

BENJAMIN P. DAVIS  
Emory University

## A/THEOLOGIES OF THE IMPOSSIBLE: ANTIGONE, WEIL, BADIOU, AND THE STRANGE

*The impossible is the least that one can demand. –James Baldwin,  
The Fire Next Time*

To the political and ethical crises of environmental devastation, capitalistic and imperial endurances, violence against the vulnerable, and occupation and war, we must respond. And yet, within the contemporary academy in the United States, rare is dissent, for instance, against continued state-sponsored military violence in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> – or, for that matter, against the epidemic of sexual violence across campuses<sup>2</sup> or the neoliberal administrations that relegate the humanities to service departments, handmaidens of the vocational.<sup>3</sup> Instead, actions endorsed by administrators, faculty, parents, and ultimately students often serve a politics (and thereby an ethics) not of *dissent*, but of *consent*.<sup>4</sup> As such, students sensitive to social crises are encouraged to pursue, for instance, the Peace Corps or Teach for America, two organizations critiqued for their “savior” mentalities and colonial models – the former in the rural Global South, the latter in the urban United States.<sup>5</sup> And thus, potential

<sup>1</sup> See Jacob Weisberg, “Where have All the Flower Children Gone?” *Slate*, December 13, 2006, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/the\\_big\\_idea/2006/12/where\\_have\\_all\\_the\\_flower\\_children\\_gone.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_big_idea/2006/12/where_have_all_the_flower_children_gone.html). Weisberg writes, “On campuses today, there is plenty of altruistic sentiment, but little in the way of revolutionary consciousness.”

<sup>2</sup> See Monica Alba, “Clinton Pushes Crackdown on ‘Epidemic’ of Campus Sexual Assault,” *NBC News*, September 14, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/clinton-roll-out-plan-combat-sexual-assault-colleges-n427016>.

<sup>3</sup> See William Deresiewicz, “The Neoliberal Arts: How college sold its soul to the market,” *Harper’s Magazine*, September 2015, <http://harpers.org/archive/2015/09/the-neoliberal-arts/?single=1>.

<sup>4</sup> Further, voices of critical dissent are being targeted and eliminated, leading to a “crises of intellectual repression.” See Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira, eds., *The Imperial University* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> See Michael Maren, *The Road to Hell: The Ravaging Effects of Foreign Aid and International Charity* (New York: The Free Press, 1997). See also Max Blumenthal, “How School privatization hawks Teach For America promote Israel,” *The Electronic Intifada*, August 20, 2013, <https://electronicintifada.net/content/how-school-privatization-hawks-teach-america-promote-israel/12700>. Furthermore, the Peace Corps and Teach for America go so far as to advertise life “After Peace Corps” and “Beyond the Corps” respectively, suggesting each as a stepping-stone to the individual’s career – not a permanent or long-

dissent is trans-muted and institutionalized into self-serving (ac)quiescence.<sup>6</sup> In this context, consequently, those in the academy often limit their vision to *the possible*: the normal, legal, institutional, and existent forms of being and living in the world.

Rejecting such acquiescence, and in order to frame a politics and an ethics of dissent, I turn my attention in this essay to *the impossible*: the abnormal, illegal, un-institutional, abject, and non-existent forms of being and living in the world. My claim is this: We should gesture toward transcending and transgressing the logic of the possible that perpetuates oppression. In this framework, cool calculations and economic efforts absorb good intentions into positivistic metrics, legal reform, (often violent) humanitarian interventions,<sup>7</sup> and capitalistic “aid” and “development.” Such proposed “solutions” are part of and indeed derived from a problem: the paradigm of the interests of the nation-state (politically) and capitalism (economically). In effect, the possible—insofar as it is conceived from these conditions—is environmental destruction, state violence, unrelenting imperialism, and economic oppression; and by working through current norms, laws, and institutions, we perpetuate the powers and privileges embedded in those structures. In contrast to this perpetuation, the impossible seeks to transform and even move beyond structures of violence. But how do we achieve the impossible? (And what is it, exactly?) I contend that by turning to a/theologies of impossibility,<sup>8</sup> of

---

term solidarity among exploited populations. See  
<https://www.teachforamerica.org/alumni> and  
<http://www.peacecorps.gov/resources/faf/afterpc/>.

<sup>6</sup> Here I use “self” to refer to both individuals and collectivities, e.g. the Peace Corps volunteer and the Peace Corps itself.

<sup>7</sup> From his architectural perspective, Eyal Weizman argues that “at present, spatial organizations and physical instruments, technical standards, procedures and systems of monitoring – the complex humanitarian assemblage that philosopher Adi Ophir called ‘moral technologies’ – have become the means for exercising contemporary violence and for governing the displaced, the enemy and the unwanted. The condition of collusion of these technologies of humanitarianism, human rights and humanitarian law with military and political powers is referred to in this book as ‘the humanitarian present’” (Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* [New York: Verso, 2011], 4.). Similarly, Giorgio Agamben writes that “humanitarian organizations – which today are more and more supported by international commissions – can only grasp human life in the figure of bare or sacred life, and therefore, despite themselves, maintain a secret solidarity with the very powers they ought to fight... The ‘imploring eyes’ of the Rwandan child, whose photography is shown to obtain money but who ‘is now becoming more and more difficult to find alive,’ may well be the most telling contemporary cipher of the bare life that humanitarian organizations, in perfect symmetry with state power, need” (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995], 133-134 [emphasis mine]).

<sup>8</sup> By “a/theology” I mean to suggest lived orientations that refuse systemization, reification, and cohesion; often paradoxical, these

transcendence and transgression, we can begin to understand orientations to the impossible, and thus begin to critique and interrupt *idées reçus* with a view toward what is outside of the *status quo*—the strange.<sup>9</sup>

This essay is organized into four parts: definition and examples of impossibility as transcendent; discussion of a radical, immanent alternative to the possible; elaboration on the implications of that material alternative; and an impossible challenge to those enmeshed in academic assemblages today. In part one, I turn to two exemplars who move beyond the logic of the possible, Antigone and Simone Weil. How could their examples and thought inform a critique of “the possible” today? I focus on Antigone because of her audacious transgressions of authority and the law, of her gendered position in society, and of life itself. Antigone, then, moves us, broadly, beyond the legal and normal elements of the possible. I then turn to Weil because of her emphasis on renouncing the self, her rejection of the idolatry inherent in capitalism, and her critique of human rights discourse and humanitarianism—two (related) approaches to global crises. Weil, then, moves us beyond the more specific elements of the possible: capitalism and state-sponsored humanitarian initiatives. In part one I argue that, for both Antigone and Weil, transcendence of the possible is rooted in and motivated by the supernatural; however, skeptical of implicit metaphysics therein, I am left wondering: How would a *material* turn to the impossible

