the chapter.

[18] Freud, "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 439.

3.1. A Jungian origin story

Carl Jung introduced the concept of the collective unconscious, distinct from the personal unconscious, in his essay "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious."[19] He posited that the collective unconscious is inherited rather than formed through personal experiences, serving to explain similarities in human representations of reality across cultures and time periods. Jung identified these shared representations as archetypes, universal symbols inherited by all individuals.[20] He argued that these archetypes influence behavior with a force akin to instincts,[21] remaining immutable and resistant to individual understanding or alteration through experience. However, Jung believed that psychotherapy could bring these unconscious representations into consciousness, though not necessarily to a full understanding. Instead, it enables individuals to recognize and make sense of the symbols within their consciousness. Jung saw the unconscious, including the collective unconscious, as a crucial source of the content that emerges into conscious awareness.

My interest in Jung is evidently not for the enjoyment of methodological developments in psychoanalytic practice. I refer to him for two reasons. One, the use of this concept by Akure-Davain suggests a return to the history of this term to give it proper meaning. Two, we benefit from clarifying the possible meaning in Akure-Davain's usage of the term by reference to a genealogy of that idea from Jung onward. From what is said thus far, it would be implausible to think that Akure-Davain's usage of the term is exactly what Jung had in mind. Considering

[19] Carl G. Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9, part 1: Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 42-53.
[20] Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," 43.
[21] "When a situation occurs which corresponds to a given archetype, that archetype becomes activated and a compulsiveness appears, which, like an instinctual drive, gains its way against all reason and will, or else produces a conflict of pathological dimensions, that is to say, a neurosis." Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," 48.

Jung's view that "[t]here are as many archetypes as there are typical situations in life,"[22] it remains a possibility that the resignation in the African or Gabonese political life harkens back to some ancient forms of seeing the world and reacting to it through action. Still, it seems a difficult claim to maintain, since for Jung such claims require evidence (such as the designation of specific myths) to make be sense of. In the absence of such evidence, I would like to think of the meaning in Akure-Davain's usage of the term to be a slightly different one, going away from the view of general human inheritance and coming closer to the specific social context in which the resignation arises.

3.2. A Fanonian critique

Frantz Fanon critiques the concept of the collective unconscious, particularly in its application to racialized identities such as Blackness in the context of Antillean peoples. He argues that the origin story of this reality is not a result of a universal human archetype, as posited by Jung, but rather a product of specific historical circumstances and the circulation of racializing imagery.[23] Fanon suggests that Jung's reliance on European motifs and anthropological writings overlooks the diverse historical perspectives and forces non-European stories into European frameworks. Fanon's critique challenges the notion of an immutable universal human inheritance, offering a perspective that highlights the flexibility and historical contingency of collective representations.[24] He redeploys the concept to give it a different meaning, aiming to offer a critique of Jung's Eurocentric view of collective consciousness.

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[22] Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," 48.

[23] "European civilization is characterized by the presence, at the heart of what Jung calls the collective unconscious, of an archetype: an expression of the bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the uncivilized savage, the Negro who slumbers in every white man." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 144.

[24] Even though Jung does refer to myths from places such as ancient Egypt and India, Fanon's critique can stand as addressing Jung's commitment to the empirical process in his method of proof. For example, to make sense of a

Taking up a cultural perspective, Fanon argues that the collective unconscious "is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group."[25] To bring the point home, Fanon employs a distinction between a habit and an instinct. Whereas Jung likens archetypes to instincts, Fanon argues that the collective unconscious should be thought of as a habit. The difference for him is that instincts are innate and invariable whereas habits are acquired and, it is implied, therefore variable.[26] The collective unconscious is, for Fanon, a cultural concept and the acquisition at issue occurs through culture which, as we have seen in the second chapter, is "the combination of motor and mental behaviors arising from the encounter of man with nature and with his fellow man."[27] The acquisition of the collective symbols, he argues, is no different than the acquisition of all other cultural patterns of behavior.

The view from culture opens up the idea of the collective unconscious in multiple ways. First, it brings the concept much closer to personal consciousness. The key distinction of the collective vs. personal consciousness for Jung is the fact that the archetypes cannot be traced back to personal history, for example in the manner of forgotten experiences. In Fanon's analysis of the Antillean condition, he insists that the consumption of European worldviews through books and other visual media is the source of the Antillean person's negative view of himself, not to mention the actual colonial contact with Europeans. This makes it likely that one can in some instances trace the activation of an archetype of collective consciousness to specific personal experiences. However, I think a charitable reading of Fanon's view of culture must also

dream symbol as an archetype of the collective unconscious one must be able to locate it in some myth or other story to which the dreamer can be proven to have no access prior to the dream. By making a universal claim through an empirical method, Jung opens himself up to exactly the sort of critique which Fanon makes.

[25] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 145.
[26] Variable here should be read to refer to the variability among individuals (as opposed to the Jungian universal view) but also to mutability (i.e., habits can change).
[27] Frantz Fanon, *Towards the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 32.

allow the possibility of acquisition without personal experience of a source of an archetype. That is, the transmission of behavioral patterns does not rely on each person having access to the source of the pattern. Still, this mode of acquisition maintains that the collective unconscious is not acquired through innate processes and thus must be traced back in some fashion to personal experience either through contact with a source of the archetype or the personal acquisition of already set behavioral patterns. Second, and as a result of this first point, Fanon's view opens up the possibility both to grasp the archetypes and to undo them, or at least to attempt to do so. Recalling that Jung argues that our awareness of the archetypes does not imply our fully grasping them, Fanon's historical process and his location of acquisition in personal history provides a way towards making the archetype fully intelligible. The Antillean person, even from within a position of his acquired self-hate, can be brought to recognize the source of this outlook on the world as well as its political function, namely as the exultation of whiteness and a necessary anchor for European domination. This realization is at the source of attempts to get rid of the contradiction in one's existence, some which fail spectacularly and in a neurotic manner (e.g., attempts by the Antillean person at being as white as possible and distance oneself from all that is Black) and others which have a potential for success (e.g., working to undo the specific political order so that a new world order can arise and allow new ways of being.)

In discussing Fanon, we are given a first glimpse of the possibility for therapy to do its work. It is here a work of revelation. The Antillean person can be brought to notice ways to articulate her experience in new ways, starting with a making conscious of previously unconscious behaviors. This is an important move in light of this chapter's goal. Indeed, what I seek is this exact move from the unconscious to consciousness in a way which unites experience at the collective and individual level. In Fanon's case, individual experience is made sense of

from a collective perspective as both diagnosis and prognosis. For Fanon the racialization of Black people starts the collective level and requires the transformation of collective structures for it to be dealt with.

Note that in the process by which the unconscious archetypes come into personal awareness, Fanon and Jung agree on this process being one of discovery. One discovers that the symbols in one's psyche are related to certain myths previously unknown to him or one discovers that the anti-Black symbols are founded on a specific political situation.

3.3. A perspective from feminist standpoint theory

The view of the collective unconscious I would like to attribute to Akure-Davain in view of our shared context is one which follows Fanon's two lessons contra Jung but moves away from the process of discovery. As an additional step in the right direction, I would like to think of collective experience in such a way that we do not think of the people as needing to "discover" what is hidden but as merely lacking a proper articulation of an experience to which they already have a substantial and conscious access. This is important in a political context where faulty relations of power are often part of the problem. In political failure, for example, the rulers inhabit a faulty hierarchical position insofar as they deny the agency of the people. It would be lamentable, similarly, if the poets and militants in this context were to relate to the people in a way which recreates some sort of hierarchy that does not recognize the agential and intellectual abilities of the people. As Ernest Wamba dia Wamba has argued, emancipative politics, i.e., politics which seek the liberation of the people, are only possible with the respect of the

intellectual capacities of the people.[28] To move beyond the mode of discovery, I appeal to the idea of a "social unconscious" within feminist standpoint theory.

Susan Babbitt sums up the idea of the social unconscious as recognizing "the possibility that people do acquire understanding of their situations as a result of their situatedness in those situations, that people in fact acquire and possess more understanding about the reality of their situations than they can actually make explicit."[29] This account emphasizes how the people whose perspective we adopt in thinking consciousness are situated within social structures. From a feminist point of view, the perspective or greatest importance is that of women, but the conception of the idea of a standpoint allows a possibility to study forms of consciousness that arise in relation to other social groups. To pay attention to that situatedness allows the notice of any privileged or limited access to certain realities. It may turn out that people know more or know less about a reality because of where they are situated. A career politician can know things the market woman doesn't know and vice versa, even as they inhabit the same society. This can be true even as the two perspectives are about the same thing, which is the importance of the standpoint in emphasizing the differentiation of the kinds of knowledge afforded by various standpoints. The implications of a drought for the politician might be understood in terms of numbers and projections for government budgets and for the market woman be experienced in the hiking of food prices or the complaints of the market goers as they struggle to make ends meet. Additionally, Babbitt's view of the social unconscious, drawing from the possibility of privilege and differentiation in our ways of knowing, argues that we can understand a situation more than we can intelligibly express it to others. This is a specific limitation, one which is

[28] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in African Politics," *Quest: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 1 (June 1992), 29-42.
[29] Susan E. Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 35.

different from what is suggested in the process of discovery in Jung and Fanon. Instead of discovery, what we have here is a need for a process of articulation, in the normal sense of the word, namely a detailed and effective expression of some meaning for oneself or for communication with others.

3.4. Lessons to carry us forward

Taking stock of these lessons on the collective consciousness, I would like to highlight certain features of the concept to retain for a conception that is apt for the carrying of the aims of transfigurative imagination. By collective unconscious I will mean an inarticulate understanding of reality shared through behavioral patterns across individuals which goes beyond what most individuals can currently grasp. This conception combines aspects of Jung, Fanon, and Babbitt. I take from Jung the difficulty to grasp contents of the collective unconscious. This is a modification from the idea of inability to fully grasp archetypes, with an addition of a temporal dimension to point to the possibility of a future grasp on the reality. With Babbitt I maintain that this unconscious should be thought as a form of inarticulate understanding.[30] In the specific context at issue, honest attention forces on one the recognition that the people, even as they ask questions which they are unable to answer, know what is essential in the political situation and its repeated state of failure—practices towards an articulation of this reality can bring this fact more to light and provide a way out of the impossible question. Moreover, part of what the people know is their own value-based judgments about the reality: it is deeply undesirable and

[30] This is related to what Alexis Shotley calls "implicit understanding." Alexis Shotley, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2011). In speaking of inarticulate understanding, I am not speaking in a particularly technical sense. All I mean by the phrase is the fact that people have access to essential features of their political condition by the mere fact that it is their experience, even when they cannot spell that access out.

their question is a form of heartfelt complaint that is repeated over and over. The possibility of articulation drawn from Babbitt's work should allow the explicit expression of this state of complaint or indignation. For this reason, I maintain that the end goal is a feeling of articulate indignation.[31] Fanon's view that the collective unconscious is a product of cultural acquisition provides the essential feature of behavioral patterns, with the recognition of Fanon's ample usage of the term "behavior," which includes both mental and motor elements. The mental element is my current focus. With this view of the social unconscious, the therapy which Akure-Davain proposes receives a specific mission: articulation. This mission of articulation recognizes that the problem at issue, i.e. excess, is a problem of intelligibility. It is an intelligibility of a specific kind, one of articulation. Articulation admits that the excess is experienced in such a way that it communicates something to those who experience it. But it is a communication that cannot be articulated because it exceeds our current abilities for this work of explicitation. The relation between articulation and excess as inarticulate is similar to a relation between the unconscious and consciousness. Indeed, consciousness can be defined as reportable knowledge.[32] Articulation is primarily the ability to put words onto experience[33], but it is not just that. It is about the ability to break the overall experience down to its various components so as to *work with* them appropriately.[34] Whereas excess creates an ecstatic relation to experience, i.e., the inability to

[31] The phrase brings together both epistemological and moral components: the work of articulation is properly epistemological, aiming at grasping things better and expressing them more explicitly and the added value of indignation recognizes that this explicitation is bound up with an explicitation of our moral view of the world as a pointing towards the requirement for transformation.

[32] David R. Shanks & Ben R. Newell, "The Primacy of Conscious Decision Making," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 37, no. 1, 45-61.

[33] A process similar to the Freudian relation between "thing presentation" and "word presentation" in the process by which an analysand attains an ability to express certain experiences through speech, in a way they could not before. See Robert A. Paul, *Our Two-Track Minds: Rehabilitating Freud of Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021)

[34] My usage of the term articulation here differs from its meaning within cultural studies and post-Marxist writings. If pushed further, affinities to this literature might appear through a shared interest in clarity and the relation between human experience of reality and the existing social structures. It should be noted that I am less interested in discourse or the connections between various nodes of oppression in a social structure (a focus of this other

make meaning throws one out of that excess with an impossibility to engage which bears tragic political consequences,[35] articulate indignation leads to what I might call object experience—the ability to make meaning through articulation provides a possibility for engagement with the experience in a way that allows potential for mastery. The idea of working with emphasizes the fact that there is a specific goal in mind in the light of which one should order one's transformative energies. As I argue below, transfigurative imagination, which I present as a version of what I take to be the work of a mass psychotherapy, functions in this goal-oriented manner. This work of imagination seeks to create new connections in our mental picture of reality.

4. What is transfigurative imagination?

In short, I argue that transfigurative imagination is a creative engagement with reality in the present so as to open up alternative ways of seeing towards a transformation of the reality.

In what follows I provide a wider intellectual context in order to give weight and justification for the need for this form of imagination in general and for the specific context of interest. My interest here is to show what we can learn from moral imagination for a conception of transfigurative imagination and to highlight the specific work of transfigurative imagination in relation to prefigurative imagination.

literature) than about the correspondence between a lived experience and our mental capacity to express it clearly for the sake of transformation.

[35] I have argued for example that migration is a practical symptom of this general problem.

4.1.Transfiguration and Moral Imagination

The starting point of a conception of transfigurative imagination is the general process of thought directed towards social change. Exemplified most clearly in the work of social movements, such thinking requires a commitment to the bringing into reality of forms of life inexistent at the time in which the thinking takes place. What this "bringing into reality" involves can take various shapes but it chiefly involves a dedication to change from one substantially undesirable social situation to a more desirable one. As Michelle Moody-Adams argues in her recent work on social movements, the goal of social movements is one of "changing relevant institutions, policies, and practices."[36] In the interim space between the undesirable situation and the desirable one lies the real work that engenders change. Whereas greater emphasis is often put on public activities that bring about the desired outcomes,[37] these activities are often accompanied or preceded by preparatory work of an intellectual kind. It is in this intellectual work that the role of imagination in politics gains its significance.

Although a concise definition of the imagination is difficult to come upon[38], I would like to proceed with a working definition of the imagination as the creative work of mentally representing what is currently absent with an intention to making it durably present, either to the mind or to extra-mental reality.[39] It operates distinctively from sensory perception, for example,

[36] Michelle Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice: Social Movements, Collective Imagination, and Political Hope* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 24.
[37] This is the view one gathers from writings on contentious politics which emphasize interaction through public action with institutional powerholders. See for example Sidey Tarrow, "Social Movements in Contentious Politics: A Review Article," *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996) and Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly "To Map Contentious Politics," *Mobilization* 1 (March 1996):17-34.
[38] Surveying a wide range of philosophical literature on the topic, Leslie Stevenson notices twelve major uses of the term, themselves broken into further minor conceptions. See Leslie Stevenson, "Twelve Conceptions of the Imagination," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 3 (July 2003).
[39] The first part on mental representation of what is absent can be found in key texts on imagination including in Kant, Aquinas, and Sartre (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* B151; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I85 ad 3, and Sartre, *L'imaginaire*). The second part on the intention of making the imagined durably present is an added dimension with a view to connecting the general view of the imagination to the work it does in political settings, namely, to lead to durable transformation.

as it prioritizes creative freedom over accuracy. This freedom allows individuals to generate new realities guided by their will, offering a unique form of mental engagement with the world. While not entirely subjective, the imagination provides a measure of creative liberty absent in other mental activities, enabling enduring creations that shape perceptions of and interactions with reality. This durability suggests imagination's potential for transformative engagement with the world, extending beyond personal mental space to engage with the external world. In politics, the space of this chapter's interest, the role of imagination so conceived aids in envisioning alternative ways of reading shared reality towards useful action in that space.

