Counterimagination and the Plurality of Radical Politics

Gauri Wagle, Royal Holloway, University of London

This paper considers the role imagination plays in radical politics, resistance, and political expression. Contemporary political theory shows that political imagination is an important resource for dominated groups because it holds possibilities for radical transformation. This paper goes beyond the existing literature's focus on public, visible, and emancipatory instantiations of political imagination. It shows that political imagination has forms that are nonpublic and quotidian and that these must be attended to alongside public instantiations of imagination. Political imagination often moves iteratively between categories of public, private, intersubjective, and personal, and it is frequently invited by shared objects. My account of political imagination also attends equally to the ways that political imagination can foster relations of domination and to how it can be mobilized by marginalized groups for radically transformative purposes. I offer a concept of "counterimagination" to illuminate the multiplicity of ways that imagination can be transformative for political life. Counterimagination is a nonpublic form of political imagination levied by marginalized groups that holds possibilities for transformation both for the subject and for the wider political order.

Keywords: political imagination, counterpublics, race, resistance

Lawrie Balfour asked if political theorists can "reimagine the presence of the slave past in such a way that more racially just futures become possible."[1] Contemporary accounts answer Balfour's question with a resounding "yes" and draw upon political imagination as a resource for radical change, resistance, and justice. In agreement with contemporary authors, I regard political imagination as an important resource for dominated groups who seek to resist domination and exclusion. However, I mean to show that political imagination—and the radical politics it inspires—is alive in a plurality of ways that are underdeveloped in the existing

1. Lawrie Balfour. "Reparations after Identity Politics." *Political Theory* 33, no. 6 (2005): 786–811, at 801.

Published online Month XX, 2022.

Polity, volume 54, number 2, January 2022.
© 2022 Northeastern Political Science Association. All rights reserved. Published by The University of Chicago Press for the Northeastern Political Science Association. https://doi.org/10.1086/718807

literature. Specifically, there are many instantiations of imagination that are quotidian and nonpublic that the existing literature occludes but that make clear how imagination can sustain domination, even as it is a resource for those who are dominated. Moreover, the plurality of forms imagination can take make it an important resource for marginalized groups and a means of engaging in in politics, even in the face of domination. An attention to everyday forms of political imagination helps us see its multiplicity of forms.

This paper brings the literature on and from marginalized communities to bear on discussions of political imagination. With theorists of political imagination, the paper considers what imagination can bring to the project of racial justice and political transformation. By turning to theorists of racial justice, and specifically those who have suffered racial *in*justice, this paper argues that quotidian and nonpublic forms of imagination demand our attention because they can be an important form of political expression and freedom in the face of domination, can contest the boundaries of politics and its study, and can lay the groundwork for more public forms of resistance and transformation. I develop an account of counterimagination that highlights this transformative potential and show how it is not only a resource for democratic justice and repair but is itself a form of freedom and expression in the face of domination.

Political Imagination and Projects of Justice and Repair

Stephanie Camp describes how an enslaved woman named California engaged in resistance by hanging abolitionist print material in her quarters.[2] California's action was not publicly visible—it was physically limited to the space of her home. But it indicated, as her enslaver wrote, that "California 'has an idea that she is free.'"[3] For California, the abolitionist prints were an image of freedom, allies, resistance, and possible political futures. The prints invited imaginations of freedom for other enslaved people as well; "they also appear to have inspired similar 'notions' in the minds of those around her."[4] California's action was political in the sense that it contested prevailing distributions of power. It was radical because it threatened to destabilize existing institutions and order. It could raise a wider movement that involved the state in the abolition of slavery. Yet California's action was not public; it was a personal choice to showcase print material in her

2. Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 98.

3. Ibid., 98.

4. Ibid.

own home. Attending to California's display shows the ways that seemingly mundane decisions and actions in daily life can set off an "avalanche"[5] that results in social and political transformation. Radical politics and resistance can happen in the home, in quiet decisions and displays, and through relations with objects. In Camp's description of California, we see that transformation and resistance are grounded in imaginations of alternatives like freedom or abolition, the murky boundary between the privacy of home and the publicness of resistance, and the importance of the object to bring forth imaginations in others. California's decision to display this material goes beyond her status as dominated. It did not conform to the ways that Camp notes that body, time, and place of enslaved people were controlled by their enslavers and was a moment of radical political expression.

