

Embracing a Sankofic Approach to Enduring Political Crisis

JANE ANNA GORDON

University of Connecticut, USA (jane.gordon@uconn.edu)

Embracing a Sankofic method as outlined by Nkiru Nzegwu, this article begins in the U.S. to argue that crises should be understood as a permanent and inevitable feature of human life and freedom. It then considers why the permanence of crisis might seem too overwhelming a prospect to bear by recounting how Antonio Gramsci's account of crises of political legitimacy has been read as pitting moments of radically open possibility (marked by profound existential uncertainty and heightened violence) against those of political stability (marked by relative cooperation, routine, compromise, surrender, and resignation). It then turns to the way that Grace Lee Boggs critically engages with this shared Marxist legacy by responding to Immanuel Wallerstein's outlining of how what was considered axiomatic in revolutionary politics prior to 1968 had to be rethought after it. For Lee Boggs this entailed calling for and enacting what many call "prefigurative politics"—or of living now as if in the world one seeks to build—and of deliberately constructing alternative possibilities from sites of indisputable crisis, such as Detroit, Michigan. In an effort to offer existential resources that might enable us to manage the profound fear unleashed by the radical uncertainty of crisis, it seeks to rethink the individualistic underpinning of contemporary Euromodern political structures. It therefore concludes, in the spirit of the meeting at which these remarks were delivered, by turning to what Nzegwu elaborates as Sankofic epistemology and what Rebecca Pointer and Darlene Miller describe as the Green Leadership School's idea of "becoming octopus." It does so to consider how distinct understandings of the relationships of space and time and models of how we might educate our affective as well as intellectual capacities may introduce the requisite values to facilitate our accepting crisis as a permanent feature of shared self-determining practices so that other modes of political action and ways of being might be engendered.

Key words: crisis; prefigurative politics; Sankofic epistemology; becoming octopus

* This article is a revised version of a keynote lecture, "Rethinking the Relationships among Political Crisis, Radical Possibility, Profound Uncertainty, and 21st-Century Democratic Political Institutions," delivered at the 11th Annual International Conference of the Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa, Chintsa, South Africa, September 5, 2024.

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, *but then you read*. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the *very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive*.

—James Baldwin (quoted in Howard 1963: 89, emphasis added)¹

1 Preamble

We have convened to discuss *crisis* drawing from resources of African existential phenomenology. Responding to the insistence of that intellectual movement that we think as situated subjects, I cannot, in September 2024, hear the word “crisis” without thinking of the country to which my parents immigrated from South Africa, of my adopted home, where, just last week, at the start of our fall semester, my undergraduate students named dictatorship and violence as their most serious political fears.

It is not an overstatement to say that the U.S. is in the midst of a major political crisis. On the ballot—in a supposed democratic republic—was a candidate who, in a campaign event on July 26, 2024 organized in West Palm Beach, Florida by the conservative Christian group Turning Point Action, told attendees that if they voted for him “in four years, you don’t have to vote again. We’ll have it fixed so good, you’re not gonna have to vote” (Reid 2024).² Why was the promise of November 2024 as their last election appealing? How was it attractive to a major portion of Americans who did vote?

A *crisis* names a predicament that demands us to judge. We must decide precisely when judging will be consequential.³ With uncertain outcomes, our actions could transform our polity dangerously. In response to this circumstance, some want a leader simply to take care of the crisis, acting decisively, once and for all. For others, the problem is not *that there was or is a crisis* but that many fellow citizens would exercise their democratic will *by trying to surrender it*.⁴ Put differently, for those committed to the democratic project, we must *embrace this responsibility* as the collectivity of deeply flawed people that we inevitably are.

After all, how does one enact a desire for a world without crises? One could try to foresee every possible danger, including the seemingly unforeseeable, and treat the unknown as primarily threatening. A conventional historical answer is to reduce who can and should act by channeling support for an empowered individual who claims to have both all the answers and the requisite authority to implement them. Consider Donald J. Trump’s repeated promises to single-handedly

end the war between Russia and Ukraine, crime, inflation, and unwanted immigration. In the name of eliminating crises, all kinds of actions might be undertaken. Fearing uncertainty's many expressions, one might enthusiastically seek territorial, linguistic, gendered, and racial borders of steel, avoiding permeability within individuals and groups at all costs.

Crisis does make plain that the human world is determined *and* contingent. We must act knowing that the consequences may be what we neither wanted nor intended.⁵ Still, there is a major difference between *desiring to eliminate the fear and anguish* that accompany radical uncertainty and learning, with our fellow citizens, to *manage them*. Consider Immanuel Wallerstein's 1999 reflection that it is uncertainty—rather than certainty—about the future that is a basis for hope (Wallerstein 1999).⁶

Stated candidly, crises are constant and ongoing.⁷ We live in their midst or immediate aftermath. As such, we need to take stock that they are neither singular nor episodic, but the other face of the temporary periods of relative stability that we can construct. Not to face crises as a permanent feature of human life is not to live, as illuminated by Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, as creatures defined by facticity and transcendence, by determination and by freedom.⁸ *Part* of what makes uncertainty manageable is knowing that it is an indispensable feature of our freedom. If we seek to retain and enact our freedom, uncertainty is its twin or condition of possibility. But this is little consolation.