Turning to that space of politics, I would like to supplement this rather abstract view of imagination with what Moody-Adams calls the "high confidence view" of the imagination. This is the view that "through the exercise of imagination, human beings can generate ideas, images, stories, and experiences that present constructively unfamiliar possibilities and perspectives and stimulate novel reflection on what is actual and familiar."[40] The contribution of this view for our purposes is a specification of political forms of enduring creations I advance are key to the work of imagination. We gather from Moody-Adams that imaginative creations carry two aims in a political context: to create new possibilities and to allow new perspectives on what is familiar. This view is related to what Susan Babbitt has conceived as central to moral imagination, in which "we presuppose the possibility of an alternative moral context or at least of an alternative understanding of the same context."[41] Of importance here is the work of presupposition. The possibility of an alternative world or an alternative understanding of reality is not a given. It is the work of the imagination whose functioning requires that we act *as if* that possibility exists,

[40] Moody-Adams, *Making Space for Justice*, 127-128.
[41] Susan E. Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams: Rationality, Integrity, and Moral Imagination* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1996), 31.

even as we may be unable to provide further justification for that presupposition. The starting point of the work of imagination becomes one in which the question of what is or is not possible is deferred so that the work of imagination, through thinking and acting, can lead us into an ability to answer such questions. Babbitt's work inspires us to think of imagination as not simply a mental activity, but also one that can take form through specific actions. There are world realities in which questions of what is possible and what is justifiable remain unanswered until a new world reality comes into being. Since such a world can only come about through activities of the sort which Moody-Adams argues change relevant institutions, then we must admit that the work of imagination can proceed in the form of world-transforming actions. The relevant actions for Babbitt are not the common activities of social movements which are the center of Moody-Adams cited work, but special acts for which we have no available justification, acts that from the perspective of general rationality might appear unintelligible or outrightly unjustifiable, precisely because they are reaching for justification unavailable in the current world. Babbitt's argument is built around Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and the actions of Sethe, one of the characters who kills her own children to protect them, an action which Babbitt reads as, among other things, "a struggle for understanding—understanding that, given the current conceptual framework, could not be acquired any other way than by bringing about certain conditions and ways of being."[42] The work of imagination then can take place through such acts that create new ways of existing in the world. One might argue that the actions are precursors to the real work of imagination, which is primarily of an intellectual kind. In presenting the working definition of the imagination, I certainly hold a privileged space to the work of mental representation. This is both in light of the central interest in this chapter—which targets the space of intelligibility

[42] Babbitt, *Impossible Dreams*, 35.

towards transforming undesirable and stifling political conditions—and in the recognition that, even in places where the imagination takes the form of the kind of actions that Babbitt studies, its work retains a certain intellectual obsession, so to speak. Such actions, as Babbitt shows, aim for transforming the world *before* a new understanding of the world can take place, but also the actions are staged *so that* a new understanding can emerge. This understanding occurs through the creation of values in the alternative world yet to come. The ongoing reflections therefore maintain this centrality of an intellectual project. As such, of the two aims—creating new realities and seeing the same realities differently—I focus on the latter. It is important to note, however, that the two aims are not completely distinct. If the concern for political thought of the kind that social movements take up is a betterment of the world, then it is not a farfetched view that such a transformation requires new ways of seeing reality. This new seeing is directed both at seeing the undesirable character of current lived conditions and at seeing the possibility of an alternative world. It is not uncommon for those living under conditions of oppression or injustice to lack awareness of the exact nature of their oppression. Theories of alienation and false consciousness have helped us grasp the gravity of experiences in which we experience our lives as if they were not our own. In that condition, the lack of awareness of the extent of our own troubles become merely the result of the previous fact, anchored in specific social structures and their various forms of coercion and denial of agency, that our lives are not lived as ours.[43] In this line of thinking, the source of our lack of awareness is largely attributed to the social structures we inhabit and the particular forms of injustice therein. In a related vein of thought, writings on self-deception have revealed the multiple ways in which our way of acting sometimes show the

[43] See for example Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) and Matteo Bianchin, "How Can Consciousness Be False? Alienation, simulation, and mental ownership," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 49, no. 6 (July 2023): 650-671.

truth that we lie to ourselves, often in order to conceal to our own consciousness certain difficult truths which it serves us to obfuscate.[44] The contribution of this other literature has been, among other things, to establish that our incorrect awareness of reality is in some cases self-induced. In light of the lessons from thinking false consciousness and self-deception and with the recognition that these faulty forms of self-awareness occur within the institutions and spaces which are objects of political work of transformation, the importance of the intellectual work towards alternative ways of seeing attains justification and relevance. Taking this intellectual task seriously leads us into the space of imagination. This is a space, specifically, of moral imagination, which takes seriously the reality that human beings are imaginative beings and whose task gains a privileged relevance when we lack clarity on the right course of action to pursue in particular situations.

Writing on moral imagination, John Kekes argues that the moral part of this formulation is "concerned with living a good life, understood as combining responsibility and fulfillment." [45] For Kekes responsibility has to do with relating to other people through actions whereas the fulfillment refers to our sense of satisfaction with our lives. And the imagination part concerns "both the correction of the unrealistic view we form of our limits and possibilities and the exploration of what it would be like to live according to our various possibilities."[46] Echoing elements of a definition of the imagination according to Babbitt and Moody-Williams, Kekes stresses the limits that create the need for alternative worlds and alternative ways of seeing current worlds. I read this need for correction as one which acknowledges the various ways in

[44] See for example Donald Davidson, "Deception and Division," in *Actions and Events*, eds. E. LePore and B. McLaughlin (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985) and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992).
[45] John Kekes, *The Enlargement of Life: Moral Imagination at Work* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), xvi.
[46] John Kekes, *The Enlargement of Life*, xvi.

which our perspectives on life might contain errors[47] (e.g., in building perspectives on the world based on inarticulate experiences assumed to be inarticulable) and the need for exploration as one which stands on the recognition that the limits which we perceive are sometimes tied to the available perspectives through which we read reality. The title of Kekes's book, *The enlargement of Life* points to the ultimate goal of the work of moral imagination. To enlarge life beyond the limits imposed on it is a most precious and delicate task. Although the central object of Kekes's work is individual self-evaluation, I evoke this work for what it holds for us in a political context.

4.2. Prefigurative and Transfigurative Imagination

Within a political context, one of the ways in which we enact an enlargement of life is through what has come to be known as *prefigurative politics*. Prefigurative politics recognizes the simple fact that to seek to enlarge life through the transformation of current society requires a thinking up of alternative worlds ahead of their existence. This is related to Babbitt's point on imagining new worlds through actions that aim to lead us to that world. In the words of Alexis Shotwell, prefigurative politics is "the practice of collectively acting in the present in a way that enacts the world we aspire to create."[48] The practice makes notice of a necessary relation to time within political work, the reality that such work is an attempt in the present to make previously

[47] An important departure from Kekes is that I conceive that work of correction as work that looks at the present in order to allow paths towards a transformed future, whereas Kekes understands a corrective form of the imagination as one that is backward-looking and of no aid in thinking up a different future (John Kekes, *The Enlargement of Life*, 19-34). I think he is mistaken on this point, even from within his individual rather than political focus. To correct a past mistake (which is his view on correction) is at the same time to understand what to do better in the future.

[48] Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2016), 166. Other notable thinkers and practitioners of prefigurative politics include Harsha Walia and Chris Dixon. See Harsha Walia, *Undoing Border Imperialism* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2013) and Chris Dixon, *Another Politics: Talking across Today's Transformative Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

nonexistent forms of life come into being at a future time. And whereas this conception of prefigurative politics, due to its source in social movement practice, privileges action, it is not alien to the work of politics to also admit intellectual work as part of the work of prefigurative politics. In this sense, we can speak of prefigurative imagination to name the intellectual and creative work involved in prefigurative politics. The task of this form of the imagination is a form of thought that brings about alternative realities for a world to come, in the same way that prefigurative politics enacts this world to come. Prefigurative imagination provides a sort of blueprint for this future world. It is a form of imagination that plans ahead. It seeks to fulfill one of the goals of moral imagination, namely the creation of alternative worlds.

Transfigurative imagination takes up the second goal of moral imagination on allowing an alternative perspective on ongoing reality. The temporal interest of this form of imagination is the present. Whereas prefigurative imagination seeks to transform the future, transfigurative imagination seeks to transform the present. The demarcation is not clearcut, for the work of transfiguration maintains a commitment to a transformed future. The difference is significant, however, in view of the raw material for each of the two modes of imagination as well as their final products. Prefigurative imagination looks at current reality and designs an updated version of what it sees and projects this version into the future. Transfigurative imagination looks at the present and seeks to clarify the picture it sees of this reality, so as to see it better. Both forms of imagination proceed in a corrective fashion, the former by suggesting a desirable social world for enactment into the future and the latter by devising a clarified picture of the reality that is amenable to the possibility for change towards greater human flourishing. Put in a different way, the end product of transfigurative imagination is not a desirable and transformed world but an articulated view of the current, however undesirable it may be, towards a possibility for change.

Suppose for example that the reality at issue involves the faulty self-awareness characteristic of conditions of false consciousness. Suppose for more specificity that this condition is caused by a certain injustice in the society. The end product of prefigurative imagination would be a transformed world, i.e. one in which the individuals have the proper self-awareness and where the particular injustice at its root is nonexistent. In relation to this, transfigurative imagination's role would be the undoing of the false consciousness in such a manner that the individuals can better visualize paths towards the undoing of the injustice. Framed in this way, it may appear as though transfiguration is assumed within prefiguration, if the former points to possibility for change while the latter presents a picture of a changed world. Not so. This appearance can be corrected with an addition that transfigurative imagination takes psychic lives of the people as its object, with the aim of shedding light on unforeseen possibilities for action. In the way I conceive it here, transfigurative imagination is a necessary step towards the bringing into life of the world sought by prefiguration imagination. This is precisely because of its aiming at the limits within agency in its work at showing alternative ways of seeing realities once conceived to be so limiting as to make individual or collective agency irrelevant. In conditions of defeat, such as those described by Akure-Davain, one not only needs to provide a blueprint for a world of victors, but also to create a path towards that victory. And the creation of that path starts in a transformation that is a form of healing for the psychic life of agents in that world.

In speaking of transfigurative imagination as aimed at the present, an important question arises, namely whether this is a work of imagination or one of perception rather. It would appear that the intended goal is to see current realities better. This form of imagination might in this way seem to address accuracy of the sort we expect from the activities of perception. Of the desiderata of an alternative world, accuracy would appear to be primary. We need to see better

(read: more clearly) in order to open up unforeseen possibilities for change, the view goes. From this perspective, the problem at issue is one of a certain opacity of lived experience to those who live it. Situations of false consciousness admit of this kind of problem, a primarily epistemological problem. A problem of an inability to see reality as it fully is, not to mean an objective view of the reality devoid of subjective experience, but a clear understanding of one's experience of reality in a wider social context. This specific reading of transfigurative imagination is suggested by the previously expressed task of coming up with alternative perspectives on an ongoing reality in the present.

However, transfigurative imagination, as I conceive it here, is not primarily required by an epistemological perspective as a need to perceive reality accurately. There are two reasons for this, one founded on the nature of the faculty of imagination and another specific to transfigurative imagination and the problem it seeks to remedy. Imagination of any kind can be read as an epistemological faculty. In our working conception of the imagination, however, we have laid out that its process is one that moves away from a care for accuracy as a primary or central motive. The creativity involved in the functioning of the imagination implies a moving away from precision. As far as transfigurative imagination is concerned, it also functions in this manner which involves a central creativity that relieves it of central requirements for precision. Still, the problem of excess to which transfigurative imagination responds, as a problem of intelligibility announces itself as an epistemological one. We must note again in this instance that it is not an intelligibility of a precision type. Rather than concerns for precision, transfigurative imagination proceeds from concerns for prudential judgment. Prudential judgment is a moral faculty whose task is to align the working of practical reason towards a chosen end goal.[49] The

[49] This formulation draws from André Makarakiza and Thomas Aquinas. "The act of prudential judgment is part of the act of prudence as such, through which the intellect applies principles of 'right reason' to specific actions which

importance of this considerations and its implications for precision can be gleaned in the following. Imagine you are walking outside on a very sunny day. You are on your way some place. But the glare of the sun is getting in the way of your vision and your ability to move forward. So, you put your hand above your eyes every so often so that you can follow your path more easily.[50] One way to interpret this is to point to your interest in clear vision, therefore foregrounding the concern for precision. Indeed, the sun is "getting in the way" and you need to see your path more precisely to move forward. Notice, however, what is involved in that clarity in relation to the total reality. Your experience of the world on that day includes the sunshine and perhaps that is even important to your decision to walk outside. But the choice to cover your eyes is a manner of creating a limit in your experience of that total reality. And the limitation is informed by a higher aim, namely, your need to follow the path and arrive at your destination. Another way to read your move to cover your eyes therefore does not foreground the precision, but your judgment in terms of the best acts to engage in so that you can reach your aim. Instead of precision, this judgment might require you to intentionally create shadows, to look away from certain things, to reshape the total experience of reality into manageable bits and pieces. It is the way of prudential judgment. Its working might at times involve certain interests in precision, but the overarching aim differs from a central concern for precision. The view of transfigurative imagination which I propose stands more on moral concerns for prudence than on epistemological concerns for accuracy.

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the human being must take in order to achieve a given end." (Translation mine) André Makarakiza, *La dialectique des Barundi* (Brussels: Académie royale des science coloniales, 1959), 50 and see Westberg on Aquinas: Prudence "represents the agent's ability to deliberate, decide and properly to order the process of practical reason to action." Daniel Westberg, *Right Practical Reason: Aristotle, Action, Prudence in Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 187.

[50] Example inspired by Hugo ka Canham who develops a theory around the word *ukwakhumkanya*, which in the isiMpondo language describes that act of using your hand to cover your eyes, as a way of see better. Hugo ca Canham, *Riotous Deathscapes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023).

The conception of an epistemological problem from primary concerns for precision assumes a possible correspondence between the reality at issue and the mind's characteristic ability to make things intelligible. The epistemological problem of opacity from this perspective has to be thought from the perspective of this "characteristic ability." It becomes a problem because of what is expected in terms of this correspondence. As an example, we do not fault human eyes for their inability to perceive infrared light. It is not in their characteristic ability to perceive such colors. In the same way, if there happens to be realities which, for one reason or another exceed people's ability to make sense of them, then the view from precision loses its interest. I advance that the problem of excess arises in one such reality.

The conception of a "characteristic ability" for intelligibility can be conceived from the general perspective of human life and the limits imposed on a human perspective. For example, a human person cannot know what it is like to hunt as a lion. Bringing it down from this human generality to the level of human intelligibility in a social setting, I draw on the work of Jonathan Lear in his book *Radical Hope* to substantiate the view of a human inability to make some lived experiences or a whole life intelligible.

The key contribution of Lear's work in the conception of radical hope is the elaboration of a form of hope that is maintained in the absence of a view of what that means, without intelligible content to substantiate the basis of this hopeful outlook on reality. My interest here is in Lear's reading of the life context in which this outlook takes form and his argument for its implications for the general human ability to make our experiences intelligible. Lear's argument is in conversation with Plenty Coups, a Crow chief, who reflects on his life after the destruction of his people's way of life. In a statement which Lear takes to be very difficult to grasp and deeply insightful, Plenty Coups claims that "After this nothing happened." After the destruction

of the way of life, that is, after the Crow people were forced onto a reservation. Lear argues that we should see this as a statement about reality. He warns us against reading it as a psychological problem. The psychological view suggests that "after they were confined to a reservation, the Crow people became depressed; things ceased to matter to them. It was for them *as though* nothing happened."[51] Instead of this focus on the internal psychic lives of the people, and the assumption that the end to the happening of things is a merely imaginary situation, Lear proposes that we see Plenty Coups in his enigmatic expression as "a witness to a certain form of human vulnerability," a vulnerability founded in the ordinary reality of human cultures as ways of life. It is a vulnerability such that in some contexts it is possible for one to "no longer have the concepts with which to understand [oneself] and the world."[52] There is here a misalignment, so to speak, between the world or the reality of one's experience, and one's ability to make sense of it. This misalignment is what I mean by the term excess. It is still not a psychological problem, Lear reminds us. It is a problem of the lack of concepts with which to make sense of the world. Concepts are, of course, tools for intellectual work, but they arise within worlds in which they acquire meaning and usefulness for the carrying about of one's life *in that* world. To return to the language of a characteristic ability, the words of Plenty Coups in Lear's interpretation show that we can lose our characteristic ability to make things intelligible.

Before moving on, I would like to point out a possible difficulty which arises in relation to Lear and my ongoing interest in Akure-Davain's call for a mass psychotherapy. In following in Akure-Davain's steps, I suggested that we read our political problem as a partly psychic one, having a lot to do with our mental lives. If, as I argue, the problem of excess is like what Lear

[51] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 3.
[52] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, 48.

describes about the Crow people, a certain mismatch appears, namely on the question of whether this is a psychic rather than world problem. For the sake of this writing, I conceive of the psyche as the ensemble of our mental lives, in both their conscious and unconscious processes. The focus on either psyche or world matters in terms of where we are to turn to for the possibility of a solution. If it is a psychic issue, we need to get our minds aright. And if it is a problem with the world, it is this world which we need to fix. Notice how closely related this distinction is to the two aims of moral imagination, the first on changing the world and the second on changing our perspective on it. As I have argued earlier, the difference between the two aims is not clear-cut as the two are intimately linked. The same holds true for psyche and world in the current discussion. In Lear's reading of the experience of Crow people through the words of Plenty Coups, to argue that the happening of things is a truth of the world is not to let the psyche off the hook. Indeed, the problem of meaning and the centrality of concepts in the formation and loss of meaning highlights the tight relation between the world and our mental lives. Lear advances that the happening of things has stopped precisely because the loss of a world has led to a loss of a central concept to make sense of the world. This is the concept of planting coups in this warrior culture to mark a boundary.[53] The loss, it must be noted, is at once a loss of a psychic nature. The mental capacity to make sense of the world, which is also to mean one's life in that world, is cut short. Worse still, the view is that one is not only incapacitated in terms of this specific concept, which for the Crow in Lear's reading is related to a warrior culture. The centrality of the concept implies that its loss makes everything meaningless, including mundane tasks like cooking. Because these tasks make sense in relation to the whole culture.[54] To argue that the illness of the

[53] Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, 13.
[54] "Every meal was in effect the cooking-of-a-meal-so-that-those-who-ate-it-would-be-healthy-to-hunt-and-fight. At a certain point though, hunting and fighting have become impossible. Indeed, they cease to be intelligible acts […] But if hunting and fighting become unintelligible, so does preparing to hunt and fight." Lear, *Radical Hope*, 40.

world is related to an illness of the psyche is a general statement about the process of our wellbeing as human beings, such that we are only well psychically when the world is well. We can make sense of a lot of hard things in life. But the point is that there exist such realities which affect our ability to make sense of them. In reference to the question "how are we going to do?" the absence of an answer to a central question of becoming—and with becoming being so central to human life—amounts to our inability to make our lives intelligible. And in a global sense, such as that which Lear notices in relation to the Crow. While this is a properly difficult reality, the inability towards intelligibility is not final. Lear's writing on the Crow people had maintained that however bleak the reality, it does not foreclose the opening up of new possibilities. The task of this work, he assigns to poets as "creative makers of meaningful space" who, by retooling the past towards alternative ways of being and making meaning, materialize "the possibility for the creation of a new field of possibilities."[55] Eighteen years since this writing, Lear has recently argued for an instance of this work of the poet, in reference to a Crow chief's resignification of the concept of planting coups to give meaning to the work of a curator of a museum exhibit on Crow life. Through the activity of the curator, an old concept is given new content. I will return to poetry later as I explore the role of narrative forms of play but let it suffice for now to say that this is the task of transfigurative imagination in our context. Not in the relation between old concepts and new meanings but in relation to the transformation of an experience of excess to an intelligible one. The work of the poets as suggested announces a certain active rather than passive relation to reality. In what remains I explore this suggestion further, then go on to discuss how transfigurative imagination responds to the collective unconscious, and finally return to the poets in their role to point towards new possibilities.