Moments of resistance like California's show the importance of political imagination to projects of justice and political transformation. In fact, as Cornelius Castoriadis suggests, transformation—such as democratic repair or racial justice—must come through imagination because change involves *discontinuity* that cannot be explained through reason and causal analysis.[6] Similarly, in Robin Kelley's account, political imagination is critical to a study of radical politics and justice because it is the faculty by which alternative futures become possible for movements that challenge existing orders. Imagination can "reopen a very old conversation about what kind of world we want to struggle for."[7] In Kelley's study of the black radical imagination, imagination is necessary to social movements that challenge power structures because it makes possible "liv[ing] through our third eyes, to see life as possibility . . . to teach us that we are not merely inheritors of a culture but its makers."[8] For movements that seek to bring into being new orders, imagination is precisely the faculty that brings into being "the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born."[9]

Political imagination brings into being that which does not exist. It is an important faculty to political life because it has "the power-to-posit as capable-of-being that which is not"[10] bringing into being the nation, people, or political

---

5. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 192.

6. Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Boston: MIT Press 1987 [1975]), 3.

7. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press 2002), 7.

8. Ibid., 2

9. Ibid., 10.

10. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, 264.

community. Part of what makes political imagination unique is that it "doesn't merely have to succumb to the reality of the exterior world."[11] Instead, imagination is "not bound to the law of causality, but is productive and spontaneous, not merely re-productive of what is already known, but generative of new forms and figures."[12] Imagination can go beyond what lies before us: "imagination allows us to think the possibility of something beyond the epistemic demand of deciding the true and the false."[13] In other words, imagination can suspend doubt, logic, function, and plausibility and invite us to see expanded possibilities. Part of what makes imagination indispensable in conversations about racial justice and democratic equality is its ability to invite new and alternative political possibilities and futures. As Kelley and Castoriadis identify, imagination breaks with existing structures and power relations to make new and alternative realties possible.

Political Imagination as Radical and Ordinary

However, by prioritizing the unconstrained nature of political imagination, imagination can seem to be *opposed* to the mundane, banal activities of daily life though this is not the case. Kelley confides: "Sometimes I think the conditions of daily life, of everyday oppressions, of survival, not to mention the temporary pleasures accessible to most of us, render much of our imagination inert."[14] Regularity and daily life seem opposed to the creative possibilities that are alive in imagination in his account. The problem with contrasting imagination's radical potential with the banality of daily life is that it obscures the ways that radical movements are sustained. Instead, we must remember that political imagination is "an ordinary human practice" even as it "enables us to 'surpass what lies before us in our sensory awareness.'"[15] Zerilli agrees that political imagination is creative and holds transformative potential, but "until we recognize the capacity for radical imagination as a fundamental human one rooted not in the subject but in praxis, and which animates the social, historical, and political domains, creative imagination will remain an empty concept limited to the uniqueness of individual genius."[16]

11. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2012), 42.
12. Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 130.
13. Ibid., 59.
14. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 11.
15. Zerilli, *Feminism*, 69.
16. Ibid.

Imagination is constituted through the activities that Zerilli calls "praxis," some of which may be extraordinary but which many times are a part of everyday life. In fact, routine acts of imagination are often the ones that make possible transformation of political and social orders.

By "praxis" Zerilli means "radical imagination . . . this ingenious activity not as the privilege of the artist, but as an ordinary human practice."[17] With Zerilli, we might understand that political imagination is not opposed to everyday, ordinary experiences. Like Camp's California, people who imagine differently might do so in their homes and in their daily lives. Political imagination can operate in daily life both to overturn and to sustain existing orders and hierarchies. As Camp's analysis of enslaved women points out, slave resistance sometimes came in daily practices of stealing from the enslaver, private decisions of displaying material in the home, or harboring fugitives. When we consider slave resistance to the civil war, then, we know that it is "no new and sudden development" but in fact, "had been long in the making. Antebellum everyday forms of resistance were the furtive prehistory that made the visible, and historically charismatic, wartime movement possible."[18] The result, as Camp notes, undermined the entire social and political system in the American South. When enslaved people ran away during the war, "they withdrew more than their labor. The shook the very foundation on which their owners' conceptions of themselves and their freedom lay."[19] In other words, everyday imaginations of alternatives to slavery illuminate forms of resistance and community-building that can result in radical transformation.