---

a/theologies call themselves into question, even suspending themselves. Here I also follow Mark Taylor regarding position, subversion, and transgression: “Given the marginality of its site, an a/theology that draws on deconstructive philosophy will invert established meaning and subvert everything once deemed holy. It will thus be utterly transgressive.” Taylor continues, “A/theology represents the liminal thinking or marginal thinkers. The / of a/theology (which, it is important to note, can be written but not spoken) marks the *limen* that signifies *both* proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority. This strangely permeable membrane forms a border where fixed boundaries disintegrate. Along this boundless boundary the traditional polarities between which Western theology has been suspended are inverted and subverted...The a/theologian asks errant questions and suggests responses that often seem erratic or even erroneous. Since [her] reflection wanders, roams, and strays from the ‘proper’ course, it tends to deviate from well-established ways. To traditional eyes, a/theology doubtless appears to be irregular, eccentric, and vagrant” (Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984], 6; 12-13).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding hearing (and, in turn, responding to) what is foreign, what is strange, Julia Kristeva also cites the importance of interruption. She writes, “The ear is receptive to conflicts only if the body loses its footing. A certain imbalance is necessary, a swaying over some abyss, for a conflict to be heard.” The alternative, she notes, is what I have described as “the possible”: “a seemingly peaceful coexistence that hides the abyss: an abysmal world, the end of the world” (Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1991], 17).

manifest itself? In part two, I suggest that Alain Badiou's notion of fidelity to "the event" is an immanent "impossible," and thus, *pace* Antigone and Weil, a viable alternative to supernatural "impossibles." Indeed, Badiou's ethics of the event enables us to envision material interruptions to the narrative of the possible. In part three, I discuss the implications of these interruptions, arguing that such breaks in self, thought, and action could inspire impassioned, subject-ivating, and self-critical responses to crises today. With these responses in mind, in part four I issue an "impossible" challenge: that we break with the *status quo* such that we become strangers to "the possible." My aim is to dwell in the openings of the impossible, openings that call into question—that radically re-examine—established presuppositions and modalities of being "possible" today.

### **Part One**

#### ***Antigone's Defiance: Death of a Religious Criminal***

In Sophocles' drama *Antigone*, Antigone defies power (as seen in the ruler and the law) and traditional gender roles. Even though her extreme action opposes her very survival, she nevertheless chooses to follow her convictions. With a view toward what motivates this steadfast, self-giving resolve, in this section I examine the factors inspiring Antigone's defiance.

From the beginning of the drama Antigone's extremism is evident.<sup>10</sup> In dialogue with her sister Ismene, Antigone confirms that she has been thinking "dark thoughts" that challenge the proclamation of the ruler, Creon.<sup>11</sup> Creon has forbidden anyone from burying Antigone's brother, Polyneices, whom Creon considers a traitor against Thebes. Ever loyal to her brother, however, Antigone decides she will inter Polyneices so as to honor him and the gods, the illegality of the act notwithstanding. In attempting to persuade Antigone not to bury their brother, Ismene appeals to the law: "Creon has forbidden it," but Antigone maintains her convictions and her filial loyalty: "It is not for him to keep me from my own."<sup>12</sup> This laconic reply provokes the continued pleas of Ismene: "You ought to realize we are only women, not meant in nature to fight against men... I shall yield in this to the authorities. Extravagant action is not sensible."<sup>13</sup> In this petition Ismene appeals to gender norms and essentialism (i.e., women "in nature"), power structures, and sensibility; yet, Antigone, rejecting Ismene's appeals to oppressive constructs, holds firm: "I myself will bury him. It will be good to die, so doing."<sup>14</sup> Antigone, thus, is willing not only to subvert tradition

<sup>10</sup> She is, then, like Martin Luther King Jr., who, in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," self-identifies as an "extremist" for love and justice.

<sup>11</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *Sophocles I: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. David Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

and authority, but also to risk her own life, her-self. To the male-dominated *polis* she seems mad, her transgressive actions transcending pre-determined roles and rational calculation. Indeed, it is sensible to wonder: What motivates such extreme action? In other words, what moves an individual to live beyond what is sensible and secure?

Antigone's inspiration lies in the supernatural. As aforementioned, she rejects Ismene's appeal to the "nature" of their status as women, which Antigone later refers to as an "excuse" that precludes action.<sup>15</sup> What explains Antigone's radical *praxis* in a positive manner, however, is a specific kind of self-declared criminality: "I shall be a criminal—but a religious one. The time in which I must please those that are dead is longer than I must please those of this world."<sup>16</sup> Antigone's motivation, then, is not oriented toward the worldly, the mundane sphere of nature. Rather, she transcends the natural, citing what is not "of this world" as her motivation for transgression.

It is perhaps this turn to the unworldly that reaffirms Ismene's doubt in regard to Antigone's planned burial. "If you can do it," Ismene remarks, placing Antigone's capacity in the conditional. "But," Ismene continues, "you are in love with the impossible."<sup>17</sup> Ismene's is a telling conclusion. Indeed, she defines a rejection of state power, law, order, gender roles, and sensible action as *impossibility*. Again, Antigone is both quick and succinct in her refutation: "No. When I can do no more, then I will stop."<sup>18</sup> Importantly, Ismene has already denied her own agency, and hence stopped herself—or, more precisely, *failed to begin*. "If things are as you say," she previously said to Antigone, "how can I better them?"<sup>19</sup> Ismene uses the same verb ("can") as Antigone, yet already she has consigned herself to non-action; her ability, she claims, is inefficacious.<sup>20</sup> After all, Ismene declares, "[F]orce constrains me."<sup>21</sup> Yet, under these same "constraints," but unwilling to make excuses or deny her own agency, Antigone promises to do what she can—to which Ismene responds, "It is better not to hunt the impossible at all."<sup>22</sup> And so the question arises: What is the result of Antigone's hunt?

Without fear of death, and with the supernatural in mind, Antigone transgresses the natural law and order and thus accomplishes what, to the rational, complacent (in regard to social norms, for instance) observer is "impossible." Antigone is a religious criminal in that she obeys supernatural laws, and thus

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>20</sup> Regarding responding to crises, then, this suggests an equivalency between sanctioned action and non-action.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 165.

transgresses natural order. Called before Creon, she confesses both that she buried her brother and that she knew such an act was against the law. Here Antigone makes a distinction between Creon's law, which is "*auto-nomos* (self-ruling) and autogenerative from within a strictly human domain" and the law of the gods, which inspires Antigone's self-sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> She explains:

[I]t was not Zeus that made the proclamation; nor did Justice, which lives with those below...I did not believe your proclamation had such power to enable one who will someday die to override God's ordinances, unwritten and secure. *They* are not of today and yesterday; they live forever; none knows when first they were.<sup>24</sup>

Antigone recognizes Creon's mortality; it is because he will die "someday," because he belongs to the natural world, that she does not believe he (or any human) can "override" the eternal laws of the supernatural. Only the supernatural, time-out-of-mind laws "live forever"; humans (and their edicts) do not. Yet in spite of this pious argument, Creon holds firm in his authority and in his position that Antigone's unburied brother does not deserve religious and honorific death rites. To Creon's autonomy Antigone responds, "Who knows if in that other world this is true piety?"<sup>25</sup> Her interest, again, is in the unwritten laws of "that other world" – a kind of "true piety" that calls into question the human laws of this (natural) world.