Trying to emulate the reaching movements of the Sankofa bird, described below, how might the nascent possibilities—in Nkiru Nzegwu's and Rebecca Pointer and Darlene Miller's rich feminist epistemological ecological reflections—inform our understanding of a crisis-ridden present? How can their insights, that we will grasp in our beak, guide us out of the anxiety-ridden shadows cast by one prevalent way of interpreting Antonio Gramsci's social critique? Put differently, what is a properly post-1968 progressive approach in the U.S. and globally to the political problem of perennial crises? How can contemporary feminist African accounts of reality, expanded relations of knowing, and enriched models of learning reorient our philosophical anthropology to equip us to live our freedom responsibly?

2 Revisiting Antonio Gramsci's Crises of Authority

On the progressive left, there are historical ways of envisioning crises that, if compelling, may intensify reasons to fear crisis. I am here making one instance an object of consideration to reflect on how, as is true for me, it may, without our fully realizing it, have negatively informed orientations to crisis.

For many Marxists, Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci was a remarkably appealing figure. Rooted in and thinking from Italy, he introduced southern Europe into European debates of his day. And he thought from the south of that south or from the south of Italy. He did so to articulate a subaltern Europe—the Global South of and in Europe—pointing out how northern Italians spoke of southern Italians in the same way they did of Black North Africans. From behind bars in Mussolini's prison, Gramsci's Marxism centered the role of ideas in processes of social transformation and framed all people, especially working class people, as thinkers and potential intellectuals.

Famously discussing power in terms of *hegemony*, Gramsci defined it as a dominant settlement of a ruling social bloc that secured their rule through *both consent and coercion*.⁹ Intellectuals, who were always organically tied to particular groups, articulated their interests and stakes in the most compelling possible ways, narrating the social order they sought to preserve or create as *common sense*, however internally contradictory. Historically, the wealthy, whether feudal or capitalist, prevailed through fragile coalitions with fragments of older ruling formations. Their intellectual and moral leadership elaborated ideas that could make assent and affirmation spontaneous through socialization offered by civic, educational, social, and political institutions, whether schools or unions, houses of worship or leagues of leisure. All played important functions of adjusting people to their social order, however fully or partially it benefited them. Those who were convinced readily, even enthusiastically, consented to the terms of what prevailed, both in quotidian and more seismic moments.

This meant, for Gramsci, that many subaltern people came to devote their energies to reconciling themselves with conditions that they could have tried instead to overthrow. They did this due to the compelling power of ideas generated by intellectuals organically tied to the ruling coalition, their own complex and cross-cutting affinities, some of which might obviously be protected by prevailing common sense, and, crucially, because of the absence of alternatives generated by intellectuals organically tied to their working or subaltern class. Such intellectuals, which included Gramsci, would frame them as lacking options and would have called for the need to alter the terrain of political decision-making. He would aim to inspire others with him to build a *counterhegemony* through which a working class coalition might come to rule.

In so doing, Gramsci offered an account of what he called a *crisis of authority*. If, in periods of political stability, coercive mechanisms of the state—whether police or prisons—recede for those who assent, for those unconvinced by the prevailing common sense, coercion remained predominant. For them, police and prisons were and are the primary, if not sole, face of the governing authorities. (One can think here of how race and class overdetermine how the state appears in the lives of different members of the same polity.) But in crisis, the status quo—that, for many, seemed so obviously right, so completely secure—frays.

The thinking that sustained the existent range of options then seems questionable. The social glue of shared ideas loses its hold. Consent is not spontaneously given; it is vociferously withdrawn. Prior

equilibrium is disturbed; leadership and authority are contested. In Gramsci's words, "*the masses no longer believe what they used to,*" and everything is up for grabs (Gramsci 1971: 276, emphasis added).¹⁰

These exceptional states are deeply unstable. Absent shared agreements that produce a clearly navigable social fabric, there is the radical uncertainty of wide-open possibilities. A new settlement must be built and how it is constructed sets the terrain for future struggle. It is not that violence must "resolve" the situation, but the entrance of arbitrary uses of brutality often does. Those who can will prevail, generating a new coalition that narrates specific conditions they hope will continue to cohere.

With Gramsci, this is because *hegemony* describes who seizes and wields state authority. Whoever wins will lay claim to its arsenal of coercive measures. Their use of violence will become the exercise of legitimate force. If this is undertaken by communists for the sake of the greater good of a greater majority, it will, for Gramsci, represent an unprecedented human victory.