[55] Lear, *Radical Hope*, 51.

5. Transfiguring the collective unconscious

5.1. Transfigurative imagination as a form of play

The emphasis of goal-oriented creativity over precision in the conception of transfigurative imagination makes space for this conception as a form of play, which I argue takes shape notably through narrative storytelling. To substantiate the role of play and highlight its relevance to our context and the problem of excess, the example of childhood play below is instructive. It shows the ability of play to move us away from excess toward mastery.

Consider this case: A child has a great attachment to its mother. The mother, as mothers are wont to do, sometimes leaves the child. The child, in reaction, grabs various objects, throws them out of sight and exclaims "gone!" only to retrieve them later. He repeats this form of play over and over. To what end?

My interest in this case, taken from Freud's work, is in what Freud makes of it in terms of the child's mastery of an unpleasurable situation through play. According to Freud, the loss of the child's object of attachment, however brief, is an unpleasurable and therefore undesirable experience. Out of various interpretations of the reasons why the child repeats this experience (e.g., anticipation of the mother's return or revenge), Freud suggests that the child repeats this experience in order to gain mastery over it. Initially, this experience is "overpowering"[56] to the child. In Freud's writing we grasp that the experience is overpowering through its unpleasurable character. It needs to be dealt with. It is unpleasurable also perhaps because the child must so to speak "suffer" the absence of the mother, i.e., cannot make the mother come back except by waiting. He is helpless in the face of the experience. There is here an excess of the experience relative to the child's capacity for mastery. Freud's argument is that the act of repetition, and a

[56] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporations, 1950), 16.

repetition in the form of play, allows the child to become active in a previously passive condition. "At the outset, he was in a *passive* situation—he was overpowered by the experience; but by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part."[57] The specific kind of passivity or activity relates to the child's need for mastery, for taking charge of his fate.

Although Freud does not offer a general unified theory of play,[58] what is said here strikes a chord with our ongoing interest in transfigurative imagination. Because this form of imagination takes the reality of excess as its object, the process from passivity to activity proves useful. Indeed, the state of resignation which plagues individuals and collectives in our political context is a condition of passivity. A simple interpretation of resignation might read this as a total passivity, that is, a situation not involving the participation of the people who live it. And those concerned by the situation do indeed employ these terms to express their condition with a truth that one can recognize from the centrality of agency in the project of becoming at an individual or collective level. At the same time, however, the insistence of the impossible question complicates this simple picture, as well as points towards the Freudian repetition. The repetition of the question is an attempt at mastering the situation, for the question arises within conversational contexts in which the speakers attempt to process specific political woes, which are then pushed beyond their specificity in the recognition that these specific events are instances of a familiar problem. It is because of this that the people ask, "What are we *again* going to do?" This form of repetition as we have seen, however, is stuck. The inability to answer the question

[57] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 15.
[58] A recent study of Freud's theory of play suggests that Freud uses references to childhood play not for its own sake but in order to clarify other things, in this particular case, the problem of war neuroses and the repetition of unpleasurable experiences. See Marie Lenormand, "The importance of not being Ernest: An archeology of child's play in Freud's writings (and some implications for psychoanalytic theory and practice)," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 100, no. 1 (February 2019): 52-56.

shows an inability to complete the move from a passive to an active relation with reality. The interest in transfigurative imagination in the form of play is to allow the completion of this process.

Eugen Fink's general theory of human play, echoing Freud, argues that play can "pleasurably engulf what is horrible."[59] The pain of the mother's leaving is engulfed through the mechanism of repetition in play for the child. Part of the reason for this is the freedom involved in play which aids in "the projection of new possibilities for lived experience."[60] Under the direction of the player's imagination, new desirable possibilities (e.g., mastery for the child) replace undesirable situations. One of the reasons why this is made possible is the view that play allows a measure of freedom seldom witnessed in other forms of activity. Fink advances that play manifests a "distinguished possibility of human freedom [because in it] the human being enjoy[s] an almost unbounded activity [and] creates productively and without inhibition."[61] This view is echoed by Donald Winnicott, arguing that "in playing, and perhaps only in playing, the child or adult is free to be creative."[62] For Fink the freedom is made possible in part because of a demarcation of the space of play, what Fink calls "playworld,"[63] from the space of normal life. Beyond this notion of play's relation to painful experience, Fink's theory also presents a connection between play and sensemaking, which is of use to us. He argues that play is "always an occurrence that is luminously suffused with sense."[64] In play, the human being "steps out of and beyond himself in a cosmic gesture and interprets the whole of the world in a manner that is

[59] Eugen Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World and Other Writings*, trans. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 22.
[60] Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 216.
[61] Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 26.
[62] Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 53.
[63] Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 28.
[64] Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 16.

suffused with sense."[65] We are given to understand that one of the roles of play is the creation of a relation between the human being and the world he lives in, in such a way that is meaningful. Because play occurs in an involvement of the human being with the world, this involvement presupposes a form of acquaintance with or knowledge of reality, which becomes a starting point for play's ability to develop further meanings through the player's activities. Herein, the project of making life experiences intelligible finds support towards fulfillment. Moreover, the need for intelligibility serves a further aim, namely one of self-actualization[66] or, in other words, the project of self-transformation in line with established values.

In relation to situations of excess, these arguments on play's function in human life present play as a mechanism of free exploration, by going through and beyond repetition, for the sake of mastering these situations. The mastery involves intelligibility and the furthering of our projects of becoming. In light of the problem of excess as well as the conception of transfigurative imagination, the relation to play appears beneficial in multiple ways. As play, this form of imagination has the potential to deal with the problem of excess in the political context through the development of practices of mastery. In this process, the failure of intelligibility as expressed in the impossible question receives a green light to proceed with some hope for success through articulation, if play is to do its specific work. Moreover, transfigurative imagination as play restores the project of becoming which the failure of sensemaking forecloses.

[65] Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 46.
[66] "Taken as an activity, as a spontaneous enactment of life, play is also a mode of human self-actualization." Fink, *Play as a Symbol of the World*, 85.

5.2. Play and the fullness of existence

The presentation of transfigurative imagination as concerned with the work of articulation and as a form of play poses certain questions. If articulation is a mere putting words on experiences, why should it have the ability to do the therapeutic work that Akure-Davain envisions? Moreover, what kind of talking is involved such that speaking such words can be read as a form of play? Below I show that it is talking within a delimited space in which we are able to talk beyond the usual inhibitions.

Once again psychoanalytic theory can help us here. In his discussion of the talking cure in the groundbreaking work of Josef Breuer with patient Anna O., Robert A. Paul asks a related question, namely "why does talking have a beneficial effect in a clinical setting?"[67] The question addresses the now foundational view owing to Breuer's work that psychoanalytic therapy functions, i.e., cures, through getting the patient to talk. Paul's answer to the question connects both the idea of play and the putting of words onto experiences. He argues that the inability to talk about certain things is a learned response in relation to one's environment. Because the analysand has experienced negative reactions from her environment to certain feelings, thoughts, memories and wishes, she adjusts by repressing these. The work of the analyst in this case becomes one of creating a space where anything can be said, felt, thought, etc. Paul calls this space "the private arena"[68] in contrast with the environment in which the analysand had experienced the negative reactions. It is understood that the ability to speak freely in the private arena can in due course be developed also in relation to the public arena. Essential to the private space, and the freedom in it, is the analysand's ability to be "irresponsible,"[69] meaning that she

[67] Robert A. Paul, *Our Two-Track Minds: Rehabilitating Freud on Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 202.
[68] Paul, *Our Two-Track Minds*, 203.
[69] Paul, *Our Two-Track Minds*, 203.

lets go of any censors to what she can say, feel or think. In the success of this process, the analysand attains what Paul calls "full speech," putting words onto experiences without the previous limitations.

We notice the similarity between what happens in this therapeutic setting and what occurs during play, most notably in terms of the freedom of activity. In the same way that play allows a greater measure of freedom to explore, the psychoanalytic setting allows the ability to freely speak without judgment. In the same way that play involves the safety of a playworld, psychoanalysis envisions a private arena. The view of psychoanalysis as a "talking cure" recognizes the therapeutic impact of this ability as well as the crucial work of the spaces in which such cure takes place. This work is so crucial that, on Paul's view, they carry the full weight of the therapy. The patient is not cured because they talked, they talk because they are cured.[70] Of course, the private space here is not empty, it is the complete situation which includes the crucial work of the analyst to listen without judgment and, most importantly, to point out the patient's inhibitions.

Returning now to the questions on articulation and play, reference to the work of psychoanalytic therapy points us in the direction of a practice in which articulating our thoughts and experiences has an impact on our well-being. The reference to this work in an explicitly clinical setting for thinking a political situation might seem inappropriate. However, Paul's work and the reference to psychoanalysis already seeks to clarify the process of culture. He points out the crucial work of words (which are cultural symbols) in psychoanalysis as part of an illustration of how humans learn to behave in certain ways as part of a cultural inheritance.[71] It is

[70] Paul, *Our Two-Track Minds,* 204.
[71] Paul's work sketches an argument on cultural inheritance on a par with and sometimes superseding genetic inheritance.

with this in mind that I take lessons from the psychoanalytic setting into the political setting which motivates these ongoing reflections. I turn to these ideas having in mind an interest in imagining what will get us to talk beyond the impossible question. Thinking the question in relation to psychoanalysis is a way to think the question as a manifestation of a muteness like that of an analysand unable to speak due to specific inhibitions. It is, in a way, to think about our own inhibitions and the work that the political elite of Akure-Davain's imagination, or what drawing from Lear I call the work of poets, can do to allow us to surpass those inhibitions and answer the impossible question. This view necessarily requires the conception of the question as potentially answerable, at least in some measure. There is a measure in which the question remains unanswerable, for example as an expression of the horror of political failure and its implications in real everyday suffering. Arguably there are parts of the horrible that are properly unthinkable. Beyond this, however, the view is that the question can be answered, and it is the task of the poets, like analysts, to articulate the reality, by pointing out unforeseen connections within lived experience towards a potential ability for the people to answer the question.

The specific conception of the move from the unconscious to conscious awareness in psychoanalysis differs from the conception of the collective unconscious I argued for. Paul's view stands in agreement with Jung and Fanon on the view of discovery, that is the view that to bring to consciousness what was unconscious is to discover what was once hidden to our awareness. I have proposed, instead, a view based on articulation rather than discovery, for the reasons of acknowledging the fact that, in the political situation, people know more than they can articulate. Still, one can argue that people can know more than they are consciously aware of, thereby insisting on the fact of discovery in any transfer of information from the unconscious to consciousness. This view makes sense, especially in a psychoanalytic setting. However,

following the feminist standpoint theory, I maintain that in the political setting at issue people, through their everyday experiences, already have the relevant information for the knowledge of their situation. In this light, the work of articulation seeks to highlight nodes of meaning within the already available information, rather than to offer new information. Even within the strictly psychoanalytic setting, the analyst's role is to point out things from the analysand's own speech or silence or other relevant behavioral elements, rather than to offer any new information properly external to the analysand. In insisting on articulation rather than discovery, I partly wish to avoid what Ernest Wamba dia Wamba calls "elite politics,"[72] founded on the idea that political leaders are privy to information essential to the project of social transformation which is unavailable to the people and thereby assumes that everyday people do not think for themselves. The conception of what is essential matters here and already centers the view that it is the people's experience which is central to any such project of social transformation. The centrality does not mean that it is all that matters. For example, the technical abilities for enacting certain collective visions might require the skills of a privileged group. What is of essence, and the most important lesson from psychoanalysis, is the creation of spaces where the people can be brought to articulate their experiences in meaningful ways heretofore unavailable to their conscious awareness. It is these ways of articulation, rather than the experiences, which are to be articulated through the work of the poets as analysts for political subjects.

5.3. Narrative Refashioning

By now, I believe we have gotten a grasp on what transfigurative imagination is and what it aims to do. I would like to supplement that picture by giving substance to how that form of

[72] Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, "Beyond Elite Politics of Democracy in African Politics," *Quest: An International African Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 1 (June 1992), 29-42.

imagination works particularly in relation to narrative. I do not think the narrative form, i.e. telling stories, is the only way in which transfigurative imagination functions. My interest is, however, to give examples of transfigurative imagination at play. I discuss a political example of the private space we inherit from psychoanalysis and then refer to the literature on narratives to give voice to the important work of narratives as a way of showing their especial relevance to transfigurative imagination as conceived in this chapter. I end the chapter by briefly discussing an example of transfigurative imagination in a narrative form in recent African political events.

5.3.1. The idea of a private space

When I was a child of about five, during the height of an ethnic war, someone I understood to be a family friend visited our home. I was excited to put a face to the name. And in that excitement, I pointed my finger to the man and asked my mother: “Didn’t you say he was in the rebellion?” The look of horror on my mother’s face made it clear that the question was not only unwelcome but deeply inappropriate. On the face of it, a child’s awareness of a family relation being a rebel in those times was harmless, even politically instructive. The rebellion was fighting a murderous dictatorship founded on ethnic supremacy. But real danger lurked. The very danger that my question was arousing. As we were seated on the veranda, my question and any answer to it—which I never received—could be overheard by a stranger. Our being outside the walls of the house meant we had crossed a threshold that made a difference for the kinds of conversations we could reasonably have.

After the war, with the collective wounds still fresh (which they still might be even now twenty years later), a popular radio podcast staged the historic relations between the two ethnic groups which had massacred each other in genocidal turns over a period of at least forty years.

Only, they did not speak of the groups by name. They adopted stand-in words. Instead of Hutu and Tutsi, the real names of the groups, they spoke of Abaseruko and Abarengero (the easterners and the westerners). Anyone who listened knew what the names stood for. By then there was no real censure on speaking of ethnic matters in public. And yet, somehow, one could not, in a public arena, stage a fiction podcast with an ethnic explicitness. If one hoped for an audience, that is.

Let me start with a note on the personal memories and their importance in relation to the work of this chapter. As Donald Winnicott has stated, "a human infant must travel some distance from early days in order to have the maturity to be deep."[73] Granted the memories I detail above are not infant memories. But they have their specific infancy. I return to the memories in order to do something with them now. To see something in and through them beyond what I was able to see in the moment. What founds my hope for the success of this endeavor? Surely, the distance from early days. I take this personal interlude to say this: the foregoing intellectual exercise is fed by that personal interest in walking some more distance in order to reach a maturity in which I, we can see beyond the limits. What I am arguing for in this chapter is work of a collective nature, but it requires the effort of individuals. As I speak of the work of the poets, let the meaning of that work also include what is occurring here in the very chapter, itself being a search for new ways of speaking and seeing.

How do we do political talk? And how do we do it in spaces where certain forms of speech are dangerous? Moreover, how do we speak towards change in a world rid of these dangers? I reflect on these two memories mainly because they make concrete not just the danger of certain forms of speech (in terms of what is said or where it is said) but more importantly the

[73] Donald Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 48 (1967), 370.

fact that certain spaces carry with them the ability to allow or disallow the expression of certain thoughts, feelings, experiences, questions. The fact on its own is rather mundane and uninteresting. Language is a situational practice. However, when put in conversation with the impossible question as well as lessons from the talking cure in psychoanalysis, its crying interest shines forth. For the perspective of the question, in which stands our inability to say certain things or to say anything beyond a certain threshold, has revealed the fact that it is our very being at stake. In our ability to become other than we are. And to carry our societies forward. The work of transfigurative imagination addresses the creation of spaces in which we heal by talking beyond current limitations and the articulation of transformatively useful connections within shared social reality.

The creation of these safe spaces harkens back to the spaces of clandestine existence, which we explored in relation to Fanon's view on culture and agency. To recall, these were spaces in which the colonized are able to exist somewhat fully out of the sight of the public space where oppression and fear reign. The mention of the public space recalls Robert A. Paul's notion of the difference between a public and a private arena. It is the difference between the veranda and the inside of the home of my childhood. Taking the psychoanalytic lesson to heart and acknowledging the necessity of a private/clandestine space towards the possibility for articulation, the conception of transfigurative imagination insists on a revalorization of private spaces as locations of necessary political work.

In the spirit of the work of the imagination to develop alternative perspectives on current realities, the insistence that we do politics also away from public spaces, is a call to this alternative way of seeing. This in itself can be a therapeutic move, even before the work of articulation fully takes place, that is before we find words beyond the impossible question. The

therapy stems from the redirection of political energy that finds no fulfillment in the public space. We remember Fanon's critique of the recourse to spiritual seances of dispossession aimed at dissolving such energy in his view that such practices distract from the real political work.[74] In the contemporary moment, it has been argued that the need for the dissolution of unrealized energies can be noticed in the religiosity of people across Africa.[75] The politicization of the private space responds to this fact, advocating for the redirection of the energies within a different political arena as opposed to their removal from the political sphere altogether. This insistence on the private space recognizes that these spaces already exist and that no doubt political conversations occur there. Transfigurative imagination insists on the transformation of the space in such a way that political talk, so to speak, can generally be afforded more meaningful airtime. With the recognition that the work of social transformation can occur there. We know from the histories of radical political movements that this affordance is key to the creation and dissemination of ideas as well as the preparation for public political acts such as in the form of protest. It is in light of this knowledge, in addition to the psychoanalytic lessons, that a political revaluation of private spaces is in order. The work towards this revaluation requires poets, or narrative workers, at the forefront of political struggle through transfigurative imagination.