In addition to the laws of elsewhere, two types of love motivate Antigone. It is filial love, not a constructed role in society, not powerlessness, Antigone claims, that is natural to her: "My nature is to join in love, not hate."<sup>26</sup> Here, *philia* is the love that motivates Antigone's loyalty to Polyneices and to the piety that demands she bury him. As we saw, she loves her brother such that she is willing to risk her own death in order to fulfill her filial duties. We also recall that Antigone is "in love with the impossible."<sup>27</sup> In this comment Ismene aligns Antigone with *erōs*, a kind of excessive love that is also related to the divine in that it designates the Greek divinity associated with passion. As such, *erōs* "names an experience or a divinity that is transgressive and even destructive."<sup>28</sup> The chorus affirms the destructive characteristic of *erōs*: "Love undefeated in the fight, / Love that makes havoc of possessions... there is no god able to escape you / nor anyone of men, whose life is a day only, / and whom you possess is mad."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> William Robert, *Trials of Antigone and Jesus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>24</sup> *Antigone*, 178.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>28</sup> Robert, *Trials*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Antigone*, 192.

As we see, neither gods nor humans can “escape” *erōs*; this is precisely because *erōs* is not fully divine but, rather, half-god and half-human, “in between mortal and immortal,” as Socrates recounts in the *Symposium*, as a bridge between humans and gods.<sup>30</sup> *Erōs*, then, outlines a kind of threshold between the natural and the supernatural. It causes one to be “mad” and leads to death and to transgressions considered impossible, what the Chorus calls “the extreme of daring.”<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this erotic audacity rendered Antigone’s death her “own choice,”<sup>32</sup> such that even though she is condemned to die,<sup>33</sup> she descends, paradoxically, “alive, to that world of death.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, Antigone acts politically from the threshold<sup>35</sup> between life and death, “destabilizing its demarcation from within”<sup>36</sup> and troubling additional binaries of man/woman and possible/impossible.<sup>37</sup>

In sum, piety and love inspire Antigone to transgress laws and destabilize categories in the natural world, and her quest for what some call “impossible” leads to her death.<sup>38</sup> But how could the

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 202d in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997). Henceforth abbreviated PCW.

<sup>31</sup> *Antigone*, 194.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Crucially, Antigone cites her pious devotion to the supernatural as cause of her condemnation: “For indeed because of piety I was called impious” (*ibid.*, 196).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>35</sup> Drawing on Lacan, Judith Butler also notes that Antigone lies “at the threshold of the symbolic,” marking “the far side of a symbolic limit beyond which humans may not cross.” Going further, Butler writes, “Antigone appears at this limit or, indeed, *as this limit*.” Perhaps, then, Antigone not only acts at the threshold, but also *embodies the threshold* (Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2000], 40, 47).

<sup>36</sup> Robert, *Trials*, 18. As such, Antigone engages in a kind of destabilizing “border thinking,” entering herself into the *polis*, an action with contemporary de-colonial resonance. Walter Mignolo writes, “Today, silenced and marginalized voices are bringing themselves into the conversation of cosmopolitan projects, rather than waiting to be included. Inclusion is always a reformative project. Bringing themselves into the conversation is a transformative project that takes the form of border thinking or border epistemology – that is, the alternative to separatism is border thinking, the recognition and transformation of the hegemonic imaginary from the perspectives of people in subaltern positions. Border thinking then becomes a ‘tool’ of the project of critical cosmopolitanism” (Walter Mignolo, “The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism,” *Public Culture* 12.3 [Fall 2000]: 721-748).

<sup>37</sup> Robert, *Trials*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Through the law, the powerful today still punish those who challenge their rule by burying the “criminal” alive. Citing Alan Eladio Gómez in her phenomenological study of contemporary U.S. prisons entitled *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives*, Lisa Guenther notes, “The very existence of political activists behind prison walls challenged the laws of advanced capitalism in the United States; resistance was unacceptable, the internal colonial other was to be *buried alive*, permanently isolated from human contact, sentenced to the

hunt for the impossible challenge specific economic and political norms in our time, including, for instance, free-market capitalism and discussions of human rights? To answer this question, I turn to the thought of Simone Weil.

### *Weil's Critique: Impossible Rejections of the Natural*

Like Antigone, Simone Weil seeks the impossible through the supernatural. Weil is concerned with "the good," which is to say she is concerned with God, for God "is none other than the good itself."<sup>39</sup> In Weil's thought this notion of "the good" is opposed to "the necessary," and the distance that separates the two is that "between the creature and the creator," that is, between the natural and the supernatural.<sup>40</sup> Weil describes this separation as "the void" (*le vide*), leading to the question: Given this distance, what does it mean for human beings to be oriented toward the good?

According to Weil, the void was caused through "creation," the moment when God decided to create the world—when the supernatural *withdrew* so that the natural could exist, and thus chose to be lesser than Godself. As such, creation is a kind of kenosis; this is why, for Weil, imitation of God lies in our own self-renunciation, what Weil calls "decreation," our giving up "being something."<sup>41</sup> "That," Weil writes, "is our only good."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, God's creation is an act of love: "It is God who in love withdraws from us so that we can love him."<sup>43</sup> Distance, then, is required for love; but, crucially, to love God is not to love on the natural level—God, after all, is not an object of this world. In fact, to treat any-thing as though it could fill the (supernatural) void would be an act of idolatry. To be oriented toward the good, then, is to recognize and maintain this void.

And yet, today filling the void is a presupposition of contemporary advertising; in our self-help culture, the logic of capitalism suggests that consumption can lead to a more "full" you. In effect, this logic elevates finite *goods* to the level of the infinite—*the Good*, in Weilienne terms. Capitalism is thus idolatrous.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Weil argues that imagining that one can fill

---

punishment of a *living death*" (Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013], 283 [emphasis mine]).

<sup>39</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 94. Henceforth abbreviated GG.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>44</sup> In his essay "Capitalism as Religion," Walter Benjamin also describes capitalism in religious terms. In capitalism, Benjamin writes, "There are no 'weekdays'... each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper." That is, consumption is constantly required; in Weilienne terms, idolatry is a quotidian demand (Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism

the void—through, for instance, buying things or self-affirmation—is an illusion that must be suspended. But what does this suspension entail?

For Weil, if in the natural world God is absent, then humans must love that absence, that void. And yet, this is an impossible task for a natural being. “[B]y a necessity of nature,” Weil writes, “every being invariably exercises all of the power of which it is capable.”<sup>45</sup> The human tendency, again, is to fill the void, to generate some kind of consolation in order to assuage the affliction of separation from God, “the good which is found nowhere in this world.”<sup>46</sup> To endure the void, then, is to refuse to exercise the power within one’s capability; it is an act “contrary to all the laws of nature.”<sup>47</sup> It is, in other words, impossible.