But this analysis, if an illuminating account of how relative political stability is forged, undone, and refashioned, can lend itself to an orientation that envisions the political terrain in potentially dangerous ways. Specifically, in it, the radical opening of possibility, as opposed to surrendering to compromising compromises, is almost always experienced as a temporary political vacuum filled by those willing and able to use force and violence, whether for the left or the right. This vantage point easily fosters a sense that political normality and the ongoing work of cooperation and coalition is also necessarily or fundamentally a state of surrender and resignation. This inevitably lends itself to valorizing and relishing the radical break, even if most historical examples of it are shut down through brutal violence inflicted on the least powerful. Consider Stuart Hall's 1979 reflections in "The Great Moving Right Show":

[T]here are some who would still argue that 'worse means better'—i.e. a sharpening of the contradictions. Such a position is often based on a belief in the inevitable rising tempo of class struggle and the guaranteed victory of 'progressive forces everywhere.' Those who hold it have short political memories. They forget how frequently in recent history a sharpening of the contradictions has led to 'settlements' and solutions which favoured capital and the Right, rather than the reverse (Hall 1979: 14).¹¹

Lost in the starkly-drawn framing poles is the ongoing nurturing of relationships and interdependencies through mundane, shared problem-solving, the relationships through which feasible alternatives, that include the fundamental questioning of prevailing hegemonic settlements, are cultivated.

A recent example is framed very effectively by Benjamin Stumpf. For many U.S. Americans, it came on the heels of the murder of George Floyd, one of so many unarmed Black men, and too many Black women and Black children, at the hands of police. In an unprecedented way, what had been a

relatively fringe call—to defund and disinvest from the U.S. criminal justice system; to recognize it as so systemically broken that it needed to be fundamentally reconceptualized—broke into mainstream public discourse as a question, if not a concrete possibility. *Would another way of interacting with communities of color and addressing presumed instances of harm emerge?* The need, powerfully articulated by an unprecedented number of predominately young people of color during a global pandemic, had mass domestic and international popular and enthusiastic support. However, as Stumpf documents, this upsurge of well-organized democratic demand that challenged constitutive common sense has been met by the massive expansion of facilities dedicated to training domestic law enforcement in tactics of urban warfare, an endeavor that is still now being countered by ongoing progressive protest (Stumpf unpublished).

In truth, as Stumpf explains, few of those involved in Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests sought a radical break in the way of reading Gramsci I have been outlining here. Many had been working in community organizations for decades to address simultaneous overinvestment in policing and systematic disinvestment in nurturing institutions. They were *hardly* relishing the opening of radical possibility extinguished by the uses of brutality that were all-too-regular features of the social world they were seeking to rebuild. Instead, their ongoing, protracted efforts as organic intellectuals of working class and poor Black communities were spontaneously joined by a diverse group of assenting others as historic ideas in Black political thought gained a wide hearing on the street.

But I fear that many observers, including some on the progressive left, understood what transpired in the polarized frames outlined earlier through Gramsci. They witnessed—in a formulation that BLM’s Alicia Garza and the late Rosa Luxemburg fundamentally rejected—that reform and more radical possibilities are necessarily opposed; that there were no “non-reformist reforms” of the kind for which many BLM intellectuals called.¹² In their account, there was this insurgent moment that gestured toward a radically transformed world and then it was over. Absent from such a portrait are the efforts that preceded and continue, that are still responding to the galvanizing crises that have not abated.

It is worth recalling that Luxemburg wrote that “the revolution is magnificent, everything else is bilge” (Luxemburg 1999: 259).¹³ Still, for her, precisely because the political horizon was a humanistic democratic socialist revolution that was necessarily intergenerational and centuries-in-the-making, one did not peddle away dimensions of a platform like sausages by thinking that coalition was the ultimate aim. At the same time, what were diminished as *mere reformism* were often urgent dimensions of the life conditions of mortal human beings.

This is not unlike how Joelle Fishman and Lisa Armstrong describe the People over Profits campaign in New Haven, Connecticut in the 1970s and 1980s (Fischman and Armstrong 2024).¹⁴ To participate in electoral politics through campaigning was not to suggest that winning votes was even the core of necessary political activity. Instead, the Communist Party ticket sought to foster the political independence of citizens by expanding the range of political options available and common sense regarding what might be legitimate governing goals. They did this through prioritizing and

amplifying—repeating back—what working people articulated as their most urgent needs and wants. As with Luxemburg, for Fishman and Armstrong, it was always better for working class people to engage and act for themselves, even if they, just like others, inevitably made and make mistakes. In refusing to rely on the decision-making of a small set of vanguard leaders, they built human capacity for embracing freedom and—its indispensable twin—responsibility. Such work did not require new crises since crises were and are an intrinsic feature of capitalism felt acutely by the working poor.

3 Revolutionary Politics Before and After 1968 and the Turn to Prefigurative Politics

In her existentially open approach to revolutionary transformation, Luxemburg anticipated the more recent reflections of Marxist thinkers Wallerstein and Lee Boggs. Lee Boggs suggested a very distinct approach to crisis, one that framed human beings as crisis-negotiating creatures responsible for constructing and actively maintaining our worlds.