As the two memories above highlight, the idea of a private space does not refer strictly to literal physical spaces. It can also refer to symbolic spaces. This is what the radio podcast example brings out. The deployment of language through metaphoric or figurative ways can allow us to talk about certain things with others in spaces where explicit language might get in the way of important conversations. At the heart of either a physical or a symbolic interpretation

[74] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 20.
[75] Mbembe, *Politiques de l'inimitié*, 45.

of private spaces lies the essential element of allowing us greater freedom to think, feel, speak, and explore without usual limitations, i.e., in the manner in which play can proceed and do its therapeutic work.

5.3.2. The genius of story

Since I am advocating for the work of narrative workers, it serves to return to the importance of narrative as a form within human life. Doing so reveals the alignment between the capacities of stories and of transfigurative imagination.

The importance of narrative for the development of moral and political sensibilities has been studied extensively.[76] The starting point of writings on this topic is the view that humans are narrative beings, to mean that we are the kind of creatures that care about stories and who employ stories in various ways to make sense of and organize our lives. The implications of this point are far-reaching, notably in terms of personal and collective transformation. In the specifically political arena, studies on propaganda and political rhetoric have shown the crucial importance of stories in the shaping of political thinking in a public setting and the possibility of action.[77] Whereas some of the literature, especially in philosophy, focuses on fiction, I think of stories here as going beyond fiction to refer to any ordering of facts of existence to make sense of reality towards a shared goal. The facts of existence can appear in a fictional or nonfictional form, through stories whose purpose is not primarily aesthetic enjoyment but political work. The

[76] See for example John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basis Books, 1978), Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981), Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), and Susan Babbitt, *Artless Integrity: Moral Imagination, Agency, and Stories* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

[77] See Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) and Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

conception is wide enough to include things such as journalism, popular media (film, music, etc.), speeches, fiction, theatre, etc. And the conception does not stand on words as the sole medium of storytelling. For example, a dance choreography can tell a story through its own specific movement-based symbols as well as a poem can.

The efficacy of stories, as Frederick Mayer has argued, lies in the fact that "[b]y placing events in the familiar code of story, we impose order on our experiences, making them appear the natural consequence of circumstances and agency."[78] The imposition of order on reality serves our need to make sense of it. It is natural therefore to turn to stories in moments where our ability to make sense of reality is troubled. I have argued that the main problem in our context of political failure which transfigurative imagination seeks to solve is a problem of excess. Note that the notion of excess, as explored, marks an impossibility to create this kind of order. In creating order, the work of narrative is selective. It is guided by a clear end-goal towards which details are selectively constructed. A story meant to arouse sadness will be ordered differently than one meant to arouse joy. In our context, the goal is the creation of articulate indignation. Those who witness the narrative should be thereby equipped with an ability to articulate their lives in novel and meaningful ways and in a manner that foregrounds their justified grievances such that the feeling can maintain or arouse anew the desire for transformation. As Audre Lorde's well-known work insists, the special work of poetry, a form of narrative, stems from its ability to help us put words on feelings towards possible action.[79] It is this goal which must guide narrative works within transfigurative imagination. The genius of story in its potential to make

[78] See Frederick W. Mayer, *Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7.

[79] "It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action […] We train ourselves to respect our feelings and transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And when that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it." Audre Lorde, "Poetry is not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkely: Crossing Press, 2007), 37-38.

certain facts or events appear as natural consequences of others through the perspective of agency is key to the work of narrative in a political context. This is true in general about politics with the centrality of action in this sphere of human existence. It is especially important in the specific context of political failure where inertia incapacitates agency. In reimagining our lives in this context, narrative's task is to order facts of our existence in such a way as highlights the revival of our agency. In this ordering lies the possibility of making sense, even if that process might mean we cover our eyes to protect our sight from the glare of excess. A story functions because it makes some sense. Our need for intelligibility benefits therefore from a story-like response. However, the centrality of agency here also implies the ability for narrative to lead to action even in places where intelligibility is unavailable. Following Babbitt's work on how we sometimes have to act in ways that do not make sense to us so that a world in which our acts make sense can arise, transfigurative imagination in this narrative form must be able to arouse agency without the requirement of intelligibility. This is in recognition of aspects of our experience of which we may still fail to make sense even with the power of stories. It can do this for example as a depiction of what it would feel like to "enlarge" our lives by extolling through a narrative form the benefits of agency for the wellbeing of the agents, even in times where the success of arrival at an end goal seems unlikely.[80] It should be noted that the narrative ordering of facts, in light of the prudential approach of transfigurative imagination which does not hold a primary interest in accuracy, proceeds with the freedom and creativity that good stories generally require. The decentering of accuracy does not imply a complete freedom in the meanings of the ordering of facts since neither imagination nor play is completely free. In the political space, for example, this ordering of facts does not, simply because it is free, form its meanings through

[80] This particular form of agency is explored in the chapter on self-alienation.

propaganda as a form of harmful rhetoric. This is, firstly, because transfigurative imagination respects individual agency whereas propaganda relies on a repression of that agency.[81] It is, secondly, because the point of this form of imagination in the narrative form proceeds with the lesson of the psychoanalytic relation in mind—the narrative workers, standing in for the analyst, are tasked with pointing things out that are present in the people's experiences and expressions already with the added dimension of order towards meaningfulness.

This work of narrative must be done in a durable manner, in light of the task for transfigurative imagination to create alternative ways of seeing current reality in a durable manner. Just as the impossible question is repeated in conversations over and over again, narrative responses to it must be told over and over again. The repetition of an ordered version of the reality in relation to which we once were helpless can lead us into the mastery which this form of play makes possible. Repetition provides a constant pull against our propensity to forget and to fall back into the habits of our collective unconscious which were at the root of our inertia and our inability to make sense of reality.

5.3.3. We tell stories when nothing is happening so that something might happen

Let me now discuss an example of a real political event around which we notice transfigurative imagination in the narrative form.

On August 30th, 2023, the world woke up to a widely circulated video of then President of Gabon, Ali Bongo Ondimba. In the video, recorded during a post-election coup attempt, the president calls on his friends to "make noise." Here's a full transcript of the call for help:

[81] Jason Stanley argues that propaganda relies on flawed ideologies, which "rob groups of knowledge of their own mental states by systematically concealing their interests from them." Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*, 5. This is what Stanley calls more specifically "harmful propaganda" in his usage of the general term propaganda to refer to all political rhetoric. I use propaganda in the text to mean the harmful kind.

> I am Ali Bongo Ondimba, President of Gabon and I'm to send a message to all the friends that we have all over the world to tell them to make noise, to make noise. For the people here have arrested me and my family. My son is somewhere, my wife is in another place and I'm at the residence. Right now, I am at the residence and nothing happening, nothing is happening. I don't know what's going on. So, I am calling you to make noise, to make noise, to make noise, really! I am thanking you. Thank you.[82]

This is an extraordinary event. The reality of political failure is predicated on a story that excludes the possibility of an event such as this. I am not able to give the event the treatment it deserves but let me point out two features of its extraordinariness. The first one is this: whereas political failure foregrounds the inertia of the people and their inability to do anything about their situation, we hear a president claiming that the people have "arrested" him. The truth of the claim matters less (more on this below) than the way the claim shatters the story we tell about our political life. So, there is something that is opened up in our sensemaking through the experience such an event, and the opening up is a unique opportunity for imaginative work. The second aspect to consider is about the actions of the deposed president. He is making a strategic appeal which might be a rare window into the minds of our dictators. He calls for people to make noise. For protest, in other words. It must give us a pause to consider that protest might in fact be a tactic considered effective in our political reality. At the time of this writing, Ali Bongo Ondimba is on a hunger strike to request the release of his wife and son from detention.[83] A hunger strike! From a person who a mere few months ago had no concern for the people and had reigned as an autocrat for many years. What is striking is not whether or not Ali Bongo Ondimba

[82] "Gabon's President Calls for Help After Ouster in Country's First Coup," *Al Jazeera*, August 30, 2023. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/30/gabon-president-calls-for-help-after-ouster-in-countrys-first-coup
[83] Jeanne Le Bihan, "Ali Bongo Ondimba en grève de la faim pour obtenir la libération de Sylvia et Noureddin, » *Jeune Afrique*, May 14, 2024 https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1568162/politique/ali-bongo-ondimba-en-greve-de-la-faim-pour-obtenir-la-liberation-de-sylvia-et-noureddin/

can stage a protest. Obviously, like any political subject, he can. And it is not whether his claim for such protest are valid. What is striking is the witnessing of the president actually stage the protest. It is the beholding of what is until now utterly unimaginable. And to realize that the strategies the president deploys are ones which are always within the reach of any citizen.

The video owes its wide circulation to various aspects both of the message and of the larger context in which it occurs. One suspects the latter has the major role in marking the unusual nature of this event. On the one hand there is the reality of a president appealing to the "world" for help, thereby cementing a helplessness quite unimaginable before it is witnessed. Indeed, he had won the elections, according to official numbers. Not only that, but his win was also in the context of an election organized with a restriction of access to information in a manner seldom if ever witnessed. The government had officially announced, on public television, that there would be no access to internet during the elections. This is a widely used practice in other places as well, but it is the owning up to it through the form of public decrees which highlights a different level of impunity. On the other hand, there is the question of who exactly this president is appealing to. The immediate addressees might be the "friends" the president has outside the country, notably in France, considering the family dynasty's known tie to the former colonial power since independence. But its appearance on social media suggests also that the appeal is to a wider audience. The dictatorship regime surely must have other discreet ways of communicating with its allies. It is no wonder then that the people (Gabonese first, then Africans in general) took the call as addressed to them as well. But the trouble: it is the people which have arrested the president, according to his words. How then are they to make

noise, presumably to liberate him?[84] It is difficult to understand the appeal, but its hold on the viewer is strong.

Responses to this event, I believe, highlight the various ways in which we can tell stories in response to political failure. I highlight the relation between the claim that "nothing is happening" and the repeated call to "make noise." The interest of the first phrase is its echoing of Plenty Coups's words "After this nothing happened" and Jonathan Lear's treatment of the words. And I would like to read the call to make noise in relation to storytelling. Ali Bongo Ondimba's claim is that nothing is happening. We know he refers to the silence at the presidential palace as the coup is being consummated. But could he not also, somehow, be expressing a feeling similar to that of the people, in their lived experience of the regime's absence? (cf. Tonda). The imprisonment he is expressing is undoubtedly familiar to the people. It is this familiarity which informs the various ways in which they made noise, by telling stories around this unique event. I'll refer here to two such ways: in a music video and in journalistic form.

Perhaps as a nod to the president's early life career as a musician[85], the president's words were set to music and became viral on TikTok with various people setting dance moves to it. A series of people are seen dancing to the song, one person ironically expressing her financial distress and asks people to make noise, some performers recording themselves sending noises (literally nonsensical sounds of various types) to Gabon, etc. In one video, the song starts with Ali Bongo Ondimba and Frensh president Emmanuel Macron hugging, then it moves into a series of shots with Ali Bongo Ondimba dancing to the beat in front of various crowds under

[84] As various TikTok users express, "What kind of noise are [we] supposed to be making?" Fafa Lawani USA [@fafalawani], (August 30, 2023) "To make noise where? To who? For what?" Reine Vanessa [@reine_vanessa18] (September 2, 2023).
[85] In the words of another TikTok user, "Ya Ali a fini sa carrière musicale en beauté." (Ali has concluded his musical career in style.) Marie [@diesus4] (August 30, 2023).

cameras, presumably in Gabon.[86] The message is clear. The videographer, through their narrative work, asks us to shift our gaze or to deepen it. Ali Bongo Ondimba can only dance in Gabon because he is hugging Emmanuel Macron in France. The former referring to the whole regime and the latter to the Western supporters, we are called to witness his hug and this continuous dance. The videographer assumes familiarity, thereby evokes images of what we know, helps us make connections within the information already available to us. The message is clear. If the hug is what sustains the dancing, is it not necessarily its stoppage that has power to halt the dance? If this is a call to our agency, the target is clear: fight the hug! The video ends in silence while shots of the president continue. His movement can hardly now be interpreted as dance. He is at best stumbling, falling almost. But how did he, how could he fall?

In a different narrative form, *Jeune Afrique* journalists Mathieu Olivier and Jeanne Le Bihan crafted a four-series account of what they called the "fall of the Bongo Empire."[87] Their purpose in the series was to answer the question on everyone's mind, namely the sudden helplessness of the all-powerful regime. Written in the aftermath of the coup that deposed the family dynasty, the journalists help us articulate how it is the case that Ali Bongo Ondimba found himself alone amid the silence of his friends who did not make the noise he begged them to make. In a typical journalistic fashion, the writers chronicle for us a path that led from the beginning of the president's rise to power and the trajectory towards his fall. A throughline between key dates and key players is laid out for the reader to see with much clarity. The fall of the Bongo empire, the reader comes to realize, is the result of a self-isolation of the now deposed president. Feuds within the family dynasty itself, the journalists argue, are the real causes of what

[86] Go C go [@thifun], "Make noise!" (August 30, 2023).
[87] Mathieu Olivier and Jeanne Le Bihan, « La chute de l'empire Bongo, » *Jeune Afrique*, October 2nd, 2023, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1487269/politique/serie-la-chute-de-lempire-bongo/

transpired after the elections. The military coup leaders, themselves, are deeply connected to the dynasty and what they frame as salvation for Gabon can easily be interpreted as part of old feuds among the elites in which the people are a second thought, if at all remembered. The narrative allows the people a complex relation both to the deposed regime and the new government. For if the people's agency remains irrelevant in either case, what potential for transformation can they hope for? In leading us here, the narrative contributes to the feeling of articulate indignation. The heart of the information in the narrative is not new to the people: everyone knows it is a family business. The contribution of the narrative is its ability to reveal connections into that known reality. Connections which can allow the people to articulate their political experience under the political regime in its old or new form. In this articulation, the people's usual grievances against the regime are stirred anew and in a manner that allows them to put some words to the experience.

These two forms of narrative around one event allow distinctive ways of seeing reality. Their very different approaches to the same reality highlight the playful nature of imagination. The clarity one gains through them points to alternative ways of seeing ongoing reality. With this also come alternative ways of conceiving the possibilities for transformation as well as our agency's role in that process. In directing us to the western support of the Bongo regime, the videographer directs our agency in a different way than the journalists who deepen our sight of the local players. Any possible response from the perspective of agency benefits from the insights of both narratives. That possibility can only be built upon the articulations of intelligibility that transfigurative imagination makes possible. Note that both narratives occur in spaces which are not explicit sites of political contestation in relation to state power, i.e., public spaces. Their ability to enlarge our life depends on their durable uptake. These and other stories

must be told over and over again until they lead to articulate indignation to elicit political action. It is through the continued retelling that alternative ways of seeing reality, in a new political consciousness, can be shared in the form of habits through culture.

6. **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued for the imagination as a transformative tool within the context of political failure in Africa. I conceive of transfigurative imagination as a mode of engaging with reality in a manner which opens up new ways of seeing and talking. Attention to the question "how are going to do?" has revealed the trauma inherent in the political condition and suggested a need for a therapeutic approach to the role of the imagination. I propose transfigurative imagination is proposed as the therapeutic mechanism which gives us a way to move beyond the question and the trauma it manifests.

At the beginning of the chapter, I laid out three desiderata for a therapeutic approach to political failure in the manner proposed by Akure-Davain. Such a method, I advanced, must be it must be such that it allows the possibility of action beyond defeat and thereby the possibility of a new form of sociality, must be able to reboot the project of living well and allow it to proceed past its previous discontinuities, and must take a form which gives new life to our intellectual capacity for imagination. The view of transfigurative imagination I develop here has sought to satisfy those features. I have emphasized the third, i.e., on the ability to give a new form to our imaginative capacities, a form which allows us to surpass our stuckness in a question and makes possible new ways of talking. It is these imaginative capacities which make way for the continuity of life by mending the rip in the fabric of life and trace new paths for action.

A related concern to the features of a theory of transfigurative imagination is the question of what makes it a successful project. First, the work of transfigurative imagination is only successful within a conversation between the poets and the people. That is to say, a poet may very well fulfill their task of clarifying reality in unforeseen ways only for the vision she lays out to remain sterile. Because it does not bear fruit in any meaningful or sustained uptake by the rest of us. We might still ask what marks the success of the poet's own part in this conversation. Could not a poet tell a false story and mislead the people? This question pays attention to the reality for example of propaganda which might be a frequently used tool for the maintenance of the condition of political failure. The consideration for a truthfulness of a poet's story rests on the condition which, drawing from the work of Wamba dia Wamba, I have set in the conception of transfigurative imagination for the recognition that people think. That people understand the reality of their political life. A successful story must be able to show respect for that fact. It must also point towards the transformation of reality towards a world in which the fact that people think—which is also a recognition of the people's autonomous and unmediated relation to life, which is also at the same time a recognition of the importance of their agency—is given a real chance at flourishing. It is easy to see that propagandist stories do not do this.