Perhaps in an attempt to orient themselves toward “the good,” or at least with good intentions, many concerned citizens today agitate for human rights. Human rights, the argument goes, serve to ensure that the dignity of “every individual everywhere”<sup>48</sup> is upheld; they recognize universal values that protect all humans no matter of nationality, gender, religion, “or any other status.”<sup>49</sup> As such, human rights are especially important in regard to the protection of minority groups within and among nation-states.

For Weil, however, our motivation and activism for human rights lie on the natural level.<sup>50</sup> Often, such agitation is caused by a kind of envy, a feeling that someone has more than you. The result is that people argue for rights through “economic demand[s],” as though engaged in a bargain.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this economic argument is part and parcel of human rights, which connote notions “of sharing out, of exchange, of measured quantity.”<sup>52</sup> The language of rights, then, “evoke[s] a latent war and awaken[s] the spirit of contention” among individuals.<sup>53</sup> For these reasons, Weil critiques rights in that they carry “a commercial flavor” and “must rely upon force in the background.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, rights are the

---

as Religion,” in *Walter Benjamin*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1, 1913-1926 [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004], 288).

<sup>45</sup> GG, 10.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See “History of the Document,” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/history.shtml>.

<sup>49</sup> See “The Foundation of International Human Rights Law,” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

[http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/hr\\_law.shtml](http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/hr_law.shtml).

<sup>50</sup> Simone Weil, “Human Personality” in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 52. Henceforth abbreviated SWA.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61.

language of the powerful, often employed as tools to dominate the weak – those with less force. That is, human rights are granted from the context of a privileged position: by the powerful (what Alain Badiou calls “the armed benefactor”<sup>55</sup>) to the weak (seen as the victim needed to be protected or “saved”).<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, Weil argues that rights have served the ends of the powerful since their inception. The Romans, Weil notes, “understood that power is not fully efficacious unless clothed in a few ideas, and to this end they made use of the idea of rights.”<sup>57</sup> Weil thus unmasks the state power in the “background” of contemporary discussions of human rights.<sup>58</sup> She asserts that the language of humanitarianism has the same “flavor” as that of neoliberalism.<sup>59</sup> As such, the suspension of the capitalistic illusions that attempt to fill the supernatural void is related to the refusal to exercise the force of power and privilege by bargaining through rights. But how would one enact this suspension and refusal, actions beyond the natural and the possible?

Like for Antigone, though in a qualified sense, for Weil individual agency is involved in the process of achieving the impossible. First, one must “consent to directing his attention and love

<sup>55</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2001), 14.

<sup>56</sup> To illustrate this polemical point, I cite my own experience studying with the Xukuru, an indigenous nation in Brazil. From colonization to the present day, and through myriad ways including state-sponsored education, forcing the removal of indigenous people from their historical land, legal claims, and economic pressures, ruling powers (and capitalist land developers) in Brazil have sought to eliminate Xukuru culture and to dispossess the nation of its historical land. Today, the Xukuru remain in legal disputes with numerous levels of Brazilian government over the rights to this land, *their land*. If they lose their cases, then the government will have used rights to appropriate Xukuru land once again; if they win, then through rights the government will “grant” the Xukuru access to land that is historically theirs, and that was violently taken from them. As such, they bargain with the state, whose force is not only in the background, but often in the foreground.

<sup>57</sup> SWA, 62.

<sup>58</sup> This power implicit in human rights also includes what William Robert calls humanism’s “ingrained masculinity” (Robert, *Trials*, 41). In the Ode on Man in *Antigone*, the chorus in the ode’s opening lines uses *anthrōpos*, which is sexually nonspecific; in the midpoint, however, it praises *anēr*, which is specifically masculine, as being able to “master the beasts of the field,” and as having “a way against everything” (*Antigone*, 174). By rejecting Creon’s *auto-nomos* law, Robert argues that Antigone is also unmasking the masculinity in “huMANism” that not only rejects the gods through its arrogance and dominates animals in the field, but also seeks to control women, as Creon did (Robert, *Trials*, 41).

<sup>59</sup> Echoing Weil’s critique of the language of rights as that of exchange and measured quantity, Weizman writes that our “humanitarian present” is “obsessed with the calculations and calibrations that seek to moderate, ever so slightly, the evils that it has largely caused itself” (Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 6).

beyond the world, towards the reality that exists outside the reach of all human faculties.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the energy required to accept the void comes “from elsewhere.”<sup>61</sup> “Yet first”—that is, before one receives the energy of “supernatural bread”—Weil writes, “[T]here must be a tearing out, something desperate has to take place, the void must be created.”<sup>62</sup> Self-renunciation in imitation of God’s creation, I suggest, can be seen as such an act of desperation, a response to the natural world in the same vein as Antigone’s “When I can do no more, then I will stop.”<sup>63</sup> That is, in the gesture of self-renunciation there is recognition both of the individual’s ability to act and of the limitations always already (socially and theologically) present in that individual’s situation.<sup>64</sup> In orienting oneself toward the good,<sup>65</sup> in renouncing the self in a de-creative moment of desperation, and in consenting to that which is “outside the reach,” one does all that one can will, and then one accepts the ultimate inadequacy of one’s will. According to Weil, what we have to do, then, is “to fix our will on the void—to will the void.”<sup>66</sup> We “clear the ground,” as it were.<sup>67</sup> It is this

<sup>60</sup> SWA, 202.

<sup>61</sup> GG, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> *Antigone*, 165.

<sup>64</sup> I recognize two qualitatively different senses of impossibility here: In *Antigone*, the socially declared impossible is not a structural impossibility; the radically new occurs as what was formerly inconceivable due to limited perspectives. In Weil, by contrast, metaphysical and a/theological limitations present structural impossibilities with respect to the will, regardless of perspectival conceptions. In *The Communist Hypothesis*, Badiou presents a sense of impossibility—what he calls “the event”—that blurs the qualitative distinction between limited perspectives in *Antigone* and situated structures in Weil: “An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility of possibilities. Another way of putting this is: with respect to a situation or a world, an event paves the way for the possibility of what—from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of this world—is strictly impossible” (Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* [New York: Verso, 2010], 242-3).

<sup>65</sup> Because of Plato’s influence on Weil, to understand how this orientation occurs we can turn to Socrates’ description of beauty in *Phaedrus*: “By their nature wings have the power to lift up heavy things and raise them aloft where the gods dwell, and so, more than anything that pertains to the body, they are akin to the divine, which has beauty, wisdom, goodness, and everything of that sort. These nourish the soul’s wings, which grow best in their presence.” For Weil, then, an orientation to God is inspired by beauty, wisdom, goodness, truth, and justice. Furthermore, and in relation to Antigone, this orienting beauty is connected to madness in Plato, for when one “sees the beauty we have down here and is reminded of true beauty; then he takes wing and flutters in his eagerness to rise up, but is unable to do so; and he gazes aloft, like a bird, paying no attention to what is down below—and that is what brings on him the charge that he has gone mad” (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246d-e in PCW, 525; 249d in PCW, 527).