Working in Gramsci's shared Marxist-Leninist lineage, in *The Next American Revolution*, Lee Boggs affirmed Wallerstein's characterization that, prior to 1968, the aim of all progressive revolutions globally was to seize state power, doing whatever was required to achieve that aim. This effort was almost always channeled through one party for which *class* was the fundamental organizing category. It, in turn, framed democratic institutions and practices as a luxury that could only be introduced after victory was secured. Finally, science was seen as likely offering all the political answers revolutionaries needed (see Lee Boggs 2012: 57–8).¹⁵

The difficulty for both Wallerstein and Lee Boggs was that all the twentieth-century revolutions that Marxist-Leninists celebrated (either at their inception and/or in their aftermath) wielded state power much like the people they had tried so hard to supplant. For Lee Boggs, the inevitable turn to violence was not just *an episodic means*. As Frantz Fanon documented in *Wretched of the Earth*, even if necessary, it scarred those who employed it and those who stomached its use (Fanon 1963).¹⁶ This was why Lee Boggs came to pair the question of revolution with that of our continued individual and collective human evolution. She asked how we could grow our souls or become different kinds of people. For Lee Boggs, trying to answer that question could counter how revolutionary thinking had become narrow, static, or even counterrevolutionary.

In what is now called a *prefigurative politics*, Lee Boggs argued that those seeking to create more humane social worlds needed to collapse the conventional two-step strategy (of taking state power and then transforming society) or political means and ends in unprecedented ways. With Wallerstein she argued that we cannot, as pre-1968 revolutionary politics, including that of Gramsci, treated as axiomatic, do whatever is required to win and then expect to be radical humanists, now with state powers.

Crucially, in so doing, Lee Boggs neither called for staving off nor seeking to quicken crises. Her thinking did not celebrate epic disruptions in common sense or the sudden erosion of the political authority of ruling coalitions. For her, *crises were mundane and ongoing* and to think and act dialectically in the face of them entailed running up against and creatively moving through exhausted political diagnoses and tactics.

For example, returning to the call of existential phenomenology to engage in situated reflection, Lee Boggs began with a very specific instance of seeming impossibility. She rooted her thinking in postindustrial Detroit, Michigan, one of many quintessential sites of economic and political abandonment where first automation and then movement of automobile manufacturing overseas were followed by white flight from urban Black political leadership. For her, places left vacant by the disintegration of old ways of organizing power and economy were exactly where to concretely build futures. One did not do so by courting the next venture capitalist investor or cynical politician on the make. Instead civilians were leading themselves in figuring out how to nourish their families in a food desert and create organizational answers to how to educate their children in a school system designed for a no-longer-existing manufacturing base.¹⁷ For her, these collective, problem-solving activities of citizenship propelled our thinking, our capacities for freedom, and our individual and shared political evolution.

While one could not ignore elected officials, since the larger political terrain was hugely consequential, it was naive to expect leaders who needed the support of those enriched by extractivist industries to advance policies to save the earth. One had to support parties and politicians who would be less destructive and continue to pressure them, after casting one's vote, to fulfill important promises. But one had to recalibrate expectations and how one directed one's energies by cultivating different models of power, leadership, and organization.

For too long, Lee Boggs argued, models of leadership were premised on individual, tough, charismatic men acting in the public sphere. This focus occluded the shared labor of tending to and caring for family and community historically undertaken by women. She likened nurturing sustainable relationships to societal midwifery. Alicia Garza affirmed this shift in attention when arguing that in communities where individual magnetic leaders had historically been targeted for assassination, one needed organizations with multiple heads, ideally that thought differently about shared aims (Garza 2020, chapter 7). Both agreed that such leaders, who peopled what Garza called "leaderful" organizations, emerged from broad, ongoing participatory modes of decision-making. (Garza 2020, chapter 10). As Deva R. Woodly reflected when discussing the Movement for Black Lives, this also demanded centering deliberate experimentation in *forms of socialization*, in how young, old and peers held each other accountable and mediated disagreements (Woodley 2022: 59–62, 156–57).¹⁸ After all, if we are raised to be well-adjusted to deeply unequal, hierarchical orders in which a small collection of people rule, what social practices could cultivate the infrastructure of a different kind of world, our evolution as political agents and human beings?

Though not explicitly anarchist, at the end of her long political-intellectual life, Lee Boggs centered the abilities of all citizens to identify, study, and solve problems together. We might interpret her as suggesting that the existence of profound problems, even those that we might term “crises,” was inevitable. When we effectively addressed pressing existing ones, new ones inevitably presented themselves. To expect a life absent such challenges was misleading and might predispose us to feel unduly put out by what instead should be considered par for the course.

This sensibility is, I think, more fundamental to the project of democratizing democracy than we might at first realize. It includes adjusting by redirecting our expectations of what inadequate, unresponsive, or actively destructive governments can do. It does so by turning to actively building local, community political organizations and institutions that can inform the use of and/or ultimately be supported by public funds. In so doing, it emphasizes our creativity acting with each other to foster ways of being self-determining that can be the basis for more viable alternatives. Rather than institutional fixes that promise to bypass our continued, engaged collective activity, it suggests that we might together become the match for the problems we face if we don't see them as lamentable interruptions to our otherwise normal lives.