How are we again going to do? Stories can do essential political work. This chapter has argued for their space within the work of imagination around an impossible question from a perspective of excess. We tell stories. Out of excess, we latch onto bits and pieces of which we can make sense. Bits and pieces which provide a measure of intelligibility. No resolution is given in that intelligibility, but through it transformative paths might be lit. No matter how dim the light. We owe much to the poets who make up the stories we live by.[88] For the new perspectives

[88] Phrase adopted from Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997).

on our lives and our agency's potential towards transformation give us new energy in the project of wellbeing, individual and collective. Beyond the immediate context of political failure in Africa, my argument here has usefulness within the larger literature and practice of political imagination. It contributes to the way we employ imaginative play to see our lives anew for the sake of social transformation. There is value, towards this project, in naming this particular form of the imagination. I focus on narrative because stories, though not exclusively able to reveal this form of imagination, are particularly able to do so. But stories too have limits. The impossible question retains a measure of its impossibility. Indeed, to study the impossible requires a readiness to end up with more questions than answers.[89] Moreover, amid political failure, our lives cannot regain full intelligibility until we arise out of that failure. Transfiguration, therefore, sets us on a path which it is our responsibility to make ours. How are we again going to do? We will tell stories. Through them, we will create meanings. And with them we will carry ourselves forward as we ask the question over and over again, and as we attempt to answer it over and over again. Until the birth of a new world which can dissolve this particular question and make room for new questions.

[89] Carlos M. N. Eire, *They Flew: A History of the Impossible* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2023), xv.

FOUR | THE PROMISE OF SELF-SACRIFICE

In May 2015, crowds of Burundian citizens descended on the streets in protests. Burning tires. Blocking roads. Guarding neighborhoods with batons and clubs. And with an excitement seldom witnessed in the country. In reaction to the then president's decision to seek an unconstitutional third term, the people refused, chanting en masse "Sindumuja," meaning "I am not a slave." Against the proclamation of a servitude that had kept them under authoritarian rule and led to violent wars for decades, they responded by occupying the public space. When a military general announced a coup, which subsequently failed, the excitement and energy witnessed everywhere was an experience to behold. The experience said something beyond the expectation of political change towards an expression of something much deeper in the lives of the people. An embodied, active desire to undo the shackles of self-serving governments. The protests did not last. As expected, the state unleashed its force, killing protesters, disappearing others, and forcing a lot of people into exile—both regular citizens and eminent political figures.

1. Aims of the chapter

1.1. A good way to live

What is the normative life of agency in a space of political failure? This is the question that motivates this chapter. As the normative element instructs, this is a question regarding what form agency should take. This form is one which is attuned to the wellbeing of the people who inhabit the space of political failure. Such a space, as the prelude shows, is one in which political agency is often slated to fail in its aim to transform society. The violence of state seems to dictate the end to any form of agency and demand its return to the mode of inertia. How can we revive it

beyond the limit of this violence? Taking inspiration from the Burundian protesters' "I am not a slave" slogan, I argue that the life of agency beyond the limits of violence is to be found in self-fulfillment, a manner of living life in attunement to individual projects of wellbeing. The protesters say "I" to demarcate the space of the individual even amid the collective manifestation of agency. They proclaim their protest to be in large part aimed at making the protester's life through the unmaking on the limits heretofore imposed on her. Could it not be possible, then, that the failure in the end of protest is not final? Could it not be that the protesters are self-fulfilled even as they are killed or disappeared? I argue that self-fulfillment should embrace the form of self-sacrifice within spaces of political failure. The benefit of this normative call is twofold: to shed light on the life of agency in spaces where we might often see only failure and to motivate the pursuit of full living against the limitations imposed by political failure. A large portion of the chapter's writing will be spent on giving justificatory basis both for self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice. What I present in the chapter, while it is clearly directed at a historically and geographically specific political condition, has relevance for political action in general. Indeed, what I say about protest and its relation to self-sacrifice amounts also to an argument about the general life of efficacious agency in the not so rare instances where failure awaits political action.

One way to best capture to the general view which I am arguing for is through the following example: Asked about her tireless and lifelong protest activity, writer and activist Grace Paley replied by saying, "It's a good way to live your life."[1] The idea that protest is a good way to live is easy to understand. Surely, standing up against injustice towards social

[1] Susan J. Brison, "'No Ways Tired' An Antidote for Protest Fatigue in the Trump Era" in *Protest and Dissent, Nomos* 62, 190.

transformation is a good way to live. And part of what makes the goodness of living in that case is the potential social transformation that is expected from protest activities. However, in Paley's specific context, the goodness is proclaimed against a background of continued failure to transform society. How is it the case, people asked Paley, that she kept on protesting so many times and for so many causes when in fact there seemed to be no social progress as a result of her or anyone else's protest endeavors? This is to ask about the point of protest beyond the commonly noted interest in social transformation. In her response, Paley directs our gaze towards a different way of thinking about protest. She does this by calling our attention to the life of the protester herself and to what it means for her to live a good life. This is a way to reasonably sideline the goal of social transformation in an evaluation of the activity of protest.

It is this idea of protest as a good way to live which animates the chapter. I take it to be a view with potential to deal with the reality of political failure. In the chapter, I pay attention to a condition of political failure and what it means to live a good life of agency in it. In doing so, I contribute to writings on political action by conceiving a distinct form of protest that takes failure seriously. The specific context is contemporary Africa and the repetition of political failure which I have maintained is the heart of the political situation. And the general interest in writings on protest, although secondary, reveals a need for this conception of political agency in a way which creates meaningful space for the possibility of failure, as a historical and structural point. I advance a view of protest as an individual aspiration towards self-fulfillment, in opposition to a common view of protest as a collective, public, and communicative political strategy for social transformation. The move from the collective to the individual as well as the centering of self-fulfillment over social transformation are suggested and justified by the attention to failure and what it means to live well (i.e. virtuously) in difficult realities. It is a way

of giving meaning to protests that fail and recognizing the worthwhile lives of protesters who inhabit that space of failure.

The form of protest I present is founded on self-sacrifice. The view that protest requires self-sacrifice is at first glance simple and uninteresting. Protests, we know, require time and energy which could be spent on other life activities. Directing such time and energy into protest rather than into these other activities is a form of sacrifice, understood as a giving of one thing for another worthier thing. The sacrifice element gains some interest in consideration of the reality that many protests are staged by vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and communities. That they give up their time and energy despite the vulnerability in order to protest is no small feat. My argument, however, is not founded on this simple fact. I argue for self-sacrifice to the death, self-sacrifice as a willingness to die so that one may live[2]. What I mean by this is a form of living one's life as best as required by one's conception of the good life, even if such a choice may lead to the danger of exposure to lethal violence. It is not an interest in self-harm for the pursuit of political goals. The foundational view is that one must live one's life fully, even amid grave danger of death. The goal is to "fully inhabit one's dwelling,"[3] as reference to what living fully requires in a human form of life as well as in the political society in which one lives one's life. It is possible to read this view as based on a claim that there are conditions under which life is not worth living. That is not the relevant background. I claim rather that life is worth living fully no matter the conditions. In this chapter I do not seek to offer a description of what protest does by way of clear definition, but rather to contribute to a

[2] The idea of a willingness to die in order to live in inspired by the Cheikh Hamidou Kane's novel Ambiguous Adventures in which a major character, faced with the reality of colonial defeat, suggests to their community a giving up of their old ways of life and an uptake of European worldviews as the only way to survive. Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *Ambiguous Adventure*, trans. Katherine Woods (Oxford: Heinemann, 1972).
[3] "habiter pleinement sa demeure." Léonora Miano, *Afropea : Une utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (Paris : Grasset, 2020)

conception of what protest can be considering specific political conditions. I advance a normative view, one not based on duties of justice (i.e., the duties we owe to others in view of our belonging in social and political communities) but on existential duties (i.e., duties we owe to ourselves in light of our personal projects towards wellbeing).[4]

1.2. Structure of the chapter and the argument

The argument of the paper is structured as follows: Section 1 argues for the need to expand our conception of protest, section 2 provides that conception as aspiration to self-fulfillment along with its various justifications, section 3 argues for the self-sacrifice as a form of self-fulfillment. I conclude with reflections on the uses of this conception of protest in relation to failure as a fact of political action and to political failure in the African context.

It is useful to offer some preliminary clarifications on what the reader should expect in this chapter.

First, the conception of protest I develop, especially in relation to the risk of death, relies quite heavily on what I take to be the reality of political experience in the contemporary African context. The implications of this reality in terms of what has been called "political failure"[5] have been explored in the first chapter, as well as is supported by other writings in philosophy and political theory. My reliance on this case in this present chapter takes the reality at face value. It is deployed to give substance to the political situation which motivates the thinking in the chapter.

[4] The term existential here is not a reference to existentialism as an intellectual tradition, even though some features of what these duties involve, e.g., the centrality of freedom, might bear similarity to that tradition.
[5] Uchenna Okeja, *Deliberative Agency: A Study in Modern African Political Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022).

Second, my evocation of Grace Paley's view that protest is "a good way to live your life" will not be analyzed with specific reference to the speaker's justification for this view. Instead, I present this as a generally defensible view on what protest does and it will be my task to provide a defense for it, one which is based in a general point of view from the perspective of failure.

Third, there are two senses of failure which it serves to keep in mind. There is the aforementioned reality of political failure which is specific to contemporary African political life. It refers to a post-colonial condition of existence in an environment in which institutional politics do not function well and have not done so since their founding after colonization. The institutional failure imbues the rest of life in a manner that stifles individual and collective projects for living well. In the space of action, as can be gleaned in the case of the Burundian protest, it is also marked by the reality of violence (often lethal) directed at those who oppose the aims of the state. The other type of failure is one that goes beyond this context to reflect on the fate of political protests, a good number of which fail. This second sense of failure captures the failure of political action tout court. It is the recognition that political agents act in ways which sometimes do not succeed in achieving their social aims. The term "political failure" when I use it in this chapter is a technical term which refers to the first kind of failure.

Fourth, I use the general term self-sacrifice with a more specific connotation which involves a willingness to die. Whereas the term can capture much less severe cases, I seek to emphasize the cases which involves the risk of death. This is motivated by the context of political failure and the play of state violence in it. In addition, because the argument I develop aims to serve as motivation for action, it serves to construct it in view of what is most likely to discourage such action. The challenge is to provide a way for a fulfilling life lived with the consciousness of death as a welcome risk.

Fifth, and last, the argument I develop here is not unique to the African context. Evidently, the geographical and historical context is one which interests and affects me quite deeply as an African person and I am convinced that philosophy, on a fundamental level, is personal business.[6] In that sense then I present this chapter's argument in view to that particular context. However, the reality of a risk of death that may attend certain forms of living and acting within a political space are not limited to that context. A lot of protests might indeed carry that fact prominently. As a result, it is my hope that my argument can be read as shedding light to something that is important to protest in general. This is part of the hoped-for contribution to general writings on protest. I do not aim to do a comparative, i.e., empirical, study of the political conditions of protest in various political spaces, but it seems to me to be true that the risk of death I speak of may be more heightened in some spaces than in others.[7] My reference to the African context, in addition to the personal interest, is also in order to give substance to that differential element.

Still, the argument of this chapter does not necessarily require empirical truths about the political condition. One could perhaps even read it as a thought exercise with an intuitive appeal: consider the case that some people fail over and over again to change the political conditions of their existence. Consider also that this failure can manifest in the form of lethal violence which can discourage action to the point of inertia. How can we conceive of an efficacious way to exist in this (perhaps hypothetical) situation? This is the question of major interest. It seems to me that it is a worthwhile task for a political philosophy to pay attention to such "cases" and to envision

[6] This view is inspired most directly by Pierre Hadot's conception of philosophy from ancient and modern times as a way of life. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

[7] It is evident to me for instance that the freedom to protest people might have in the US American space (despite its own real and deep failures that often manifest in the selective murdering of members of target populations) is quite distinct from what one could expect in Burundi for example where one can be jailed, tortured, or disappeared simply for a rumored stance against the government.

a path for political life and action that is attuned to such hypothetical but possible conditions of existence.

2. Protest beyond social transformation and the collective

In this section, I present common assumptions about what protest is and does. I do this through a five-point definition of protest as a collective, public, and communicative activity staged as political strategy for social transformation, a definition which brings together common themes from various writings on protest. From this foundation I go on to show the contingency (rather than necessity) of the five elements of the proposed definition. In this section I focus on two elements of the five-point definition, namely its collective form and its goal of social transformation. Doing this work makes room for the view of protest as individual aspiration for self-fulfillment, a view which highlights the individual over the collective and self-fulfillment over social transformation.

2.1. Common aims of protest

What do we seek to achieve when we protest? There are three dominant views on the functions of protest. Let's call them communicative (speaking to others), self-expressive (speaking of oneself), and community-building (standing with others).[8] To think of the functions of protest is at the same time to think of what protest itself is, since the meaning of actions comes from our consideration of their ends. The communicative function of protest envisions protest as an

[8] This is not the only way to categorize the aims of protests. L.A. Kauffman, for example suggests a classification in terms of what can be termed social transformation (policy and awareness) and therapeutic self-expression: "Do protests change policy? Do they change minds? Or do they just let off steam?" L.A. Kauffman, *How to Read Protests* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 1-2. In addition to this, Susan J. Brison argues for a social consciousness aim in protests, allowing protesters to not feel alone (Brison, "No ways tired," 194-195). While my classification is in no way exhaustive, I believe it captures much of what has been written on the aims of protest.

activity which seeks to communicate about injustices to others, as regular members of society or as those with institutional power to effect needed changes.[9] The self-expressive function reads protest as a tool for the protester to assert herself. In the space of injustice, on this view, she who protests speaks of her own beliefs and her care for justice. In this way, she speaks the truth of herself by following her own conscience against perceived injustices.[10] And the community-building function recognizes the protester as one who emerges out of solitude to face others and attain the realization and comfort that she is not alone. Within a situation of social injustice, it is easy for those who suffer the injustice to feel disconnected from the rest of society, especially because many kinds of social injustice operate through mechanisms of exclusion and neglect. Protest thus provides a process for one to exist in togetherness with others by becoming aware of existing communities as well by forging new ones.[11] Note that these three functions, though distinct, do not each constitute a specific kind of protest. They are varied perspectives through which one can read the usefulness of protest.

If one were to devise a unified conception of protest from these functions, one would come upon a picture of protest as a collective, public, and communicative activity staged as

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[9] "Protest is an attempt to publicly communicate about perceived injustices to two groups: other members of the society generally, and those who have the institutional and systemic power to fix or ameliorate those injustices." Jennifer Kling and Megan Mitchell, *The Philosophy of Protest: Fighting for Justice Without Going to War* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022), 146. José Medina's work on protest also conceives protest as "communicative resistance." José Medina, "The Duties to Protest and to Listen to Protest: Communicative Resistance, Enabler's Responsibility and Echoing," *Democratic Theory*, vol. 9, no. 2(Winter 2022): 101-119. See also José Medina, "Philosophy of Protest and Epistemic Activism" in *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, eds. Lee McIntyre, Nancy McHugh, and Ian Olasov (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2022), 123-133, and *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

[10] Speaking of civil disobedience, a key term within conceptions of protest, Donatella Di Cesare argues that it "requires the courage not to betray oneself and the justice one believes in by folding to the iniquitous command of others. This means that, within disobedience, there is always a form of obedience, to one's own conscience." Donatella Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, trans. David Broder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022), 85.

[11] José Medina argues that "[w]ith respect to its internal audience, the act of protesting has the crucial function of forging and affirming in-group solidarity." Medina, "The Duties to Protest and to Listen to Protest," 108. Similarly, Susan J. Brison advances that protest, among other things, "unites the protesters, creating or enhancing solidarity among them." Brison, "No ways Tired," 195.

political strategy for social transformation. Much thinking can be done about what exactly each of these five aspects entails. For example, does the claim that protests are collective activities imply a conception of the collective as a single agent or is it merely a claim about the social fact in the prevalence of mass protests? Or what form of communication does a protest involve? These and other questions are no doubt important and some of them have been treated extensively in the literature.[12] The formulation of protest with the five aspects works here as an overview of what is generally assumed to constitute protest. Likewise, the connection of the five aspects to the three general functions of protest is easy to grasp. The public aspect for example can arise from the view of protest as communication (as the fact that such communication requires appeals to public reasons) or from the perspective of community-building (as reference to the work of protests to create or highlight publicly legible community formations). In presenting both the three general functions of protest and the five-point definition of protest, I intend to provide a bird's eye view of writings on protest as a place to start towards an expansion of the space of our thinking about protest. It should be noted that all three goals of protest above center the perspective upon which to protest requires communicating with others, in such a way that the communicative function can be said to subsume all others. In self-expression, one speaks of oneself to others and the process towards community-building requires expressing certain things to one another that makes people recognize their shared perceptions of social reality. In addition, protest on any of these views is considered from the perspective of political aims. Protest appears as a political strategy for social transformation. Moreover, the views propose that we read protest primarily as a public matter,[13] as the prime example of politics which, as Hannah

[12] José Medina's work provides an extensive consideration of what communication involves in protest.
[13] "[P]rotest must be publicly communicative." Kling and Mitchell, *The Philosophy of Protest*, 119.

Arendt has argued, requires individuals to appear in the public space and face one another.[14] Lastly, attention to the history of protests leads to a wider conception of protest as a collective activity, given the prevalence of mass protests as the standard form of the activity. It is, in this light, not a common approach to read protest from the perspective of individuals as I intend to do here.[15]

2.2. The contingency of the five elements of protest: the collective form and the aim of social transformation

One may question each of the five elements of this conception, i.e. its collective form, its public manifestation, its emphasis on communication, its use as political strategy, and its aim of social transformation. In reference to the two senses of failure, as a general fact of political action and as a technical marker of African political life, I argue in what follows that none of these five elements is necessary to a conception of protest. The goal is not to argue against a conception of protest which employs these five elements. It is, instead, to show that there is room and, indeed, a need for a conception of protest which goes beyond the fivefold view. The conception of protest which I pursue in this chapter aims to supplement rather than refute other conceptions of protest.