<sup>66</sup> GG, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

effort that destroys “a part of the false sense of fullness within us,”<sup>68</sup> and that, by eradicating our idols and distractions, is experienced as a desperate “tearing out.” What is left is to endure the void, a moment of “terrible risk” that places one on the threshold of the natural and the supernatural, the possible and the impossible.<sup>69</sup>

As we have seen, Weil presents us with two impossibles that overlap: to accept the void (and thus to suspend the illusions of capitalism) and to not exercise our natural power (and thus to refuse to invoke human rights). But, for Weil, what “is impossible naturally is always possible supernaturally.”<sup>70</sup> At the threshold, human will is rendered futile. “Impossibility is the door of the supernatural,” Weil writes.<sup>71</sup> “We can but knock at it. It is someone else who opens.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, *for Weil the impossible can be achieved only through the supernatural.*<sup>73</sup> To accept the void and to refuse to exercise power—these *transcend* natural, human tendencies; they are supernatural actions. And like in Antigone, these moves that contravene nature lead to death: the result of “endur[ing] the void,” Weil writes, is “to accept death.”<sup>74</sup> This leads me to wonder, more generally: Is there a necessary relationship between hunting the impossible and death?

In Part One, I have argued that in both Antigone and Weil we see a loving orientation to the impossible that is motivated by the supernatural and moving toward the threshold between life and death. Therefore, I contend that those who are oriented to the impossible, like those who, for Socrates, “practice philosophy in the right way,” are “in training for dying and *they fear death least of all.*”<sup>75</sup> This *praxis* includes not only the death of self, but also, as I have discussed, the death of rigid and unjust worldly hierarchies and gender norms, as well as of oppressive economic systems, idols, the “false generosity”<sup>76</sup> of human rights, and (imperial)

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 11. In Christian terms, this threshold is a kind of cross—an intersection of the horizontal and the vertical.

<sup>70</sup> SWA, 65. Needless to say, this is a paradox. Here I want to note that *paradox* etymologically breaks into *para-doxa*, “by, past, beyond” *doxa*, belief. In other words, paradox is itself a transcendent concept, going past what is believed, beyond what is possible. For this reason, I want to suggest the importance of paradox as a mode of interrupting narratives of the possible (See “paradox, n. and adj.”. OED. Oxford University Press. and “para-, prefix1”. OED. Oxford University Press).

<sup>71</sup> GG, 95.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> She writes, “One cannot go up: it is necessary to be drawn” (GG, 99).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>75</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 67e in PCW, 59 (emphasis mine).

<sup>76</sup> Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1993), 26. Freire describes this generosity as an attempt “to ‘soften’ the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed” (ibid). In reality, however, this false generosity—this “messianism”—of the oppressor manifests his sense of guilt: he

humanitarian intervention. And for both Weil and Antigone, agency is involved such that we are *response*-able actors. Yet, one might object to Antigone's piety or to Weil's religious Platonism and mysticism as non-universal experiences. Indeed, to those not religiously inclined, these supernatural hunts for the impossible could be alienating, or simply untenable. Furthermore, the contemporary philosopher might argue that both Antigone and Weil presuppose metaphysics with which she is uncomfortable in light of postmodern philosophy's "incredulity toward metanarratives"—and by extension toward metaphysics itself.<sup>77</sup> In part two I address these objections; my question hinges on whether an orientation to the impossible requires *transcendental* inspiration. Can someone *not* "shaken by God" have a desire for the impossible?<sup>78</sup> How would an *immanent* motivation toward the impossible manifest? And ultimately, what would this immanent impossible imply and interrupt *vis-à-vis* quiescent narratives today?

### **Part Two**

#### ***The Event: A Radically Immanent Break with "The Possible"***

The French philosopher Alain Badiou provides an immanent ethical model that ruptures "the possible": the normal, legal, institutional, and existent forms of being and living in the world today. In this section, I will outline this model by specifically focusing on what Badiou calls "the event."

For Badiou, in the circumstances of a truth an individual becomes a subject through fidelity to an "event."<sup>79</sup> These circumstances that convoke the subject are outside of the normal, consensual *status quo*; they happen "in situations as something that they and the usual way of behaving in them cannot account for."<sup>80</sup> Here we see two important aspects of the event. First, it occurs "in situations." That is, the event is *situated*, singular, located by its "evental site," which itself is situated at the edge of "the void" [*vide*]; that is, Badiou explains, "[T]he event names the void...the not-known of the situation," providing a "wholly new architectonic and thematic principle" for that which it is an event.<sup>81</sup> Second, the event presents something distinctly *other than* the situation, and the opinions and instituted knowledges therein. Void, then, is relevant in another sense: those who dominate a situation perceive this "other than," this strange truth, as "void," as invalid. Thus, the event transcends what Badiou calls the "state" of the situation, with "state" here connoting both the *status*

"attempts not only to preserve and unjust and necrophilic order, but to 'buy' peace for himself" (*ibid.*, 126).

<sup>77</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>78</sup> *Antigone*, 184.

<sup>79</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 40-41.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 69, 68.

*quo* and the political state. In this way, the event transgresses social norms *and* political power, and it manifests what is strange, incalculable, and impossible. In sum, being outside of “what there is” and “excluded by all the regular laws of the situation,” an event impels an individual to choose a new way of living and being in the world, and as such it serves as a kind of transformative *supplement* to the ordinary, completely inaccessible to and outside of the rules of the situation.<sup>82</sup>

In the event, human will does not lie in generating its circumstances; rather, Badiou claims, “To enter into the composition of a subject of truth can only be something that *happens to you*.”<sup>83</sup> Will, however, lies in the moment of decision after the event’s occurrence: that is, the individual is faced with an immediate choice, *viz.*, to affirm or deny the event. In order to decide a new way of being, the individual must relate to the situation not through the consensual norms of “what is,” *but from the perspective of the event*. Badiou calls the latter relation “fidelity” to the event. Importantly, this fidelity is transgressive. As a rejection of “what is,” it militates against the normal and the possible: “Every fidelity to an authentic event names the adversaries of its perseverance. Contrary to consensual ethics, which tries to avoid divisions, the ethic of truths is always more or less militant, combative.”<sup>84</sup> For that reason, Badiou refers to “evental fidelity” as “a real break (both thought and practised) in the specific [political, artistic, etc.] order within which the event took place.”<sup>85</sup> Here two important questions emerge. First, if the event *happens to* a person, then is it a kind of transcendental, supernatural, or mystical experience with theological connotations? Second, what does this transgressive fidelity, this “break” entail?