In James Scott's account, too, everyday imagining plays an important role in widespread resistance. The Brer Rabbit tales told among American slaves emphasize caution in daily life but also offer an image of triumph and victory over the dominant classes bringing forth an imagination of freedom or vengeance. In these stories, rashness and trust "in the sincerity of the strong" set back Rabbit, whereas "dissimulation, guile, and agility" help him towards a victory in which he "not only kills Wolf but 'mounts him, humiliates him, reduces him to servility, steals his woman and, in effect, takes his place.'"[20] The tales imagine a "course of pride and satisfaction"—an instance in which the relatable protagonist wins over the dominating group.[21] Stories like the Brer Rabbit tales that circulate in the everyday

17. Ibid.
18. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 119.
19. Ibid., 127.
20. Scott, *Domination*, 163.
21. Ibid., 164.

can help marginalized groups to imagine themselves as powerful and effective and to imagine alternative futures, even as they caution those who resist to use guile or agility.

As Camp's example of California and Scott's discussion of the Brer Rabbit tales show, everyday forms of imagination can make possible radical transformation. Imagination in ordinary meetings and daily activities illuminates transgressions and resistance. Such everyday resistance can create an "avalanche"[22] that brings about social or political transformation. Even though political imagination is radical in the sense that it breaks with existing power relations, it is also grounded in ordinary human practice.

The Spaces and Things of Imagination

For Castoriadis, as in Camp's example of California, "material" things are an important part of an individual's imagination being "taken up" by others.[23] Objects and spaces can invite others into a radical imagination, as Castoriadis suggests, or inspire new imaginations in the first place. Like Castoriadis, Bonnie Honig helps us see that objects, spaces, and things have "seemingly magic powers" to invoke the kind of community to which we belong.[24] *Things* bring into being an image of community because they "stabilize the common world and provide specific points of orientation for action in concert."[25] For Honig, the *things* in question are the public spaces of parks, neighborhoods, and bridges, but with Camp, we might note that an abolitionist print hung on the wall of one's own home might invoke an imagination of what is possible.

As James Baldwin notes, the beginnings of doubt and resistance might be found precisely in interactions with objects: "My brother, describing his life in uniform, did not seem to be representing the America his uniform was meant to represent -: (sic) he had never seen the America his uniform was meant to represent. Had anyone?"[26] For Baldwin's brother, like for many marginalized peoples, the claim to equality in newspapers, freedom celebrated by the flag and the uniform, and justice heralded by memorials does not fit with the experience of domination and exclusion. Often, resistance can emerge because of a relationship

22. Ibid., 1990.
23. Castoriadis, *Imaginary Institution*, 264.
24. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 2.
25. Ibid., 38.
26. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 11.

between intersubjective relations, objects, and personal experience. As Romand Coles writes, "remove bodies, places, and things, from this picture, and you miss much of what nurtures the vitality of democratic sensibilities."[27] For Coles, like for Baldwin, objects matter. In Baldwin's brother's relationship to his uniform and California's relationship to her abolitionist print, we see that an object can invite imagining alternatives. Imagination can be brought forth through interactions with objects, even as it makes possible political futures and the hope of transformation that goes beyond the limits of *what is*.

Shared spaces and things, like streets, parks, memorials, and neighborhoods, can bring forth imagination because they ask and answer the question, "Why are we here together?"[28] In the question and answer, an imagined "*we*" comes into being.[29] Objects, like California's abolitionist print, can invite imagination. Shared things—like parks and newspapers—can provide points of orientation by making manifest that there is some*thing* that is shared. Physical spaces and objects can invite someone into an imagined community—like a nation, a people, or an abolitionist movement—or offer affirmation that such a community exists.

Political Imagination and Injustice

Even as political imagination can be brought forth by shared sites, Edward Said's work shows us that shared spaces and objects do not always invite an image of democratic community or inclusion. Said calls the materials that create and sustain communities an "imaginative geography."[30] Said's *geography* includes territory and the objects that circulate within and about it. The interaction between physical things and spaces, intersubjective affirmation, and repeated experiences of reading and viewing bring into being political order, domination, or hierarchy. Said shows that the distribution and circulation of materials, such as art, literature, and the demarcation of space, can invite and sustain an imagination riddled with domination and exploitation. Camp, too, refers to the "planters' geographies of containment"[31] that upheld and sustained slavery. Domination depended on this "spatial and temporal logic"[32] to control behavior, prevent resistance, and