2.2.1. The failure of political action and political failure

First, then, the general idea of failure.

[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 204.
[15] "[N]o one protests as an abstract individual or a bare particular, but as a member of a group that is for or against something." Susan Brison, "No Ways Tired," 191

I remarked earlier that failure is a historical and structural consideration in a conception of protest. What this implies, among other things, is our need to take this fact into account as we conceive of what protest can be. If failure is a possibility, then one must include this fact in a conception of protest such that those who stage failing protests can, if they survive, look back at it and find benefit therein—so that they can think that it was worth it. The motivation for this thought is not a search for coping mechanisms in times when our actions fail, however honorable a cause that may be. It is not a merely therapeutic interest. Nor is it an attempt to justify protest for protest's sake. Not all protests, as is true of any actions, are worth the time or the energy of anyone. The motivation is the following: assuming the justification of our aims in protest—which I will link to our justified interest in wellbeing—it is a reasonable expectation that those who act through protest should feel that they have lived their lives in a worthwhile fashion. I recently heard of a local activist who led an important social movement which at the time seemed largely slated to succeed but ended up committing suicide when the movement failed spectacularly. Without making judgments on the inner life of the activist, one can imagine the possibility of a hopelessness and a disappointment so deep that they could lead one to the conclusion that life is not worth living after failure. The view I am proposing here takes cases like this into consideration. How can we conceive of protest such that we can live well when we fail? Part of that work, I believe, requires that we do not leave the possibility of failure as a *post hoc* consideration. For the possibility of failure is real. As Grace Paley's example teaches us, the failure of political activity is a well-known reality which is not limited to any specific time or place. It is at once a historical and structural consideration. The history of political protests provides plenty of examples of the failure of such activities. It is arguably the case that far more protests fail than succeed. Even if that were not the case, and this is the structural point, one's

reasonable involvement in any political activity must envision the possibility of failure. To consider failure is thus a sign of practical wisdom about what to expect as a consequence of our actions. Moreover, within the globally dominant democratic framework of politics and its constitutive competition among different political interests, learning to live with failure is part and parcel of what it means to be a citizen.[16] Taking the history of protest seriously and heeding the democratic need of inhabiting failure requires a wider conception of the functions of protest to include a meaningful space for protests that fail. As is the nature of conditionals, to provide space to the possibility of failure ("If I fail, then…") implies that the inner world of that space considers that failure actually happens and plans accordingly ("Since I fail, therefore…").[17] There is a need to think from the perspective of failure before one engages in protest so as to understand what protest can mean in the presence of failure and plan a course of action in light of that failure.

Second, some detail on political failure in the African context makes the idea of failure concrete in a way that highlights its potentially lethal danger.

The notion of political failure in the African political context, as inspired by the work of philosopher Uchenna Okeja, highlights the idea that the African political experience has been one of failed political institutions in a manner which affects all areas of social life in that context. This institutional reality, as I have argued in the first chapter, has its correlate in ecstatic living as the existential condition of the political subject, causing a disengagement from transformative action in a state of inertia and serving as foundation for continued and often failed attempts at

[16] See Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship after Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and Juliet Hooker, *Black Grief/White Grievance: The Politics of Loss* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[17] This is to say that to think with conditionals is to allow the possibility of a world in which the hypothetical is factual. When such thinking is deployed for the sake of action, the possible world affects what we can expect as outcomes of the specific action.

leaving the African physical space altogether. Protests are not foreign to this political situation.[18] The inertia is therefore not total. But the outcome of attempts at protests in many places contribute to the very inertia, that is, through the failure of protests to achieve their goal of changing the political situation which cements the inefficacy of agency. The ability of state institutions to contain protests, through the use of police terror, intimidations, disappearances, and outright murders, manifests the violence of the state in the service of the interests of the political elites. Within ongoing protests, the realization of this hard reality, often by witnessing the violence in action, say, through the police shooting at protesters, tends to discourage and break protests down. For anyone planning a protest therefore, the failure to be imagined is no longer the mere fact that the protests might not achieve the social transformation they seek to achieve. It is also the added realization that the failure might occur in the form of a literal loss of life. In many cases this is not a remote and unlikely reality, but a real and looming danger. This is where the power of the state lies—in its ability and readiness to mete out violence to those who oppose it. More than the simple Weberian view of the state's monopoly on violence,[19] there is here an additional layer in the reality which arises out of the specific historical conditions for the development of the state in Africa. In the first chapter I have briefly referenced the history of that development to highlight its widely noted ties to colonization. To conceive protest in this context requires an understanding of state violence specific to it and the ever-coming danger of violence against protesters, understood not necessarily as opposing the state (i.e., not from a strictly oppositional view of protest in which to protest is primarily to be against something[20])

[18] Think for example of the "Arab Spring" of the 2010s.
[19] Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 77-128.
[20] Susan Brison advances that a protester is "a member of a group which is for or against something." Brison, "No Ways Tired," 191. The same oppositional view can be gleaned in José Medina's work in his central view, drawing from John Rawls and Candice Delmas, on which a duty to protest arise from an imperfect duty to resist injustice. See José Medina, "The Duties to Protest and to Listen to Protest," 103-104.

but as those who through varied ways of living and acting get in the way of the violent and oppressive aims of the state within political failure. Thinking protest from this perspective requires a readiness for defeat through ultimate death.

2.2.2. Implications for the five-point definition

What does all this imply for the fivefold definition of protest? A serious consideration of defeat, through the general view of failure as a historical and structural element and the specific context of political failure in the African context, suggests a rethinking of the goals of protest. In relation to the five-point definition, the perspective from failure already eliminates two of the five elements of the definition of protest provided above: the aim of social transformation as well as the collective form of protest (since social transformation involves the ability to reach and involve other people in a manner which leads to the oft-cited mass protest form.) The rest of this section will address this. The three remaining aspects of the definition, namely the public nature of protests, its communicative approach, as well as its deployment as political strategy are discussed in Section 2. They require a prior conception of protest as an individual aspiration for self-fulfillment which is to be developed in that section. The task of the ongoing section is to advocate for the need of that novel conception. This process of elimination is not a refutation of these aspects as inessential to protests. Indeed, such common features of protest can be easily noticed in most protest movements. Instead, the goal is to create a wider space for a conception of protest which takes failure seriously in a manner that the common views often do not.

The point of failure most immediately brings to mind the inability for protesters to transform society. Indeed, since this is the ultimate end goal of most conceptions of protest, the failure of protest is understood primarily as one at the social level. This is the fact which prompts

the questions to Grace Paley. Why do you, Ms. Paley, keep protesting when nothing seems to change? That nothing seems to change is a statement on the truth of the world evaluated from protest's assumed goal of social transformation. Those who asked Paley this question were implicitly suggesting that her protest had no point once its ultimate end repeatedly failed. She might have responded in all sorts of ways. As some like to do, she might have pointed to minute changes here and there, or claimed that her protesting is a mere seed in preparation for real change to sprout in a metaphorical tomorrow. We will return to her emphasis on the good life. For now, though, it is important to note that her answer accepts the premise of the question posed to her. Yes, nothing seems to change. So what? My activity, she seems to say, is not to be evaluated primarily from the perspective in which things in the world must change as a result of protest. Together with Paley, it is reasonable then to let go of the view that protest is evaluated exclusively or even primarily from the perspective of social transformation. As we do that, we might find space for Paley's point of living one's life well and the related pursuit of self-fulfillment.

In presenting the case of Grace Paley and staging it as a conversation between indeterminate people and a single individual, I thereby gesture to the possibility of protest from the perspective of a single individual rather than a collective. It is true, this does not tell us whether Paley protested alone or within a collective. And this is precisely the point: in pursuing a conception of protest from an individual perspective, I do not seek to claim protest to be all in all an exclusively individual activity. That would be an untenable position. I seek rather to shed light on an individual perspective even as it may and often will be inserted in a wider collective context. The assumption that protests are collective activities is no doubt informed by history,

but it is not unheard of for individuals to stage protests alone.[21] The possibility of individual protests shows that protests need not be collective. We can therefrom argue from the location of a single individual as we conceive of protest generally. Moreover, taking the perspective of the individual recognizes the simple fact about collectivities, i.e., that they are made up of individuals. It is a fact which is crucial in understanding the dynamics of protest, e.g., how they come about, how they break down, how they appear in public, etc., as such dynamics rely at least implicitly on a functional picture of individual existence in a social setting. How are people motivated? How to provide room for individual self-expression? How to create sufficient bonds among individuals to build a cohesive community? The reliance on answers to these questions in organizing protests highlights the importance of the individual perspective, even from within a collective conception of protest.

3. Protest as an aspiration for self-fulfillment

Taking advantage of the space created by the discussion thus far, I offer below a conception of protest that is based on a primarily individual perspective. It is the view of protest as self-fulfillment. The conception does not aim to offer a full and exclusionary picture of protest, but to give due attention to the individual protester in light of both the need and the room made for this individual point of view. I argue that protest as self-fulfillment is motivated from the point of view of existential duties, or duties we have to ourselves in view of our personal projects for wellbeing. I refer briefly to the neglect of the individual perspective in common thoughts about

[21] As L.A. Kaufmann argues, "[p]rotests come in many forms and happen on wildly varying scales, from a single individual kneeling on a football field to a million people marching through the streets of a major city." L.A. Kaufmann, *How to Read Protest* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 3. A recent example is the case of Aaron Bushnell, a US Air Force person, who set himself on fire in protest of Israel's war on Gaza, saying "I will no longer be complicit in genocide." Aishvarya Kavi, "Man Dies After Setting Himself on Fire Outside Israeli Embassy in Washington, Air Force Says," *The New York Times*, February 25th, 2024 https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/25/world/middleeast/israel-embassy-man-on-fire.html

protest, then show how the perspective of self-fulfillment is a corrective approach. The consideration of political failure evinces the limitations it imposes on self-fulfillment—it denies necessary resources for the project self-fulfillment and thwarts the pursuit of individual agency its own life independently of the state. Despite this, a consideration of the relation between self-fulfillment and social conditions reveals the priority of the former over the latter. Individuals must therefore be committed to their projects of self-fulfillment independently of the social conditions. This section develops the view of self-fulfillment as a way of life and protest as a mode of collision between individual and state interests. Protest is thus not mainly a reactionary attitude. However, I also argue that there are grounds for a reactionary view of protest in form of further commitment to one's project of wellbeing. This commitment is what founds a minimal requirement for protest as a good way to live one's life. The view of protest and self-fulfillment as a way of life reveals the contingency of the three remaining elements of the five-point definition of protest, namely its public manifestation, its communicative function, and its deployment for political strategy.

3.1. A return to the individual

In her book *The Time of Revolt*, Donatella Di Cesare expresses that "[r]evolt is usually analyzed in terms of its political charge, while the existential tension that both permeates and underpins it is left overlooked."[22] This view echoes the centrality of social transformation as the goal of protest. The prioritization of the political goal in protest or revolt can have the (perhaps unintended) consequence of neglecting other elements involved in the reality of protest. For Di Cesare, this omission requires what she calls a "phenomenology of revolt that unpacks its

[22] Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 73.

individual perspective."[23] To think protest through an existential perspective,[24] it is suggested, directs our attention onto the experience of the individuals who protest. From this perspective, a protester's experience is to be considered primarily from the perspective of concerns for freedom. To unpack the individual perspective requires that we set aside other perspectives, even if we may not exclude them since we must rely on multiple other perspectives to complete the full picture of protest.

There are surely important differences between revolt and protest as political concepts which might call into question an appeal to Di Cesare's arguments. In making this appeal, I rely on the proximity between the two concepts, whose difference may be largely historical (i.e., in terms of what realities each is used to describe) rather than on their real content. For example, to give substance to what revolt is, Albert Camus speaks of an enslaved person who, having lived under the orders of his master suddenly refuses to obey the master and says no.[25] The no of the enslaved person suggests a refusal of one's lived conditions which, given the nature of slavery, limit the fullness of the life of the person as an agent and a free being with his own life project for wellbeing. This view of revolt as refusal makes it similar to protest which is also often understood as a refusal of the ways things are. Relatedly, Di Cesare defines revolt among other things as an individual's "refusal of injustice,"[26] a view which echoes the definition of protest as communicative resistance against injustice.[27] Engagement with Di Cesare's thoughts is motivated by the recognition of this similarity between protest and revolt, despite their potential differences.

[23] Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 73.
[24] I take the existential perspective to imply the experience of living human beings. It is not necessarily a reference to the existentialist philosophical tradition.
[25] Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), 27.
[26] Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 45.
[27] This is Medina's general view of what protest is.

Di Cesare's view is that there is an existential tension which "permeates and underpins" revolt.[28] This is the tension between individual life and politics.[29] In other words, revolt or protest takes place in a space in which there is a disagreement and often a disconnect between the aims of politics and the aims of individuals for the pursuit of their life projects. Against this tension, revolt seeks to recover the connection between life and politics.[30] The recovery might take the form of a demand for a new alignment between politics and life. Given the reality of failure, however, that demand might not be met. As such, the motivation for protest might redirect its focus away from the expectation that the demand will be met to instead focus on the individual life of the protester. This is what the decentering of social transformation suggests.

3.2. Wellbeing and self-fulfillment

The existential perspective recognizes that the individual is in pursuit of a life project which involves an endless reaching for self-improvement. Following an Aristotelian tradition, I maintain that this search is based in wellbeing as the ultimate end of human life and action.[31] The practical details of what that implies will differ from person to person, and different theories of wellbeing offer varied options. But the thought that human beings have a sense of what is good in life and make life plans in light of an interest to live well is generally accepted. The terms we use to describe this general interest also vary. It may be termed happiness, wellbeing, quality of

[28] Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 73.
[29] "The only way to understand this tension is to start from the fragile connection between politics and existence." (Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 73). Di Cesare emphasizes that the lost connection between politics and life is principally about the abstraction of politics which proceeds as calculation and bureaucracy, a perspective which is not part of my ongoing reflections. More important to me is the idea of a disconnect between politics and life, of lives made irrelevant by political procedures that repeatedly fail to fulfill legitimate individual and collective expectations.
[30] "Revolt seeks somehow to recover this connection, often by dramatizing its loss." Di Cesare, *The Time of Revolt*, 73.
[31] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1097b.

life, among other things. The ongoing reflections align more or less with the capability approach to this as developed by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen.[32] Located in a general interest in a human quality of life with a prominence of considerations for freedom, this moral theory highlights a connection between human agency and human existence, calling attention to what we are able to do in pursuit of freedom in relation to what we can be as human beings.[33] Imagining human freedom, the approach suggests, requires a conception of the real potential there is for individuals to actually achieve their sense of freedom in fulfillment of the larger project of wellbeing. The theory provides a privileged place to people's interest in living a good life and at the same time recognizes that this achievement requires abilities (in terms of resources, sociopolitical conditions, etc.) without the consideration of which projects of wellbeing cannot fully make sense nor be brought to term. Because of differences in these abilities, individuals' project of wellbeing will differ.

Towards the ultimate end of wellbeing, individuals undertake specific actions within their abilities. This undertaking, insofar as it is self-directed and aiming towards personal conceptions of well-being, can be thought of as self-fulfillment. That is, the individual realizes herself through her actions. She makes herself who she is by working on her life project. The view of self-fulfillment is not based on a consideration of the individual in solitude, as disconnected from

[32] See for example Amartya Sen, *Commodities and Capabilities* (Nee Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2011)

[33] This is more in line with Sen's version of the approach than with Nussbaum's which finds a general pursuit of freedom inadequate for a political project (e.g., because some freedoms are prized over others or because the very idea of freedom requires constraint) Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 69-76. Nussbaum's critique makes sense within her specific human development perspective in which capabilities are tools for a comparative assessment on how different nations are faring at any given time in terms of providing a quality of life to their citizens. The interest in freedom, however, when brought back from the nation to the individual level, imbues even Nussbaum's theory. People need to be able to pursue the things they value (read: should be free to do so, i.e., should not be substantially impaired by external constraints). A nation's provision of good education is a way to remove hindrances to its citizens' pursuit of their wellbeing, so that they are free to live a quality of life. The sense of freedom I am referring to is not technical, as opposed to Nussbaum's usage of freedoms in a political sense (e.g., free speech, etc.).

a social setting. It recognizes rather that a good life requires a good measure of self-interest. And in fact, that self-interest will often translates in social needs. For instance, Nussbaum's list of ten capabilities—that is, what she takes to constitute what is essential for individuals to live a life that they value—includes a significant consideration for the individual's relation to others. Her capabilities include things like social interaction, nonhumiliation, and the ability to have a say in the politics of one's society.[34] It is assumed therefore that the individual is connected to a social environment which include other people as well as various institutions and that self-fulfillment relies on a healthy relation between the individual and the larger society.

3.3. Self-fulfillment amid political failure

The reality of failure interferes with aspirations towards self-fulfillment. Whereas aspiration suggests an interest in a gradual betterment of self towards wellbeing, political failure imprisons individuals in undesirable lived conditions which go against essential aspects of what is required for their wellbeing. Put in the language of the capability approach, political failure takes away the abilities which individuals require to pursue their projects of wellbeing. Within political failure the nation, which is supposed to be the guarantor of the capabilities for a quality of life, becomes the major obstacle to it. It is a known fact for example that the failure of politics in the African context affects all other areas of social life including education and the economy which hold great importance in the pursuit of wellbeing in a social context.