For Badiou, the event is not transcendental but, rather, immanent. Badiou calls the process of fidelity to the event “truth,” or, more precisely, “*a* truth.”<sup>86</sup> That is, and against Plato, for Badiou “there is no Truth, there are only truths, disparate and untotalizable.”<sup>87</sup> Crucially, and against Weil and Antigone, for Badiou “a truth is the material course traced, within the situation, by the evental supplementation. It is thus an *immanent break*.”<sup>88</sup> He elaborates:

“Immanent” because a truth proceeds *in* the situation, and nowhere else – there is no heaven of truths. “Break” because what enables the truth-

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 42. Here I will reiterate that the event takes *place*: it is situated, involving a site. Furthermore, the event also *takes place*: it occurs and subjectivizes.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Event as Trans-Being,” in *Theoretical Writings* (London: Continuum, 2006), 104.

<sup>88</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 42.

process – the event – meant nothing according to the prevailing language and established knowledge of the situation.<sup>89</sup>

In other words, “as far as its material is concerned, the event is not a miracle.”<sup>90</sup> Rather, and in strong contrast with Weil’s Christian Platonism, the event is extracted from its material situation. The event, then, is neither transcendental nor supernatural. And thus our first question is answered. But before I turn to our second question—the importance of this “break,” which cannot be communicated in the established language—I must briefly explain Badiou’s notion of “the subject” in relation to the event.

Fidelity to the truth-process is a decision of what Badiou calls “the subject.” For the subject, the decision to be loyal to the event entails a complete re-working of how she thinks and lives in her “situation.” Importantly, the subject does not exist in the situation before the event; rather, “the process of truth *induces* a subject.”<sup>91</sup> Not knowing what she will become through the “testing experience” of the event, the individual must “submit the perseverance of what is known to a duration peculiar to the not-known,” a matter “of *being faithful to a fidelity*.”<sup>92</sup> Badiou exhorts: “Persevere in the interruption. Seize in your being that which has seized and broken you.”<sup>93</sup> In fact, it is *only* through this ethical decision, this *subjective commitment* that cannot be conceptualized or calculated by the “state” of the situation, that the individual becomes a subject. It is in this sense that Badiou writes that the event, that engagement with truth (as opposed to knowledge), induces a subject (in what hitherto was an individual). In part three I return to my question: What is the result of this perseverance? What is the result of a “break” that cannot be communicated through established knowledges?

### *Part Three* *Broken and Breaking: Implications of the Event*

The implications of the event are nothing short of revolution(ary). Badiou recognizes that one might ask, “[W]hat is it that makes the connection between the event and that ‘for which’ it is an event?”<sup>94</sup> The answer is the void [*vide*]. For instance, Marx is an event in political theory because he named the “proletariat,” which was “the central void of early bourgeois societies.”<sup>95</sup> This power of naming is transformative. We have seen that a truth process results in a kind of “break” with the normal, with “circulating knowledges,”<sup>96</sup> with what I call “the possible.” Thus,

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

<sup>90</sup> Badiou, “The Event as Trans-Being,” 100.

<sup>91</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 43.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 46, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 43.

the event “punches a hole” in the knowledge of what is, and through this hole, as it were, we begin to consider the “not yet,” the “what could be,” the impossible. In this way, a truth process, as it occurs from the perspective of the event, calls for a kind of re-cognition of reality (as well as a pursuit of the resultant uncharted paths) and hence a new language. Whereas the language of the situation is a kind of “pragmatic evaluation,” the language of the truth process “changes the names of elements in the situation”; it alters “the established codes of communication.”<sup>97</sup> More simply, Badiou notes, “The language of a poem is not that of a journalist.”<sup>98</sup>

Hence, the language of the event is poetry. Whereas the journalist strives to clearly describe an occurrence so as to communicate it with the public in terms already widely approved, “poetry does not easily suffer the demand for clarity, the passive audience, the simple message... It is devoid of mediation and hostile to the media. The poem resists the democracy of polls and television.”<sup>99</sup> As such, the poem is militant against the language of the powerful today, “the language of communication and reality, the confused language of images; a mediated language which is the province of the media.”<sup>100</sup> In contrast to this communication, a poem is an “exception to the noise”: it harbors silence that interrupts “the ambient cacophony” and says, “This thing that cannot be spoken in the language of consensus; I create silence in order to say it. I isolate this speech from the world. And when it is spoken again, it will always be for the first time.”<sup>101</sup> For Badiou, poetry as such, as a kind of “operation of silence,” presents itself to us “as a thing of language, encountered – each and every time – as an event.”<sup>102</sup> The poem, incalculable, without knowledge and thus without an object,<sup>103</sup> lies on a threshold as a kind of void,

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 82, 83.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>99</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 239.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 240. With similar ethical concerns, Weil writes, “If our present suffering ever does lead to a moral reorientation, it will not be accomplished by slogans, but in silence and moral solitude” (Simone Weil, “The Responsibilities of Literature” in *Simone Weil: Late Philosophical Writings*, trans. Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt, ed. Eric O. Springsted [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015], 154).

<sup>102</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, 240. In lines also related to my later discussion of hospitality and the stranger, Rumi suggests this event occurs in daily human existence: “This being human is a guest house. / Every morning a new arrival.” In response, he concludes, we ought to affirm the arrival, to “Be grateful for whoever comes, / because each has been sent / as a guide from beyond.” (Rumi, “The Guest House,” trans. Coleman Barks in *The Poem I Turn To: Actors & Directors and the Poetry that Inspires Them*, ed. Jason Shinder [Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2008], 6).

<sup>103</sup> For Badiou, whereas knowledge is related to an object, “the poem does not aim at, presuppose or describe an object” (Badiou, “The Event as Trans-Being,” 241).

objectless, possessing no-thing. In other words, Badiou avers, the “*common task*” of poetry (and philosophy) is “to think the unthinkable, to say what is impossible to say.”<sup>104</sup> Moreover, Badiou suggests not only that we say the impossible poetically, but also that we enact the impossible politically.

Just as a new language emerges from the event, so too does a new politics. Similar to the political event, politics itself is what Badiou always refers to as a *pensée-faire*, a kind of truth procedure, a thought-practice.<sup>105</sup> As such, politics is related to (but separate from) philosophy; for Badiou, one task of philosophy is to articulate a future ideal to be realized in political *praxis*. But, before we accuse Badiou of idealism, what Marx derisively called fighting phrases with phrases,<sup>106</sup> I remind us that Badiou maintains, “[P]hilosophy depends on certain nonphilosophical domains” and thus “the future of philosophy depends on its capacity for progressive adaptation to the changing of its conditions.”<sup>107</sup> The political question, then, is one of changing material conditions.

For Badiou, the “militant” changes the political conditions. As noted above, the ethic of truths—fidelity to an event—is always militant, combative, and transgressive. But when we think of “militant,” we ought not think of the warrior in a polished uniform or of the warmonger’s opinionated speech. Rather, militant evokes the Latin *miles*, and *millia passuum euntis*, the “mile-goers.”<sup>108</sup> In this light, the militant is she who “goes the full mile,” who enacts her beliefs in a kind of poetic thought-practice.<sup>109</sup> Political change will depend on the fidelity to the event of these thoughtful actors—those who, broken themselves, break through the *status quo*. Hence, Badiou calls on the youth to be militants—a move that itself challenges our conception of philosophy.