27. Romand Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism: Radical and Ecological Democracy in Neoliberal Times*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 50.
28. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso Books, 2006), 56.
29. Ibid.
30. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books 1979), 54.
31. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 48.
32. Ibid., 58.

ensure compliance—in short, to support the authority of the dominating group. "Place functioned both metaphorically and literally in the Old South,"[33] exemplifying the ways that imagination and physical space interact for the purposes of domination. Sometimes, the imagined community invited by objects and spaces is exclusive or hierarchical, as in the examples Said and Camp offer. The possibilities imagination holds also mean that it can invite political futures and bring communities into being that are exclusive and unjust.

One hazard of studying political imagination is that we might be swept away by its promise to bring about transformation of unequal orders without being attentive to its dangers. Contemporary accounts of political imagination highlight imagination's possibilities for transformation and often focus on its positive potential. But precisely because political imagination is plural, it can also bring into being and sustain unjust political communities. Jason Frank notes that in the instance of Publius, imagination can be dangerous, destabilizing, and a tool for groups that seek power and hierarchy—not only equality and freedom.[34] While with Frank and Publius we might note that imagination is dangerous, Frank—like Kelley, Zerilli, and Castoriadis—reminds us that imagination is indispensable as it is a "precondition of democratic politics."[35] Publius acknowledged and responded to "anti-imaginistic discourse . . . [which] was motivated primarily by a longing for social and moral stability, with the imagination posited as the human faculty posing a constitutive threat to that stable order."[36] But in Frank's reading of Publius, political imagination "far from subverting authority, the imagination is here enlisted in its support."[37] In other words, imagination was vital to the creation of authority and order in America: "Publius invoked the imagination as a heteronomic support to navigate the dilemmas of democratic self-authorization."[38] In some ways, Publius's use of imagination did support "democratic self-authorization"[39] as Frank suggests, but it also subordinated and excluded groups to assert unity. As Balfour notes of Frank's work: "Publius enlists slavery and empire in the service of the rhetorical creation of the republic in ways that Frank's book does not

33. Ibid., 16.
34. Jason Frank, *Publius and Political Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).
35. Ibid., 66.
36. Ibid., 51.
37. Ibid., 61.
38. Ibid., 48.
39. Ibid.

fully own."[40] Political imagination's dangerous and unjust possibilities are often obscured because of its importance to community-building.

Similarly, in Benedict Anderson's seminal study of imagined communities—such as the fledgling American democracy—the political imagination Anderson focuses on is that of "deep, horizontal comradeship" even in the face of "actual inequality and exploitation."[41] Anderson, like Frank, notes that imagination is necessary to the project of creating new communities and political orders—but these communities might depend on hierarchy and inequality. In Anderson's imagined national community, to be French meant to speak the French of Paris; the administrative French of the state. "Certain dialects inevitably were 'closer' to each print-language and dominated their final forms. Their disadvantaged cousins . . . lost caste, above all because they were unsuccessful in insisting on their own print-form."[42] The struggle to insist on "their own print-form" was a claim to political identity and position in an emerging hierarchy.[43] The literature on imagined communities emphasizes the transformative and emancipatory potential of imagination in ways that often occlude the exclusions upon which imagined community might depend.

In a contemporary context that brings attention to both the spaces that invite imagination as well as its potential to sustain inequality, the segregation of American neighborhoods means that the "we" of the imagined community is predicated upon exclusion. Segregated communities do not have access to the same spaces; the shared things that invite an imagination of shared community. The result is an image of community that hinders a way "to 'see' the racial other as 'one of us.'"[44] This can have important political consequences. As Hooker tells us, de facto segregation in New Orleans meant that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, white folks felt little political obligation to the black communities that the hurricane destroyed because they did not imagine themselves in community together. Much like Baldwin's example of his brother's uniform, in Hooker's account, interaction with objects and spaces like neighborhoods can bring into being, reflect, or sustain problematic and exclusive imagined political communities.