The perspective of self-fulfillment imagines the individual as committed to their wellbeing, whatever the social conditions they inhabit. This commitment is in general what allows people to assess their society's ability to provide for what they need. It is also what allows

[34] Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 34.

critique and activity for redress. This consideration reveals that the commitment to self-fulfillment will often be ahead of social conditions in such a way that the former functions as the basis of the latter. When people's agency has efficacy in the political organization of their societies, politics is a public manifestation of an aggregate of various individual projects of self-fulfillment. It is granted that the efficacy of agency will require such things as the ability for individuals to know their own interests without social interference so impairing as to render that knowledge impossible.

In the kind of political failure that is the reality of contemporary African political life, the commitment to self-fulfillment collides with the state that pushes against the flourishing of the commitment into life and action. This, as a basic fact, is what founds the reality of protest. It is, in a primary sense, not a reactionary activity. It is not even a specific activity at all, but a way of life. It is the fact of the individual living fully in pursuit of their life project towards wellbeing which is thwarted by the actual political conditions in the society. It is protest only from the perspective of an unshaken commitment to the project of self-fulfillment. Protest only if the person, through her commitment, keeps pursuing a full life despite the limits imposed on that pursuit by unfavorable social conditions. As it will surely happen, an unshaken commitment will register as a refusal of the limits which political failure imposes on self-fulfillment.[35] And refusal it indeed is. However, the heart of it is a collision of two oppositional forces, one which propels the individual for self-improvement with the guidance of their sense of wellbeing and another

[35] Note that self-fulfillment does not involve an exclusive care for a self that is removed from others and the larger social world. What is required is a view of the self in which the wellbeing of the individual involves the care for the wellbeing of others. Nussbaum's capabilities, for example, include the ability to empathize with others, an ability with suggests on some level that we see our own interest also in the interests of others (Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, 34.)

which founds the reality of political failure which curtails people's ability to direct their lives and actions towards wellbeing.

Committed to their projects of wellbeing, individuals are justified in reacting to the political interference that halts their aspiration towards self-fulfillment. Whereas inertia is the status quo reaction in political failure, those committed to wellbeing in the manner described above react by a further commitment to their project through a continuation of their active lives. This reaction as protest can take many different forms. However, in view of the serious attention we wish to give to failure, it is the individual perspective which matters here. This is, to return to Grace Paley's formulation, a "good way to life your life." How, we might ask, does one live one's life in a good way within the existential tension between politics and individual life? The minimal requirement of a good life of protest is the commitment to one's project of wellbeing, with an assumption that it is a legitimate project. Without going into detail of what makes a legitimate life project, it is assumed that for instance a project that is built around a personal thirst for murder is not legitimate (e.g., from concerns of justice). Note that this minimal requirement does not make explicit reference to the condition of political failure. Though it is unlikely that those who live under political failure will remain oblivious to the condition, awareness of it is not necessary to the view of self-fulfillment. It so happens, however, that pursuing this commitment to the project of wellbeing is met by the limitations imposed by political failure. One wants to get a good education for one's children but is faced with a moribund education system, one aspires to live a healthy life but is met with a dysfunctional health system, etc. In reality, however, the commitment to the project of wellbeing in the space of political failure arises with an acute awareness of that failure. It is an aspiration that is formulated as an intentional move against the limitations which political failure imposes on

individuals. Against imposed silence, individuals might see self-expression as central to what it means for them to be well. Against the state's policing of public spaces and the relegation of certain forms of expression to the private spaces, individuals might for the sake of wellbeing seek to re-inhabit the public space. There is a wide range of expressions of protest as conceived here. And this openness is faithful to the subjectivity of formulations of life projects for wellbeing.[36]

In view of self-fulfillment as a way of life, we can return to the five-point definition of protest and the remaining three features, namely the view that protest is a public activity, that it is communicative and that it serves as political strategy. If protest is a way of life through the perspective of self-fulfillment, its expression takes various forms, directed by an individual's life project towards wellbeing. It need not be public, even as it may often be so. A way of life is not such thing as serves to communicate things to others. It is to serve the person who lives it. And a way of life cannot fundamentally be a tool for political strategy. It is self-contained rather than a means to an end beyond itself.

4. Self-fulfillment through self-sacrifice

After providing the view of protest as self-fulfillment in the previous section, I argue in this section for self-sacrifice as a mode of self-fulfillment. I provide a minimal picture of the claim which I then support with relevant justifications. I offer two types of justifications: from the perspective of human life in which both life and death are accepted as facts and from the perspective of dignity as a duty to the self. The view from dignity draws from Anita Allen's conception of two duties to the self, namely self-care and self-respect, as well as from Aristotle's

[36] Commonalities exist within this variation. Martha Nussbaum's ten capabilities is one way to think of what is common to all beyond the variations.

conception of the virtue of courage. A commitment to self-fulfillment is grounded in Allen's duty of self-respect whose aspect of dignity is likened to honor as the benefit of courageous living from an Aristotelian perspective. However, since self-care might be read as promoting self-preservation over self-sacrifice, I advance that self-fulfillment takes precedence over self-preservation for the sake of a dignified life.

4.1. A minimal picture of self-sacrifice as a mode of self-fulfillment

Considering the real possibility of lethal state violence within political failure, the commitment to the project of wellbeing is also a commitment to the likelihood of death. Individuals choose to live fully and accept the consequences of that choice. When these consequences include a tangible threat of death, the commitment amounts to a willingness to die. Note the distinction between commitment and willingness. In self-fulfillment, one has an interest in living and living to the fullest potential achievable. If this pursuit puts the person in danger of death, that is a welcome fact. The commitment to living fully overrides all other concerns and threats.

4.2. Justifications

4.2.1. From the perspective of a joint human commitment to living and dying

If we step back from self-sacrifice in the specific context of political failure to consider the general idea that a commitment to living can involve a commitment to dying, the thought of a willingness to die does not appear as strange as it may sound. Indeed, human life when lived well requires an awareness and an acceptance of the fact that we are such beings as live and die. It is reasonable to think that to live this form of life in the best way demands more than a reluctant or sorrowful acceptance of the fact that we die, but a welcoming of that fact (even without our

consent) as much as one welcomes the prior fact that we live. The process may involve a lifetime of intentional mourning which may not ever be completed but retains the ideal of a fully joyful welcoming of death as of life. A hard task, yes, but a worthwhile one, nonetheless.

This general human reality can serve as a preliminary justification for self-sacrifice. Indeed, the commitment to self-fulfillment is merely a specification of the very general commitment to life through a highlighting of the manner in which we can live well. The presence of death in this specified context is similar to its presence in the general context. However, one may object to this claim of similarity, to argue that within the specific context of political failure, the commitment to life and death is not as straightforward as it is within the normal human form of life. The hesitation to think of the commitment as similar in both instances, may be founded on the implicit understanding that in self-sacrifice one is not merely accepting death as a reality of human life, but precipitating it. Accepting death as a fact of life does not, in this sense, equal to a welcoming of its premature arrival, especially when it seems one has a part to play in this in the manner one chooses to live and act. One might argue therefore that there is a substantial distinction between the operation of self-fulfillment and agency within political failure as opposed to the usual operations of these things in general human life, making the equivalence questionable.

My reply to this is, firstly, to call us back to the idea of self-fulfillment which, among other things, naturalizes the agency of individuals within political failure. By this I mean that those who inhabit tragic living conditions should not be assumed to be uninterested in or lacking an ability for living to the fullness as happens in places spared by such tragedy. This is the fullness of agency rather than of a good quality of life as imagined by the capabilities approach. The implications of living out this interest when it collides with unfavorable lethal force may be

lamentable, but they do not by that fact render the interest so distinct from the general interest we all have in living well and our general willingness to employ our faculties and energies to that end. Therefore, we might on some level allow self-sacrifice to maintain some measure of the usual relation between life and death within human existence.

Secondly, the view from self-fulfillment requires that we prioritize the human being in the process of living rather than in the process of dying. The precipitation of death is not part of a general human commitment to living fully. Were it not for the intrusion of oppressive politics, self-sacrifice would not occur at all. In the presence of such politics, the individual's willingness to die is justified by what already justifies his commitment to self-fulfillment, i.e., the self-justified interest in wellbeing. Self-sacrifice does not create an additional obligation or require justification distinctly from what is already called for by self-fulfillment. In situations where the possibility of self-sacrifice is a reality, the interest in self-fulfillment manifests in novel ways appropriate to the new situation but these are subsumed in the larger life project towards wellbeing.

4.2.2. From the perspective of duties to the self and the virtue of courage: dignity as a common benefit

I would like now to justify self-sacrifice in terms of the benefit of dignity for a life lived well. To do this I draw from two sources: first, from Anita Allen's conception of duties to the self and second, from Aristotle's discussion of the virtue of courage. The convergence of these two sources is in the importance of dignity. I will conclude the subsection by defending self-sacrifice against concerns for self-preservation, which might be suggested by one of Allen's duties to the self.

4.2.2.1. Duties to the self

As opposed to duties we owe other people in view of our social existence, Anita Allen argues that duties to ourselves are "duties of self-care and self-respect."[37] As Allen argues, such duties are "first, duties to act so as to promote one's rational interests in safety, security, freedom, and opportunity and, second, duties to strive to be the kind of person who acts with self-regard, dignity, and integrity."[38] I have referred to the importance of freedom in the pursuit of wellbeing. And the importance to the development of one's potential to a quality-of-life standard speaks to the notion of opportunity. Moreover, that a good life in a social setting needs things like security, safety, and dignity is a given. It will be understood that the duties do not mean that it is up to the individual to provide for these needs. The duty is for the individual to act in such a way as to promote these features of a good life. The satisfaction of the needs will require a concerted effort between the individual, other people, institutions, social and natural conditions. An individual's fulfillment of their self-regarding duty will not lead to safety in a country at war, for instance. When considered within the specific interest in self-fulfillment, I call these duties to oneself existential duties. This is in order to emphasize that they are central to the general project of making one's life towards wellbeing. As a reliance on what the word existential invokes, I also intend to emphasize that they hold such importance that their fulfillment within dangerous political situations will imply whether one lives or dies, literally.

How do we derive self-sacrifice from Allen's two duties to oneself? First, it is important to note that I do not present self-sacrifice as a duty. The justification for an obligation to willingly die requires an argument which might require too high a threshold either to be such a

[37] Anita L. Allen, "An Ethical Duty to Protect One's Own Information Privacy?" *Alabama Law Review*, vol. 64, no. 4, 854. As the philosophical literature teems with argument for and against duties to the self, an interested reader can see Allen's engagement with the debates in this article.
[38] Anita L. Allen, "An Ethical Duty to Protect One's Own Information Privacy?", 854.

duty as can be fulfilled or one for which agents are motivated to fulfill. This is all the more so because self-sacrifice as I conceive it should be not a rare instance. The prevalence of the condition of political failure which it is meant to address implies that those who inhabit situations of political failure might have to engage in self-sacrifice quite regularly. That is my very hope in sharing these reflections. It is not to say that a duty for self-sacrifice is altogether untenable. It is mostly that I do see the interest in building such an argument for the purposes of the health of agents in the situation of interest. What is needed, I believe, is to offer sufficient justification. To show that self-sacrifice is a reasonable course of action within a particular situation and towards a particular end. Once again, the particular situation is political failure, and the particular end is a pursuit of wellbeing pursuit through the continued process of self-fulfillment. To present a justificatory basis for self-sacrifice, I start with the duty for self-respect and draw from Aristotle's view on courage as way to ground the dignity of a life in situations of danger. Then I shall return to the duty for self-care to justify self-sacrifice in such a way that it is made appealing against the general interest in self-preservation that might be commonly understood to be at the heart of a duty for self-care.

Self-sacrifice results from a life lived courageously. The commitment to self-fulfillment, although it may not involve courage in normal circumstances (i.e., in spaces where there are no serious antagonisms between the individual's pursuit and their social environment), permutes into an act of extreme courage within political failure. Because the violence of the state functions partly as a way to intimidate individuals into submission and retreat, for people to continue living as is required by their own sense of what is involved in living well, it calls for a measure of courage as the manifestation of their commitment to that sense of wellbeing. In such spaces of danger, individuals are so to speak given a choice. To retreat or to dare. To submit or to resist. It

is at the heart of this choice that courage becomes a relevant consideration for what is involved in living well.

4.2.2.2. Courage

In *The Nichomachean Ethics,* Aristotle argues that courage is a virtue which is a mean between fear and confidence, the benefit of which it is to make a person honorable.[39] The turn to courage understood as a way of facing fear and exhibiting confidence poses questions about how one understands self-sacrifice as justifiable. Justifiable against what? By referring to courage in terms of fear and confidence, one might be led to imagine an objection according to which self-sacrifice is a bad thing because the death of the self should be feared. While it is a common fact of human existence that most of us do indeed fear our own death, this is not the perspective from which I turn to Aristotle. It is not for his definition of courage as a virtue, a definition which, in his general view of virtues will require a mean between what is excessive and what is deficient as well a specific object for the virtue. It is to draw out, quite simply and very briefly, the point that courage is a good thing and to connect its specific goodness (namely in making someone honorable) to the duties we have to ourselves. Nonetheless, fear is not irrelevant to the condition of political failure; it is what founds the role of violence as a tool for terror.

Aristotle argues that courage makes a person honorable. In his view of honor, he insists that the kind of situation in which the courageous man attains such a state is in a situation with a danger of death, that is, a situation of war.[40] This emphasis of the danger of death makes this view of courage and its benefit very apt to helps us think about the danger of death in self-

[39] Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1115a-1115b.
[40] Although this is Aristotle's main object for the virtue of courage, one can conceive of courage from his point of view as extending beyond a danger of death. See Denise Vigani, "Aristotle's Account of Courage," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 4 (October 2017): 313-330.

sacrifice. In self-sacrifice, the individual who retains their commitment to self-fulfillment practices courage. And she manifests her character as an honorable person. The centrality of honor for Aristotle's definition of courage, especially in its "civic" form, may appear a little misleading. That is, in terms on my emphasis that self-sacrifice is a form of self-fulfillment and the focus on the life of the individual in relation to herself. In general, we do not think of individuals as honorable in relation to themselves but rather in relation to other people.[41] This is not the only way to think of honor, a term which might even refer to dignity. Indeed, τιμή, the Greek word that Aristotle uses for honor can be translated as dignity, esteem, and other related self-regarding feelings, not necessarily involving other people. This gets us back to Allen's duties to oneself. The second duty was a duty for self-respect which involves things like dignity and self-regard. Self-sacrifice, as an unshaken commitment to self-fulfillment towards well-being is an expression of self-respect and a recognition of one's dignity, is an expression which manifests itself through the courage required if one is to maintain this self-regard.

4.2.2.3. Why should dignity ever involve self-sacrifice?

One might think it extreme to maintain one's dignity to the point of self-sacrifice to the death. But this view would have to contend with the diminution of life required by political failure in relation to a life lived well to the best of individuals' abilities.[42] This view might arise in consideration of the very duties we have to ourselves. The first duty in Allen's argument is a duty for self-care. It might seem quite reasonable and even required for self-care to manifest at

[41] This view aligns with what Aristotle views as "civic courage" involving acts that lead to civic honors, such as the public respect accorded to soldiers who fall on the battlefield. Aristotle, *The Nichomachean Ethics*, 1116a.
[42] From an Aristotelian point of view, a person who lives courageously cannot simply turn away from danger when in fact courage is such a thing as gains its relevance exactly in the face of danger. There might be room, still, to argue that the self-alienating person is reckless, a view which sees self-sacrifice as not being courage at all. So far I do not see an argument for that, given the centrality I have given to self-fulfillment in the conception of self-sacrifice.

least in self-preservation. I admit that it does and indeed must. Self-care implies that when one is ill one will seek healing whenever it is within reach. A self-caring person eats when hungry, drinks water when thirsty, and rests when tired. All because it is good, and a duty to oneself, to self-preserve. However, self-preservation cannot be an indefeasible obligation. For instance, is one to kill if threatened with death? Is one to give up one's life project because doing so will lead to annihilation? Is one to submit to authorities whose functioning implicates tools of terror? While it is not rare to find ethical theories that might say yes to one or more of these questions,[43] such an affirmative answer does not necessarily deprive those who respond negatively of all reasonableness. To refuse to submit, to refuse to kill, to refuse to curtail one's life because of a threat of danger is not a matter of the curtailed life being too bad to be lived. It is a manifestation of the strength of the commitment to live life fully. In other words, the commitment to self-fulfillment justifies living one's life in such a way that accepts death as an outcome. Because the centrality of concerns for the promotion of self-respect (as dignity, honor) would go off its course were it to halt or limit itself simply because of a danger of death. It would not be its kind of life altogether.

4.3. The question of choice

Thus far I have provided argument both for the view of protest as self-fulfillment and for the mode of self-sacrifice as self-fulfillment. There remains a question about action guidance, namely how the reflections and justifications can be translated into a practical guide to action for political agents. This is an important question because I develop this chapter partly from the perspective of motivating action. In this section I would like to tackle that question. I argue that

[43] The first question for example can be given an affirmative answer in terms of self-defense and the second in terms of comparisons between the value of a human life and the cost of the curtailing imposed on its full expression.

the commitment to self-fulfillment is a self-guided, meaning that it is informed by the individual's own sense of wellbeing. As a follow up to the discussion of courage, I briefly mention action guidance from the perspective of the virtues. I then address the question of whether one chooses death in self-sacrifice, advancing the view that self-sacrifice does not involve a choice of death from the perspective of autonomy. If it is a choice at all, it is one devoid of consent.