4 Nzegwu's Sankofic Epistemology and Pointer and Miller's "Becoming Octopus"

We make crises a more manageable feature of human life when we assume that we must face them together and that we will get better at responding to them *by actively responding*. We thereby develop our living, built repertoires of action that we recall rather than willfully forgetting as we do traumatic events. Part of what generates potentially insurmountable crises are unrealistic expectations: that we might be insulated from crises by savior leaders that can and will protect us from them; that institutions that we have allowed to atrophy will offer necessary antidotes.

Crises are worsened by hiding from our responsibility and by how such efforts to hide manifest in disastrous conceptions of power, leadership, institutions, *and of crisis itself*. Part of taking responsibility for the project of collective self-determination and fighting for democracy to live through and beyond our generation is a different philosophical anthropology that centers our *growing into creative, difficult work that does not cease*. Two valuable resources for developing a different conception of ourselves as human beings emerge in recent work in feminist African philosophy.

In what Nkiru Nzegwu calls “an antidote to forgetting and willful ignorance,” Sankofa's implications are far-reaching.¹⁹ Depicted as a bird with feet facing forward to the future, its head reaches back to retrieve either a seed or an egg, both symbols of nascent, as-yet-unrealized possibility. A prescriptive orientation, not only does it summon knowers to “go back to retrieve what they must,” at stake is a fundamental challenge to Eurocentric conceptualizations of knowledge and of the model of the

knower that “became the model and standard for all humanity” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 1). In this hegemonic model of knowing, predecessors, tradition, and the past writ large are primarily burdensome, unthinking, and obscuring. In a relishing of novelty that frequently disavows its own forms of indebtedness to previous labor, intellectual and otherwise, one would be silly or nostalgic to have one’s head facing anywhere but forward. Centrally, for Nzegwu, Sankofa suggests not only the imperative to remember past events, but also past existences. As such, she describes how Sankofa entails a “reworking of the ontological boundaries of knowledge” and its metaphysical underpinning with profound implications for “what is and can be known” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 1).

As with scientific methods, Nzegwu describes processes and procedures, including rituals, speech acts, and symbolic forms engaged to “open centers of learning” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 2). Drawing from “African understandings of being, life, death, incarnation, reincarnation, and existential possibilities,” Sankofic epistemology is grounded in an account of reality itself as “critically conscious, aware, and intelligent” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 2). If we are “wakeful and alert” to our envelopment in a cosmos that is “alive,” we can become attuned to its ubiquitous communicative stimuli. As we learn to use all our senses to “decode and respond,” we become aware of the fallacy of empty space (Nzegwu forthcoming: 2). Instead the world is charged with force-energy, which shapes all life forms. Whether *kalunga* among the Bakongo, *àṣẹ* with the Yoruba, or *oku* for the Igbo, rather than die (with the implication of disappearing or becoming absent), all life “transforms, mutates, and endures” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 3). This is how “the ontological framework of African communities [...] includes departed ancestors and our apprehension of that realm” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 3).

If ancestors are vital to “human experiences, human knowledges, and human histories,” Nzegwu turns to *how* their knowledge is accessed across generations and ontological space. (Nzegwu forthcoming: 3). In ways that seem to answer Lee Bogg’s call for our continued evolution but now through refusing to treat what has transpired as no longer palpable, Nzegwu describes how domains of reality that are usually imperceptible can be reached through higher order modes of perception. These are typically cultivated by *sangoma* (Nguni), *dibia* (Igbo), and *babalawo/iyaniifa* (Yoruba), who undergo what the Nguni call *ithwasa*, or the opening of awareness. Still, aspects of such sensory awareness are not only available to would-be healers. Outlining, as will Pointer and Miller, an enlarged approach to the potential aims of transformative learning, Nzegwu notes that others too can “inwardly hone in,” learn to “attend to occurrences” and “heed knowledges” by beginning with an awareness that “knowledge can be transmitted and grasped in ways not ordinarily understood.” This is because we inhabit an energy communication field that reliably “delivers information about the world around us” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 9).

Understood this way, Sankofa epistemology also contains a distinct understanding of memory. It is not accessed primarily by isolated, decontextualized individuals relying on their own, narrowly cerebral capacities. As Nzegwu writes, “Memories are not hermetically-sealed off and located exclusively in a single person’s body. One does not remember by figuratively rifling through the recesses of the brain searching for the ‘record.’” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 10). Departing from

“remembering [as relying] on the ‘organ’ of memory,” in what she calls “critical remembering,” one does not seek a “static archive,” but energetically sends out a “message or stimulus of what one wants to remember” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 18, 10-1). Such sending out assumes and activates an active and living web of relations. As Nzegwu explains:

First, because remembering is inherently social, what is remembered comprises a community providing details, verifications, critical analysis, interpretations, judging, and evaluations of what is remembered. Secondly, a community of persons is necessary to explicate the meaning of relevant past events, accord them human significance and value, and connect them to human actions (Nzegwu forthcoming: 18).

Inherently collective and shared, the fundamental sociality of memory is the basis for its verifiability, credibility, and value.