On the one hand, philosophy is seen as the acquisition and transmission of two kinds of knowledge: “the knowledge of truth in the theoretical domain” and “the knowledge of values in the practical domain.”<sup>110</sup> As such, philosophy relates to certain “schools,” and the philosopher is a professor, organizing the transmission concerning truth and value. On the other hand, Badiou argues, philosophy is not a type of knowledge but rather “it consists in the direct transformation of a subject, being a radical conversion of sorts – a complete upheaval of existence.”<sup>111</sup> Philosophy as such, as evental, Badiou writes, “is a free address

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>105</sup> Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants* (New York: Verso, 2012), 21.

<sup>106</sup> See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 41.

<sup>107</sup> Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, 31, 32.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 38.

of someone to someone else," like the *parrhesia* of Socrates in questioning the youth in the *agora* of Athens.<sup>112</sup> That is, philosophy is not the learning of knowledge but a thought-practice, a corrupting of the youth that is political insofar as it engages with the *polis*, as opposed to being isolated in the academy. Badiou writes:

"To corrupt the youth" is, after all, a very apt name to designate the philosophical act... To corrupt here means to teach the possibility of refusing all blind submission to established opinions. To corrupt means to give the youth certain means to change their opinions with regard to social norms, to substitute debate and rational critique for imitation and approval, and even, if the question is a matter of principle, to substitute revolt for obedience.<sup>113</sup>

Against Kant, then, Badiou argues that we must not only discuss and analyze power, but also thoughtfully and critically disobey authority. Our public *and* our private use of reason ought to be free, and thus we become dissenting actors in the *polis*, not only consenting students, professors, and so on in the academy. Our disobedience, our transgression, is a political non-compliance with an unjust and possible social order governed by the "state." After all, Badiou notes, "[E]mancipatory politics always consists in making seem possible that which, from within the situation, is declared to be impossible."<sup>114</sup>

#### *Part Four*

#### *Philosophy as Strange: An Impossible Challenge*

*And the more that cloud of impossibility is recognized as obscure and impossible, the more truly the necessity shines forth.*

—Nicholas of Cusa, *De Visione Dei*<sup>115</sup>

In this essay, I have outlined the logic of the possible: the normal, legal, institutional, and existent forms of being and living in the world that are perpetuated by sensibility and calculation, and that, in turn, perpetuate the oppressive structures of capitalism and the nation-state that constitute the *status quo*. Departing from

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 121.

<sup>115</sup> In *Cloud of the Impossible*, Catherine Keller suggests that contemporary planetary exigencies require a new kind of theological practice, including new and impossible modalities of living: "[T]he cloud is never enough; it is not any of the ensembles elemental or social that it makes possible; *is* not the theology, not the theopoetics. It lets us face an impossibility of our *oikos* with some new possibility. In the present book, the cloud has offered itself not as a home, not as an earth, but as a perspective hospitable to experiments in dwelling differently" (Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2015], 310).

this framework, I have argued in favor an ethics and politics of the impossible: the abnormal, the extreme, the “other than,” the strange. My argument has unfolded in three parts. First, I discussed transcendent impossibility through the examples of Antigone and Simone Weil. Second, and skeptical of the metaphysics inherent in the pious and mystical transcendence of Antigone and Weil, I turned to Alain Badiou’s immanent break: the event and fidelity to it. Third, following Badiou, I suggested poetic and political affirmations of the event that, though seen as impossible through the opinions and mediated communication of the capitalistic, statist (and neoliberal academic) *status quo*, paradoxically open up new possibilities of existence today. These responses seek alternatives to legal and governmental organizations—and the NGOs and humanitarian groups that too often serve as their accomplices in violent and (neo)colonial enterprises.<sup>116</sup> In what follows, and with a view to my own *situation* and current place, I contend that the philosopher who is comfortable has been incorporated, and with that in mind I propose an impossible challenge: to break with the *status quo* such that we become strangers to “the possible.”

Badiou writes, “*The Philosopher is always a stranger*, clothed in his new thoughts.”<sup>117</sup> We, too, must clothe ourselves in a new,

<sup>116</sup> Eyal Weizman’s architectonics of such violence is helpful in thinking through such alternatives. In critiquing four of the insidious forces I outlined in my introduction (positivism, capitalism, statism, and humanitarianism), especially as they relate to Israel’s occupation of Palestine, he notes that their power “is grounded in the very ability to calculate, count, measure, balance, and act on these calculations.” “Inversely,” he continues, “to make oneself ungovernable, one must make oneself incalculable, immeasurable, uncountable” (Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils*, 17). This conception of being “ungovernable” relates to the philosopher’s being *atopos*; see note 117 below.

<sup>117</sup> Badiou, “Thinking the Event,” 24 (emphasis mine). Furthermore, I add that the philosopher *has always been* a stranger. The historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot writes, “[T]o be a philosopher implies a rupture with what the skeptics called *bios*, that is, daily life. He continues, “[P]hilosophers are strange, a race apart... By the time of the Platonic dialogues, Socrates was called *atopos*, that is, ‘unclassifiable.’ What makes him *atopos* is precisely the fact that he is a ‘philo-sopher’ in the etymological sense of the word; that is, he is in love with wisdom. For wisdom, says Diotima in Plato’s *Symposium*, is not a human state, it is a state of perfection of being and knowledge that can only be divine. It is the love of this wisdom, which is foreign to the world, that makes the philosopher a stranger in it.” But, Hadot notes, even with “a better understanding of *atopia*, the strangeness of the philosopher in the human world,” there remains an insoluble conflict: the philosopher must live “in this world in which he feels himself a stranger and in which others perceive him to be one as well. And it is precisely in this daily life that he must seek to attain the way of life which is utterly foreign to the everyday world. The result is a perpetual conflict between the philosopher’s effort to see things...and the conventional vision of things underlying human society, a conflict between the life one should live and the customs and conventions of daily life” (Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises*

impossible way of thinking, living, and being. The philosopher must render herself what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “*deslenguada*”: one who offends the powerful and who speaks in aberrations.<sup>118</sup> Thus, “with tongues of fire,” with a poetic language strange to the *nomos* of the *polis*, we respond to and critique the fires of today.<sup>119</sup> In regard to this response-ability of contemporary philosophy, Eduardo Mendieta writes, “Language that does not give voice to suffering is mere jargon; suffering that is without language remains mute and unredeemed historical torment.”<sup>120</sup> Incorporating ourselves into the consensual (and consenting) communication of “the possible” through the language of international law, human rights, humanitarian organizations, NGOs, etc.—believing we can change the system from within, as the common saying goes—is to learn to speak what Mendieta calls “mere jargon,” the language of the journalist. Thus *trans-muting* our own dissent, suffering, too, “remains mute.” Giving voice to suffering, by contrast, is not an incorporated *stasis*, but rather an embodied *dynamis*, a process of fidelity to an “other than” that estranges ourselves from the “state” of our situation.<sup>121</sup> Nothing short of this is required if we are to “[s]peak truth to power.”<sup>122</sup>

---

*from Socrates to Foucault* [Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995], 56, 57, 58).

