

Drucilla Cornell, 1950-2022

Philosopher-activist of the imaginary domain

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I met Drucilla Cornell at the New School for Social Research, shortly after my arrival in the US at a time of political turmoil. I joined the Philosophy Department in 2010, and one of the first things I was invited to do was help organise an international conference called 'The Anarchist Turn'. The conference took place in May 2011 and it gathered an uncharacteristically large audience by academic standards, leaving many of us quite surprised. Little did I know that some of the people who had gathered there would decide not to leave and ended up staying the whole summer, until, in September 2011, the movement called Occupy Wall Street erupted in the streets. People started to flow into the city, Zuccotti Park was occupied, and everywhere a revolutionary ferment was palpable. During OWS, as in the Arab uprisings, the movement's strength was its spontaneous, horizontal character, but, as some of us feared, this may also have been one of its weaknesses: how to make sure that such a movement would not vanish as quickly as it came about?

It is within this framework that a student told me about a visiting professor who was teaching a class on how to create a revolutionary government. Who on the planet had come up with that class, right at that moment, which seemed so much needed? In December, the Arab revolts started and in January, Drucilla Cornell's 'Constituting a Revolutionary Government' class began. In the middle of that revolutionary ferment, sparked by the first protests in Tunis, Drucilla was there, expressing her solidarity with demonstrators, while immersing students in the classical debates of the European left, such as Marx vs. Bakunin, or Lenin vs. Luxemburg, but also putting them in dialogue with authors like Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant among others. Drucilla did not simply indulge in rhetoric about 'decolonisation': she questioned the colo-

rial imaginary and its epistemological boundaries in the same way in which she questioned the sexist imaginary in her feminist work. She was suspicious of the word 'decolonisation' because in her view, it often amounted to a rhetorical move that paradoxically reproduced the centrality of the colonial imaginary:¹ if we are simply decolonising 'Kant and Hegel', are we not thereby reproducing the centrality of the white, European male in the philosophical canon? Drucilla Cornell did not just do that: she 'went to the ground' and worked with authors outside of the boundaries imposed by white epistemologies, and thereby not only did she *de facto* question such boundaries, she also helped to build a different imaginary. That was certainly the case for the students who attended that class in 2011 at the New School, who may have joined the class attracted by the names of Marx, Lenin and Mao, and then found themselves reading Fanon, Glissant and the Ubuntu philosophy she had studied in South Africa.

Drucilla Cornell was not just a theorist of the imaginary: she was also a practitioner of it, and the author of many successful plays. She theorised about the 'struggle for redemptive imagination' but she also actively pursued it with passion and generosity. Even though some aspects of her *The Imaginary Domain*, as she herself admitted, may be outdated, the central intuitions of that work remain, in my view, as valid as ever. Once again, that is the result of the fact that, on feminist issues, as well as all others, she 'went to the ground'. At the time when she was working on *The Imaginary Domain*, feminists were brutally divided between those who wanted to abolish sex work and those who embraced it, between the supporters of pornography and those who saw it as a tool for the perpetration of rape culture or even as a form of rape itself. Drucilla had been an activist and union organiser

for many years, so whenever in doubt about academic debates, she went back to the workers themselves, and looked at the material conditions of their labour.² When you do that, the very moral question about abolishing or tolerating sex work turns into a much more urgent political question: how can sex workers unionise if you criminalise them? How can we ensure their working conditions are safe and not exploitative? That is why she not only argued against the criminalisation of sex work, but further went on to build a feminist brothel. Instead of adopting a moralist attitude in favour or against pornography, from the comfort of a university office, Drucilla Cornell decided to meet and work with the women in the business. In doing so, one may discover that, although mainstream heterosexual pornography can be extremely violent and detrimental to women's interests, some feminist pornography may actually work in their favour. Hence her central claim that, since we are all sexed beings, we need to be able to have access to a material and psychic space that enables us to individuate as sexed beings. As she wrote: 'There are three conditions that ensure a minimum degree of individuation which I defend as necessary for the equivalent chance to transform ourselves into individuated beings who can participate in public and political life as equal citizens. They are as follows: 1) bodily integrity, 2) access to symbolic forms sufficient to achieve linguistic skills permitting the differentiation of oneself from others, and 3) the protection of the imaginary domain itself'.³ Consider how such a move enables us to sweep away endless academic discussions on who is the subject of feminism, whether we need 'women' or not for a feminist cause, and whether we can, or should ever attempt, to define what it means to be a woman. No need to indulge in academic definitions of womanhood: just make sure actual people have the symbolic means to define themselves! The very same concept of the imaginary domain, which enabled her to address pressing feminist issues by connecting vital strands in critical theory with psychoanalysis and legal theory, also enabled her to make an original contribution to critical philosophy of race.

Despite a life in the academy, Drucilla Cornell never forgot the lessons she learned as an activist: as a union organiser, as a militant feminist, and as a Black Panther ally.

In a panel at the Goethe Institute in New York City, devoted to celebrating the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, Drucilla explained why she always shied away from reductive academic readings of Marx. Despite her encounter with Marxism at a time when everything in the study of Marx was about science and economics, Drucilla was instead attracted to his critique of alienation, and how capitalism leads not only to exploitation but also to imperialism and inhuman conditions of labour and life. Hence her critique of the 'scientization of Marx': 'it is part of turning a revolutionary thinker into someone who can get you tenured at Harvard'.⁴ But if you read him as a thinker who demanded the immediate abolishing of an inhuman reality and follow in his footsteps, then you are going to be in trouble. On that same occasion, Drucilla Cornell explained how she, indeed, got into trouble, how she was kicked out of Stanford and Columbia, but she also emphatically repeated: 'It was worth it'.

Drucilla Cornell is just gone, but we already miss the lucidity of her thinking, and the courage of her actions. As I think about her struggles for a 'redemptive imagination', I cannot but recall her Facebook profile picture: Drucilla holding a copy of *The Imaginary Domain* and, next to it a sign: 'Let's talk about abortion rights!'

Notes

1. On multiple occasions, we debated this point. I am less skeptical of the word, once we spell out that it is not just a metaphor. She seemed to prefer the word 'creolisation'. See, for instance, the edited volume, *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg*, she edited with Jane Ann Gordon (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

2. Luckily enough, one of the lectures she gave in my class has been recorded and saved in OOPS, the free Online Open Public Seminar I directed in 2016. Particularly appreciated was the story of how she helped in unionising sex workers and building a feminist brothel: <https://publicseminar.org/2016/05/oops-lecture-gender-and-domination-class-by-drucilla-cornell/>.

3. Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (New York, Routledge 1995), 4.

4. See the video of her intervention at the following website. To the question 'is Marx still relevant today', she replied by reading a passage from the *Grundrisse* on the alienation of labour conditions: <https://thebrooklyninstitute.com/blog/faculty-video-marx-now-a-symposium/>.