As such, it is also not reached across segmented, linear time. Nzegwu elaborates that remembering “operates in an animated environment where events are etherically recorded and never lost to history” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 10-1). When all our senses and our full bodies seek connection with “an intelligently organized order and reality” or “information in an animated energetic field,” “the malleability of space” and “the multiplicity of times-lines that were temporally preserved” are unveiled (Nzegwu forthcoming: 16, 11, 17). Fundamentally rejecting conceptions of time as exhausted by discrete, compartmentalized, chronological moments, “*Sankofa* connects the past to modern times and the future in ways that accord value to past human experiences, discoveries, and activities. The past is intelligible from the standpoint of the present” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 18). If we accept a shifted trajectory of political life in which the future is nascent in how we live today, we are far from political history as a linear series of constituted, disrupted, and reconfigured hegemonies. Instead, we are enriched by the Sankofic framing of time as “permeat[ing] who we are and all that we do” in a “complex world of timelines” (Nzegwu forthcoming: 18, 19).

The urgent existential need for a richer web of anchoring and sustaining timelines is all too clear in the context of contemporary South African higher education. There, Rebecca Pointer and Darlene Miller grapple constructively with the failures of the formal end of apartheid to translate into meaningfully decolonized approaches to learning. In their account, schooling is still envisioned “as the efficient transfer of knowledge, with the student as customer, who expects a degree at the end of the process, with the development of the intellect promoted over other forms of human development” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 120).²⁰ With a sense that this unchanged view entails the blockage of an actual, emergent future, Pointer and Miller launched the Green Leadership School in June 2014. In an effort to uproot “deeply affective structures and sensibilities of coloniality entrenched in contemporary universities” (Zembylas 2022: 1),²¹ they structured opportunities to practice enacting a different account of who participants were and how they could relate to time, memory, and non-human forms of life (Pointer and Miller 2024: 121).

Inspired by Donna Haraway (2014),²² Pointer and Miller rooted their distinctively South African approach in “the old South African Domestic Workers’ Union logo, with a woman performing many tasks and having multiple arms” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 125).

Likening the woman to an octopus, the Green Leadership School centered the idea of “becoming octopus.” After all, octopi could move their bodies to escape through tiny gaps with “brains” in each of their eight legs. They could flow beautifully, in ways resembling belly-dancers. Seeking activities that included “more than just rational, scientific lessons that only engage the intellect,” participants were invited to interact with each other and the planet, making connections that could “heal scars created by enforced borders and ‘rational’ cartographies” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 125, 137).

Unlike an academy almost exclusively preoccupied with gaining access to jobs, in the practice of “becoming octopus,” those involved centered “new ways of thinking, feeling, and travelling through the world” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 121). Learning to resemble creatures with green blood and three hearts involved sustained study, as in Detroit with Lee Boggs, beside those few who continued to work the soil in their local modes of subsistence and consumption. In so doing, participants reconnected with the land, the environment, and ancestral histories. Farms, beaches, and eco-villages became the classroom, with spiritual practitioners, musicians, artists, and government officials as guest facilitators. If Nzegwu stressed how dynamic reality connects all life forms in and across time, Pointer and Miller draw from Ntuli’s explanation²³ that “African values and knowledge emphasize that survival depends on [a] reality in which human beings, plants, animals, and the universe are one interconnected whole” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 126). Similarly to the sensorial awakening Nzegwu described, the Green Leadership School effectively stressed reattunement to how “African knowledge systems” see that “animals communicate essential messages or convey blessings to humans by performing certain movements or through encounter” (Mokuku 2012: 161-62).²⁴

Similarly to Wallerstein and Lee Boggs, Pointer and Miller built from but ultimately sought to transcend their “Marxist/Freirean (1970) roots” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 126). Seeking a continued human evolution as the prefigurative politics necessary to actual revolutionary transformation, they recognized that “people do not simply rise up when they see the true nature of their situation” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 126). They therefore aimed to foster healing and creativity in the face of the protracted political disappointment of post-1994 South Africa. Knowing how many participants were absorbed in meeting daily needs or lacking faith that they could act with consequence, the program centered affective and sensorial experiences of contemplation that rather than severing or attenuating relations, fostered connection to other humans and other-than-humans (Pointer and Miller 2024: 127). As Pointer and Miller conclude, “As we moved, to become octopus, we increased the bodies’ power to act,” realizing new capacities in and through expanded modes of interaction (Pointer and Miller 2024: 127).

Like Nzegwu, Pointer and Miller turned to resources of ritual. However, in their case, “chunks of the ritual arose spontaneously. As such, this was not a traditional ritual—performed in the exact

way a *sangoma* would conduct a ritual” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 129). Still, they created “a series of liminal moments” and they “invoked the past (by calling ancestors), acted with [their] bodies in the present, and looked to the future with the affective sensations that had been stirred” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 129). Echoing Nzegwu, they reflect that the “ritual created a structuration of perception in which people experienced different aspects of human potential and saw themselves as part of a wider whole” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 129 and Kapferer 2011). As such, ritual played an “integrative function” (Pointer and Miller citing Urbasch 2002: 11).