<sup>118</sup> Eduardo Mendieta, “The Jargon of Ontology and the Critique of Language” in *The Aesthetic Ground of Critical Theory: New Readings of Benjamin and Adorno*, ed. Nathan Ross (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 62.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> As a voice, and in regard both to *atopos* (see note 117) and being ungovernable (see note 116), perhaps Antigone serves once again as an exemplar. Liz Appel writes, “Antigone’s unreadable or unthinkable place threatens to render the entire system of which she is yet a part unreadable or unthinkable. Antigone therefore speaks, as it were, from a void; she is a voice from nowhere heralding a subject position that is presently unrecognized, yet nonetheless exists... unraveling a system of relations that cannot comprehend her” (Liz Appel, “Itinerant Antigone” in *The Returns of Antigone: Interdisciplinary Essays*, Tina Chanter and Sean D. Kirkland, eds. [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014], 188-189).

<sup>122</sup> William Stafford, *Every War Has Two Losers* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2003), 143. In a similar vein as the poet Stafford, in his Reith Lectures Edward Said presented what he called “the basic question for the intellectual: how does one speak the truth? What truth? For whom and where?” In that lecture Said continued, “Nothing in my view is more reprehensible than those habits of mind in the intellectual that induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position which you know to be the right one, but which you decide not to take. You do not want to appear too political; you are afraid of seeming controversial; you need the approval of a boss or an authority figure; you want to keep a reputation for being balanced, objective, moderate; your hope is to be asked back, to consult, to be on a board or prestigious committee, and so, to remain within the responsible mainstream; someday you hope to get an honorary degree, a big prize, perhaps even an ambassadorship. For an intellectual these habits of mind are corrupting par excellence.” Personally, he went on, “I have encountered them in one of the toughest of all contemporary

Indeed, if we are poetically and philosophically “to think the unthinkable, to say what is impossible to say,”<sup>123</sup> then we must speak “in accents and borrowed words,” recognizing that the impossible “has no native tongue, it lacks a home, and it is without a native soil.”<sup>124</sup> The impossible is strange. And becoming a stranger requires not only leaving our own language, but also, analogously, abandoning our own sense of comfort, our own philosophical tradition,<sup>125</sup> our own “home.” “Philosophy that is still possible,” Mendieta continues, “must be homeless.”<sup>126</sup> This evental move involves personal and structural, thought and practiced “breaks”; as the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “We have to break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class, in other words, with all that can stand in the way of a real, profound solidarity with those who suffer.”<sup>127</sup> As a result of these breaks, these manifestations of our fidelity to the event, we become strangers to the “state” of our “home.” In this liminal void, ethical possibilities of the impossible emerge.

Following Antigone, Weil, and Badiou, we know that our sense of not-being-at-home is experienced on the threshold of impossibility. At this margin, we respond to the marginalized;

---

issues, Palestine, where fear of speaking out about one of the greatest injustices in modern history has hobbled, blinkered, muzzled many who know the truth and are in a position to serve it. For despite the abuse and vilification that any outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights and self-determination earns for him or herself, the truth deserves to be spoken, represented by an unafraid and compassionate intellectual” (Edward Said, “The Reith Lectures: Speaking Truth to Power,” <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/the-reith-lectures-speaking-truth-to-power-in-his-penultimate-reith-lecture-edward-said-consider-1486359.html>; see also Chris Hedges, “The Treason of the Intellectuals,”

[http://www.truthdig.com/report/page2/the\\_treason\\_of\\_the\\_intellectuals\\_20130331](http://www.truthdig.com/report/page2/the_treason_of_the_intellectuals_20130331)). This role of the intellectual is currently under threat in the United States, where criticism of the state of Israel is conflated with anti-Semitism, resulting in, for instance, the State of California taking legal actions that limit academic freedom. See “Hundreds of academics call on State Dept to revise its definition of anti-Semitism, respect criticism of Israel as protected speech,” Mondoweiss, <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/05/definition-criticism-protected>.

<sup>123</sup> Badiou, “Language, Thought, Poetry,” 248.

<sup>124</sup> Mendieta, “The Jargon of Ontology and the Critique of Language,” 62.

<sup>125</sup> In his poem “The Impossible,” Rimbaud says, “Philosophers, you belong to your West!

[*Philosophes, vous êtes de votre Occident*] (Arthur Rimbaud, *Œuvres Complètes d'Arthur Rimbaud* [Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1963], 240.). This is an important self-critique of this essay: in my own hunt for the impossible, I am quick to look to Socrates and other Western sources.

<sup>126</sup> Mendieta, “The Jargon of Ontology and the Critique of Language,” 62.

<sup>127</sup> James B. Nickoloff, ed. *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 289.

and we, too, risk marginalization, a “break” with the borders, norms, and traditions that demarcate our existence “at home.” Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch write, “The place where we encounter the Stranger is a threshold” and “[a]t such thresholds of experience, we stand in an event: an opening onto hospitality. But doors can be opened or shut. Or stand ajar.”<sup>128</sup> This event is paradoxical, one of *poiesis* and *aesthesia*, creation and reception, poetry and witness.<sup>129</sup> In conclusion let me suggest an example that remains “ajar” to us today, and to which, in a *pensée-faire*, we are called to respond politically, ethically, philosophically, and poetically. In our time, they who are suffering from droughts produced by anthropogenic global warming,<sup>130</sup> from the occupation of the nation-state, from the legacies of colonialism and the capitalism of neo-colonialism, they who are literally marginalized—exiled through the drawing of borders and thus living on the threshold of inside and outside, life and death—are the Palestinians. In a kind of poetic witness, “standing ajar” to the impossible and to the strange, I will close with the verse of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish:

O rose beyond the reach of time and of the senses  
 O kiss enveloped in the scarves of all the winds  
 surprise me with one dream  
 then my madness will recoil from you

Recoiling from you  
 In order to approach you  
 I discovered time

Approaching you  
 in order to recoil from you  
 I discovered my senses

Between approach and recoil  
 there is a stone the size of a dream  
 It does not approach  
 It does not recoil

You are my country  
 A stone is not what I am  
 therefore I do not like to face the sky  
 nor do I lie level with the ground

<sup>128</sup> Richard Kearney and Kasa Semonovitch, “At the Threshold: Foreigners, Strangers, Others” in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>130</sup> See Fred Pearce, *When the Rivers Run Dry: Water—The Defining Crisis of the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), esp. chap. 18 “Palestine: Poisoning the Wells of Peace.”

but am a stranger, always a stranger<sup>131</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, "Psalm 9" in *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 158.