4.3.1. Action guidance

In thinking of choice in relation to self-sacrifice, one of the considerations which we have not considered is in terms of what the view which I propose can be lived practically. In other words, if one were convinced by the view which I present, how would one apply it to one's life? It is assumed that not all forms of self-sacrifice are justified. How is one to decide? Because I present the view of self-fulfillment from the perspective of a personal sense of wellbeing, the argument I develop does not offer a formulaic way of deciding the specific manner in which one is to live or act. What I propose instead is a reliance on the courses of action that might be suggested by the justificatory bases. For example, if one is to think along the lines of courage as justifying self-fulfillment even into self-sacrifice, the guidance for action is conceived in the general manner in which virtues guide action. That is, by imitating courageous people or by seeking counsel from those considered to be virtuous in this regard.[44] It is reasonable to conceive self-fulfillment in general from this perspective of virtue in terms of its specific forms of action guidance which is open-ended rather than based on precise formulas. Responses to the question of what the fullness of life demands in specific situations which might involve self-sacrifice can provide sufficient

[44] See Daniel J. Daly, "Virtue Ethics and Action Guidance," *Theological Studies*, Vol. 82, no. 4 (December 2021): 565-582.

action guidance without specifying a course of action ahead of time. This lack of specificity is not a weakness of the argument since we have examples of legitimate ethical perspectives (e.g., virtue ethics) which likewise do not require specificity.

Beyond the question of action guidance in terms of the choices that self-sacrifice calls for, I discuss below the question of whether one chooses death within the framework of self-sacrifice. The assumption that in self-sacrifice one precipitates one's death (as opposed to the regular relation to death in normal life) implies the notion that one chooses to live in such a way which bears a great likelihood of an early death. The reflections below reveal that there is no special choice of death in self-sacrifice even though it may seem otherwise.

4.3.2. Choosing death?

In the British costume drama *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Twister an elderly man and Alf a young man talk about a war veteran returned for his yearly visit to their village. The veteran, named Peg Leg, is supposed to have lost one of his legs in war and now has a piece of wood in the place of the lost leg. Twister, suspicious of the fact that the veteran embellishes his war tales at each visit, suggests that it is probable he never went to war in the first place. Shocked, Alf asks, "Twister! How can you say such a thing about this man? He gave his leg for his country." Laughing, Twister replies "Give it? He didn't give it. It was took!"

That people give up their lives for others (other people, institutions, ideals) can be a laughable notion. What does it mean for someone to give a limb, a life for a country, for others? The laughability in some ways declares such a notion as nonsense. It is from the perspective that

self-sacrifice is unimaginable perhaps altogether or at least to most of us.[45] Considering that people do actually give up their lives so frequently that self-sacrifice is a generally intelligible idea, it is likely at least imaginable to those who go through with it. What of the rest of us who have not? Setting aside our ability to imagine a literal giving up of one's life, it is possible to grant that people do indeed do such a thing but still question whether they truly choose it. Whether they choose to die, that is. One could claim that those who sacrifice themselves are lacking in rational capacities and therefore cannot be said to choose in the right sense of the term. It is possible that some people might fall into that category. But not all do. My sense, which I support below is that there is indeed choice involved, but it is not choice understood as a reasons-driven selection of one option among many nor consent to dying. We must be able to distinguish a willingness and even a welcoming of unfavorable conditions without an agreeable involvement of our autonomy. One may not consent to giving a leg for one's country, even as one willingly lets it be taken.

4.3.3. Self-Sacrifice and Autonomy

To conclude the discussion of choice, I turn to the notion of consent as central to a conception of choice for autonomous beings to argue that self-sacrifice does not involve the choice of death from the perspective of autonomy.

Does self-sacrifice involve a giving of ourselves? Is our life such a thing as we can choose to give away? Considerations of self-sacrifice can make it seem as though an individual is given two choices between death and life and proceeds to choose death over life. Paul Kahn, in

[45] British writer Zadie Smith recently sparked controversy in an essay directed at the ongoing pro-Palestine protests in which she suggested, among other things, that "personal sacrifice [of a certain level relating to self-sacrifice is] unimaginable to many of us." Zadie Smith, "Shibboleth," *The New Yorker*, May 5, 2024.

his writings on torture has argued that sacrifice does not involve consent.[46] I agree with this view.

As it is usually discussed, consent is such a concept that heavily relies on the view of the agent of consent as an autonomous agent. As a being that has its own distinct interests which it seeks to manifest in its form of life. Notably through agency in actions or other forms of self-expression. Relating to such a being, when it is done well, requires respect for that central feature. We bemoan situations of oppression or coercion precisely because they bypass this feature and lack the required respect. Now, note that self-fulfillment is a process that is constructed around this feature. The interest in wellbeing is an expression of the directional pull of autonomy. A person involved in such a process has no autonomous interest in self-sacrifice, a reality which involves the most serious impairment of the autonomous process, i.e., its very end. We must conclude therefore that self-sacrifice does not involve consent. This fact clarifies the unified commitment to life and to death in self-sacrifice—it is not one that involves consent to die. It can still be read as choice, perhaps because we lack a more exacting language, but it is a peculiar choice. A choice to live with the understanding that such a form of living might or will lead to dying.

4.4. Self-sacrifice and self-harm

More than the idea that self-sacrifice is laughable or unimaginable there is a common thought, perhaps an intuition, that self-sacrifice is a form of unreasonable or excessive self-harm. The worry is not self-harm as a general idea or practice. It is rather its supposed unreason or excess. In this section I argue that self-sacrifice is not a form of self-harm. I do that mainly by

[46] Paul Kahn, *Sacred Violence: Torture, Terror, and Sovereignty* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 33.

contrasting this view from cases of death fasting employed as a form of protest for political ends. The key distinction is the role that death plays in self-sacrifice and in death fasting, appearing as a political strategy in the latter case and not in the former.

4.4.1. Why self-sacrifice is commonly thought to be self-harm

Self-sacrifice is commonly thought to be a form of self-harm, a fact which announces the task of the theorist of the attitude as one of justifying self-harm. I do not take that path. Self-harm can readily be noted as part of our daily lives, if by it we mean doing something that causes pain to oneself. This is quite a mundane view of what self-harm involves and we must grant that those who think self-sacrifice is self-harm are thinking beyond pain. Still, pain is a good place to start as it reveals one general process that can mark a form of self-harm as justifiable or not. We sometimes cause pain to ourselves for various reasons, sometimes for the sake of some greater good. The key point is this idea of a greater good. Self-sacrifice, however, because of its death element, is assumed to exceed the usual threshold of what is reasonable self-harm. Precisely because it leads to total annihilation of the self and thereby has no greater good which could justify the self-harm. Because self-sacrifice is conceived in a secular perspective, it lacks the comfort of the religious martyrs that hope for a heavenly life after death. And because it is conceived as a relation to oneself, it cannot rely on a conception of the person that gives themselves to other entities such as a nation or another person. Moreover, self-sacrifice as I conceive it here does not rely on a commitment to an ideal in the way we usually think of people dying for things like freedom, such that this ideal itself can justify the self-harm. It could be said that the commitment to wellbeing is a commitment to an ideal. However, the reality of what that implies is that one is committed to living well, a commitment to oneself rather than to an ideal

which can be conceived as properly distinct from the person. It may be that this is what people mean when they speak of dying for an ideal. If that is the case then we stand in agreement. The point is that self-sacrifice, fundamentally, cannot rely on any justifications beyond the self.

4.4.2. An example of self-sacrifice as justified self-harm

To offer a contrasting perspective from an activity that is both self-sacrifice and self-harm, I use the case of people who fast to death as a form of protest. This contrast allows us to see the distinct nature of self-sacrifice as conceived in the context of failure.

Banu Bargu's book *Starve and Immolate*[47] is a study of such cases. To think with this study provides further clarification for self-sacrifice by showing how death fasting goes against the very structure of self-sacrifice as conceived here—the former harms the person's bodily wellbeing whereas the latter seeks complete wellbeing of the person, the body included. Bargu's book studies incarcerated persons in Turkey who protested the advent of high security measures by starving themselves to death. In Bargu's study, the protesters turned their bodies into weapons. Weapons against the state. Weapons meant to fight the state which was introducing the high security carceral models. Through the voices of the protesters as well as through the author's analysis, we are given to understand that the protesters are acutely aware that they are doing harm to themselves. This is essential to the process which turns bodies into weapons. This process, however, retains its own justifications, mainly by the recovery of human dignity as the protesters nullify the power the state has over their bodies. This is quite literal. Whereas it may be true that state power always functions at least partly through the power it effects on the bodies of the citizens, incarceration is a privileged reality in which the state's power over the body

[47] Banu Bargu, *Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

stands out. In reclaiming their bodies, the protesters thereby make the power of the state ineffective. Helping us to see what is happening in this case, Bargu points to this being a "technique of self-destruction as the basis of political action."[48] It is "self-inflicted, painful, potentially irreversible, and final, therefore existential and embroiled within a logic of sacrifice that is opposed to our conventional notions of instrumental action because it renders difficult, if not altogether impossible, the achievement of political ends through means other than death."[49] In this sense, death becomes a necessary tool or strategy towards the attainment of political goals. In addition to the state's privileged power over bodies manifested in incarceration, the course of action in which death is a political strategy is justified by concerns for human dignity. In the words of one of the protesters, "I would rather live a day with dignity than a dishonorable life that lasts hundreds of years. I know that if I let them trample my dignity, if I sell my dignity, I know that I will no longer be human."[50] The protester's expression brings out what the concern for dignity implies, namely that the conditions of incarceration in the contested high security form is a death of some sort. A death to humanity. As these words suggest, this is a perspective from which protest is a reaction to conditions of death by enlivening the protester even for a brief moment. It is, in other words, from the view that life under the high security conditions is not worth living as a properly human life.

[48] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 6.
[49] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 6.
[50] Bargu, *Starve and Immolate*, 175.

4.4.3. Departure from the example: self-sacrifice is not justified self-harm, not self-harm at all

Similarities exist between this case and what I have argued constituted self-sacrifice. For example, there is in both cases a certain positive relation to the fact of death. And self-sacrifice as conceived here and death fasts occur within political contexts in which there is a serious tension between the state and individuals. However, the particular relation to death is distinct in each case in a way which reveals death fasting as self-harm and self-sacrifice as not. Most importantly, whereas death is employed as a strategy for political ends in death fasting, the same does not hold true in self-sacrifice. There are multiple ways to read this but let me focus on the relation to death as well the idea of political strategy. Because self-sacrifice comes from a commitment to self-fulfillment towards wellbeing, I have it does not relate to death as a desirable fact. In death fasting, the desirability of death is a condition for political success. Even when it is presented as a threat to the state in the hope that it might take pity and halt the high security measures, the very practice of death fasting requires the view on which death is more desirable than a life lived under the protested conditions. Moreover, as Bargu notes, even if the state were to come to its senses and halt or reverse the high security measures, the very form of the protest through extreme fasting will imply that in many cases the process is irreversible, therefore likely to cause death when the protested condition no longer obtains. This, of course, does not rule out the fact that self-sacrifice may yet be a different form of self-harm, one which is not related to death as a tool for political ends.

To rule the self-harm out, we can pay attention to the self-inflicted pain of the death fasters. The refusal of available nutrition to the self. The having to suffer hunger pangs. The refusing to reverse the process that leads into death. This perspective has its own justification in

its specific context. And my role in discussing it here is not in any way to discredit it as a valid expression of political agency. It has a morbidity however which is quite absent in the ways I conceive self-sacrifice. In noting that self-sacrifice is a form of self-fulfillment, my intention is not a mere insistence to refuse the fact that it can be self-harm as a way of elevating this way of life. As we can see from the case of death fasters, the position of self-harm even unto death for political ends is a perfectly defensible position. So why not adopt it as part of self-sacrifice? Because the commitment to self-fulfillment towards wellbeing is not a mere turn of phrase. I imagine the self-fulfilling person as living as joyfully, healthily, and largely as called for by her sense of wellbeing and as made possible by the social, economic, and other conditions that found her capabilities to live a good quality of life. From this perspective, it is quite unimaginable that the person would kill herself by hunger. Her living this way might cause the state to murder her, but she has nothing to do with her death and everything to do with her living fully. It seems to me that the only harm we could conceive in relation to self-sacrifice is death and nothing else. And if we can hold as reasonable the position that one can live fully in a way which, against her will and consent, can lead to her being killed, the harm to be entirely imputed on the state rather than on the individual. Moreover, the idea of protest as self-fulfillment extends much widely beyond the space of self-sacrifice. That is to say, self-sacrifice is a likely reality which is, yes, central to the view of protest as develop here, but self-fulfillment can express itself in many ways that will not lead to death. The commitment to living fully can release new energies for living in many ways which are not even registered by the state as threatening its power and thereby not even likely to lead to self-sacrifice. What I propose is a way of life within a particular political condition, a way of life to transform the lives of those who inhabit the condition.

I do not suppose that this is a foolproof argument for self-sacrifice as something other than self-harm. Far from it. But I believe I have offered sufficient reasons to think that it might indeed not constitute self-harm. However, the success of the foregoing argument does not stand on that sole point because, again, the Turkish protesters example provide a way for justifying self-harm in a political context.

5. Conclusion: On the uses of self-sacrifice

I have been arguing, in this chapter, for a view of protest as self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice as a possible mode of self-fulfillment within political spaces with the likelihood of lethal violence as a response to political action. Allow me to return to the two political conditions that motivated this chapter to briefly offer reflections on the usefulness of this conception of protest.

In relation to the general fact of failure in the question posed to Grace Paley, the goal has been to elaborate on Paley's view that protest is a good way to live one's life. I have argued that protest can be conceived as a way of life with the minimal requirement of a commitment to self-fulfillment towards wellbeing. The emphasis is on a way of life rather than on protest being an activity. It is my hope that this conception, with relevant justifications, provides room to think failing protests in a different way which gives worth to the lives lived towards failure.

In relation to political failure in the African context and the reality of state violence, the view of protest as self-sacrifice, which is self-fulfillment when met with extremely limiting and lethal violence, should likewise provide unforeseen meaning and worth to those who live their lives in this condition and dare to live them fully. Even at the risk of death.

The emphasis of the present argument was put on an individual perspective against a neglect it often suffers in writings on protest. The benefit of the argument I have constructed

here, however, does not limit itself to individual lives. This is a consequence of the fact that individuals do not live in solitude but live with other people and in relation to social and political institutions. A person who lives their life fully may invite the notice of others who might be inspired by her courage and take it upon themselves to do the same. And such a person, as is suggested by the possibility of death, may live and act in ways that are visible to the state as threat. Both of these social elements of protest carry potential for an advantage that goes beyond the individual. Potential for social transformation. This is in line with the centrality of the individual and the view that self-fulfillment is not primarily a political strategy but a way of life.

The context of political failure in Africa presents many difficulties for the life of the individual person as well as for the collective. The treatment of protest, in the particular sense in which it is an individual aspiration for self-fulfillment provides one way in which to think of ways of living and acting that not only are appropriate for the context but also can contribute to a political project for undoing the tragic condition. The thoughts on protest address the reality of an agency rendered ineffective as a result of the repetition of failure which is made possible by lethal state violence among other things. By deactivating the threat of death, this chapter's conception of protest hopes to revive that agency. Against the repetition of failure, what is proposed is disruption by living in a way that does not conform to expected modes of living and acting. Against the limits imposed on daily life, a certain boundlessness of existence is made possible by a renewed commitment to one's own interest in living well. Most importantly, the interest in self-fulfillment here provides a different way of living that is grounded in the specific life projects that individuals have for themselves against ecstatic living in which individuals are thrown out of themselves and live in a manner turned outside themselves and the local political space. Individual projects, as I have argued, will manifest in different ways. Some might insist

on taking form in direct confrontation with formal politics, others might bypass that relation. In either case, the promise of self-sacrifice is a life lived to its fullness.

CONCLUSION | TOWARDS PLENITUDE

In the film *Neptune Frost* directed by Saul Williams and Anysia Uzeyman which tells the story of a hacktivist fugitive community of young people in Burundi, one of the characters, bemoaning the direness of political reality that has led to their fugitivity asks whether one should pursue war or poetry. I have been arguing for an approach which brings the two together in a unified political project. I take war here to be a metaphor for transformative agency of the kind we see in protest and poetry to relate to the work of the imagination. But where does this leave us?

If my argument in this dissertation remains at the level of generality, it is because I take the work of thought on general problems to precede the more specific work on translating the general into practical considerations for political action and organization. As such, what this dissertation presents is a prelude to a political program. Such a program, if done well, should follow from a serious analysis of the political problems it seeks to address as guidance towards the specifications of the social structures as a well as assumptions and provisions for individual agency and wellbeing.

Let me return to the problem as I conclude.

At the age of thirty-three, I have never voted in a national election. If things keep going as they are, I may live my whole life, however long, without ever participating in the formal process of political organization in my country. This fact is not unique to me, nor is it simply a matter of individual choice. The sense that politics, at least in the electoral form, is a meaningless performance robs many of a motivation for political participation. How does one find energy to go vote while knowing that the results are decided independently of the votes? How does one find meaning in participating in the life of a politics which is founded in a denial of one's

agency? Yes, perhaps one does choose to not cast one's ballot. But it is a question which is not about the very act one chooses not to pose but a choice that expresses something about the context in which the action happens, such that the action in view of that context appears meaningless and not valid as a reasonable course of action.

Any political program must take this reality into account—with the gravity that I gesture towards throughout this dissertation. This gravity follows the view that, rather than a problem of particular forms of political organization, we are dealing with a problem of meaning making and of the seeming impossibility of action towards change. A requirement for this consideration is the principal foundation for a political program in the context at issue. It may be the case that such a program will dictate a move away from the electoral form of politics. Whatever form it takes, it must take care to not lose sight of the centrality of agency and the promise for emancipation that founds post-colonial African political life.

For those of us who find the project worthwhile, let us do war or poetry if we must. But let us never lose sight of what motivated our interest in the first place: to emancipate the human being towards the plenitude of individual and collective flourishing.

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