When Green Leadership School participants reflected on their experiences, they described how connecting with different parts of their bodies led them both to discover and release stored emotional pain and that growing food as they had as children led them to realize that their own children’s mental and physical health would be improved by such practices. As with Nzegwu’s account of Sankofic processes, Pointer and Miller emphasize the modes of experiences that open onto knowledge that the intellect alone “cannot grasp or explain” (Pointer and Miller 2024: 137).

5 Conclusion

In a political moment in the U.S. that treats “being woke” as a slur,²⁵ Nzegwu reminds us that it is by becoming increasingly wakeful and alert that we don’t only become attuned to the present and past of our immediate politico-historical environments but also to our cosmos—alive as it is with communicative stimuli. If so attuned, what we may access through these collective stimuli is not only past events in discrete, compartmentalized prior moments, but collective, communal understanding born of past existences.

Such ongoing attunement is how we might continuously live—rather than only being episodically reminded of—the value of study as deepening our human connectivity. Connection through persistently facing shared torment is reminiscent of a practice indigenous to what is now called the U.S. In it, in especially significant moments, individuals imagine the physical space that surrounds them—that might otherwise appear relatively empty—as filled with their forebears and ancestors. Together, then, they share this moment with those who inaugurated their struggles and with whom all victories are more meaningful. Making what appears absent present, they multiply the timelines in play along with their still unfolding possibilities.

Connecting back to Gramsci, such an approach frames progressive revolution as a centuries-long endeavor in which centuries themselves cross-cut and intersect. Within it, rather than a two-step strategy of seeking first and exclusively to seize the state with its arsenal of force, with Lee Boggs and Pointer and Miller, we wrestle with failures of older Marxisms to consider how scars attach us to borders that close in on our capacity to root our obligations and powers to act in an interconnected universe shared with all modes of awe-inspiring sensuous life, including the Earth that is our only home.

Such wrestling does not surrender the most radical of commitments to social transformation. Instead, by stirring our affective sensations by reconnecting us with dense webs of temporal relations and a reality pulsating with possibilities, we can, with Garza and Woodly's accounts of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives, in Lee Boggs's formulation, seek our deliberate, continued evolution as human beings. We do so in the thick stream of life, by growing in and through ideas and organizations that enact our collective responses to ongoing endemic problems, shifting as and when we exhaust our extent approaches.

It is through such efforts that we refashion the institutional expressions of how we together face ongoing radical uncertainty with something other than terror. Rather than pitting what we might do together each day against the broad opening of a frayed social consensus, we reweave this fabric through together, concretely and creatively, building political options.

Jane Anna Gordon is Professor of Political Science and Social and Critical Inquiry (Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) at University of Connecticut, with affiliations in American Studies, El Instituto, and Philosophy. She is author of *Statelessness and Contemporary Enslavement* (Routledge, 2020), *Creolizing Political Theory* (Fordham University Press, 2014), and *Why They Couldn't Wait* (RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), co-author of *Of Divine Warning* (Routledge, 2009), and, most recently, co-editor of *Creolizing Rosa Luxemburg* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021) and *The Politics of Richard Wright* (University Press of Kentucky, 2019). President of the Caribbean Philosophical Association (CPA) from 2014-2017, Gordon continues to direct the CPA Summer School and to co-edit the organization's two book series, *Creolizing the Canon* and *Global Critical Caribbean Studies*. With Lewis R. Gordon, she is Executive Editor of the open access journal, *Philosophy and Global Affairs*.

¹ Jane Howard, "Telling Talk from a Negro Writer," *LIFE* 54, no. 21 (1963): 81-92, 100-02. I would like to thank Amara Chimakonam, Abraham Olivier, and Justin Sands (co-organizers, with M. John Lamola and Rafael Winkler, of the Centre for Phenomenology in South Africa conference), Heather Pincock (as paper discussant at the inaugural Southern Symposium for Political Thought), and the reviewers and editors of *JWP* for generative feedback on this paper.

² Tim Reid, "Trump Tells Christians They Won't Have to Vote after this Election," *Reuters* July 28, 2024 (URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-tells-christians-they-wont-have-vote-after-this-election-2024-07-27/>; last accessed on June 30, 2025).

³ Lewis R. Gordon writes, "In the true sense of *kreinein* ('to decide,' from which evolved the word *crisis*), [Frantz] Fanon embodies the crisis of European man as decision, whether favorable or unfavorable: there is no guarantee either of the good or the bad in the new" (Gordon 1995: 12). Lewis R. Gordon, *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, New York: Routledge.

⁴ There is rich, historical reflection on how to limit possibilities of citizens surrendering their abilities to act with freedom. Consider Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *On the Social Contract*, Book I, Chapter IV (144-7): "Since no man has natural authority over his fellow man, and since force does not give rise to any right, conventions therefore remain the basis of all legitimate authority among men [...] A man who makes himself the slave of someone else does not give himself; he sells himself, at least for

his subsistence. But why does a people sell itself? [...] It will be said that the despot assures his subjects of civil tranquility [...] What do they gain, if this very tranquility is one of their miseries? A tranquil life is also had in dungeons [...] To say that a man gives himself gratuitously is to say something absurd and inconceivable [...] To say the same thing of an entire populace is to suppose a populace of madmen [...] Renouncing one's liberty is renouncing one's dignity as a man, the rights of humanity and even its duties. There is no possible compensation for anyone who renounces everything." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company 1987.

⁵ I am here invoking both Karl Marx (1978: 595) and Max Weber (2002: 359-69). From Marx, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton 1978), 594–617; Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," in *Political Writings*, ed. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 309–69.

⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as We Know It*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

⁷ While beyond the scope of this essay, Nelson Maldonado Torres (2019) argues that it is *catastrophe*, rather than *crisis*, that more accurately describes how modernity/coloniality shaped Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. It is in a similar vein that Oscar Guardiola Rivera has said that Amerindians already live in postapocalyptic times; that, for them, the apocalypse has come and contemporary life is undertaken in its aftermath. Nelson Maldonado Torres, "Afterword: Critique and Decoloniality in the Face of Crisis, Disaster, and Catastrophe," in *Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm*, ed. Yarimar Bonilla and Marisol LeBrón (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), .

⁸ See Beauvoir (2009 [1949]) and Sartre (1995 [1948]). Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York: Random House: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009 [1949]; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, trans. George J. Becker, New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. 1995 [1948].

⁹ My thinking about Gramsci in this context is immediately sparked by the doctoral research of Benjamin Stumpf (unpublished). See, Benjamin Stumpf, "Mounting an Abolitionist Hegemony: Critical Conjunctions of Repression and Resistance after the George Floyd Uprising," PhD dissertation, Political Science, University of Connecticut, Storrs (unpublished).

¹⁰ Antonio Gramsci, "State and Civil Society," in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 206–76.

¹¹ Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show," *Marxism Today* (1979): 14-20.

¹² See Garza (2020) and Luxemburg (2004). I thank Sharon Stanley for reminding me of the relevance of the BLM conception of non-reformist reform as a way of naming working within the system with an eye to transcending and exceeding its logic. Alicia Garza, *The Purpose of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart*, New York: One World, 2020; Rosa Luxemburg, "Social Reform or Revolution," in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, ed. Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 128-67.

-
- ¹³ See, Rosa Luxemburg, “Letter to Mathilde and Emanuel Wurm, July 18, 1906,” in *Gesammelte Briefe*, Band 2, ed. Annelies Laschitza (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1999).
- ¹⁴ See, Joelle Fishman and Lisa Armstrong, *Lessons from Revolutionary Organizing: On the Campaign Trail and Beyond*, New York: International Publishers, 2024.
- ¹⁵ Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- ¹⁶ Frantz Fanon, “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963), 249–310.
- ¹⁷ See Lee Boggs’s account and analysis of some of these solutions (2012: chapters 4, 5, and 6).
- ¹⁸ Deva R. Woodley, *Reckoning: Black Lives Matter and the Democratic Necessity of Social Movements*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.
- ¹⁹ With apologies for the change in citation style, this is quoted from the first page of an as yet unpublished book chapter manuscript titled “Epistemology of Remembrance” that Nkiru Nzegwu shared as the focus of one of two workshops at the Caribbean Philosophical Association Summer School held at the University of Connecticut in June 2024. My detailed discussion of her pathbreaking work appears here with Nzegwu’s express permission.
- ²⁰ Rebecca Pointer and Darlene Miller, “Becoming Octopus: Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Green Leadership,” *SOTL in the South* 8, no.1 (April 2024): 119-43.
- ²¹ Michalinos Zembylas, “Toward Affective Decolonization: Nurturing Decolonizing Solidarity in Higher Education,” *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 20, no. 4 (2022): 300-19.
- ²² See, Donna Haraway, *Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene: Staying with the Trouble*, Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet, Santa Cruz, California, 2014. (URL: <http://opentranscripts.org/transcript/anthropocene-capitalocene-chthulucene/>; last accessed on June 30, 2025).
- ²³ See P. Ntuli, “Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the African Renaissance: Laying the Foundation for the Creation of Counter-Hegemonic Discourses,” in *Indigenous Knowledge and the Integration of Knowledge Systems: Towards a Philosophy of Articulation*, ed. C.A.O. Hoppers (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2002), 53–66.
- ²⁴ T. Mokuku, “Lehae La Rona: Epistemological Interrogation to Broaden our Conception of Environment and Sustainability,” *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 17 (2012): 159-72.
- ²⁵ See, for instance, Ramaswamy (2019) and Adams (2021). Chitra Ramaswamy, “The More the Word ‘Woke’ is Used as a Slur and a Joke, the More We Need It,” *The Guardian US*, March 4, 2019 (URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/04/chitra-ramaswamy-the-more-woke-is-used-as-a-joke-and-slur-the-more-we-need-it>; last accessed on July 1, 2025); Joshua Adams, “How ‘Woke’ Became a Slur,” *Colorlines* May 5, 2021 (URL: <https://colorlines.com/article/how-woke-became-slur/>; last accessed on July 1, 2025).