40. Lawrie Balfour, "Reading Publius with Morrison and Melville" *Polity* 47 (2015), 550–57, at 556.

41. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

42. Ibid., 47.

43. Ibid.

44. Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

The Importance of Nonpublic Political Life

In Frank's, Said's, and Anderson's accounts, the political imagination of America, the West, or the nation might be understood as "common-sense notions that develop out of the interactions among our background conceptions of the way the world is . . . with new ideas, practices, and laws."[45] As in the examples Frank, Anderson, and Said provide, this kind of common-sense political imagination is invited by public discourse, publicly circulated newspapers, and public spaces like monuments and memorials. In Frank's account, for example, the study of imagination happens through the dramatized public identity of Publius that crafts an imagination for the new American republic. This political imagination is important because it is creating a *common-sense* understanding, to borrow Woodly's term, of what it means to be part of an American community and who may thus call upon rights and resources.[46] Not everyone is part of this kind of imagined community—it depends, as in the American case, on gendered and racial exclusions.

For those left out of the "French of Paris" or counted as only three-fifths of a person in Publius's time, the experience of domination can make necessary and enable new ways of imagining. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "[Alice] Walker describes how her outsider-within location influenced her thinking: 'I believe . . . that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships.'"[47] As Collins's volume suggests, the position of domination can incite new ways of imagining oneself and one's world. As Walker herself notes, "the gift of loneliness is sometimes a radical vision."[48] One conclusion that we can draw from this, as Kelley does, is that there is something indispensable in the imaginations of marginalized groups. With Kelley, we can agree that being dominated gives groups the ability to see how domination works and what is required for justice. In another formulation, dominated groups can "observe the distance between the American ideals he cherishes and the American practices of systematic racial degradation."[49] Domination can bring about an alternative image of reality in ways that make possible resistance.

45. Deva R. Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense: How Social Movements Use Public Discourse to Change Politics and Win Acceptance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8

46. Ibid.

47. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 12.

48. Ibid.

49. Lawrie Balfour, *The Evidence of Things Not Said: James Baldwin and The Promise of American Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 38.

For many accounts that consider how imagination is utilized by marginalized groups, imagination is explored and discussed in the ways it interrupts the exclusionary kind of political imagination described by Frank, Said, or Anderson. For Kelley, for example, public, visible leaders of social movements, rather than the groups and individuals that make up the masses of these movements, lead imagining differently. He calls these leaders "poets" and argues that they constitute the "social movements [that] enable participants to imagine something different, to realize that things need not always be this way."[50] In this account, political imagination is centered around and driven by the leaders of social movements. Kelley's poets include W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcom X, Paul Robeson, Claudia Jones, Harold Cruse, Huey Newton, and others united by a common quality: published, circulated, mostly male authors, many who spent a large part of their lives in the political spotlight. Even Zerilli's account emphasizes *acting publicly* as the means by which feminism can break free from the politics of victimization and move towards freedom-centered politics. This claim comes from equating "the radical demand for women's political freedom" with "the right to be a participant in public affairs."[51] Yet this merging of the two concepts obscures other kinds of radical demands for freedom and forms of resistance that are *not* about participating in public affairs but which are often important for members of marginalized groups. In accounts like these, marginalized groups act in ways to challenge the "commonsense" imagination.

In the example of the Black Lives Matter movement, we see how imagination can illuminate public resistance. In Hooker's analysis, an understanding of the way white people would react to black people's resistance illuminates some of the movement's strategies. Actions that appear deferent and submissive like the "hands up/don't shoot" gesture are also "delivered as indictments of police officers that fail to protect black citizens" and so can "be read as combining deference and defiance at the same time."[52] People of color are "gifted" with the sight to navigate the distance between the ideals of democracy and their own exclusion from its practice.[53] The kinds of "sight" or imagination that come with domination allow marginalized groups to see the kinds of injustice and hypocrisy that proliferate in their political communities and, sometimes, to challenge those injustices.

50. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 9.

51. Zerilli, *Feminism*, ix.

52. Juliet Hooker, "Black Lives Matter and the Paradoxes of U.S. Black Politics: From Democratic Sacrifice to Democratic Repair," *Political Theory*, 44 (2016): 448–69, at 462.

53. Balfour, *Evidence*, 48.

But what happens to the people who are both left out of "common-sense" political imaginations of community as well as invisible in the movements that challenge these imaginations? Take, for example, historian Leigh Fought's account of the role of women in Frederick Douglass's politics: "evidence that an undercurrent of female activity ran just beneath the surface of his work was not explored because the idea that women's work should be invisible held sway."[54] Focusing on the women around Douglass does many things: first, and most obviously, it "illuminated nuances in his activism and perceptions"[55] deepening our understanding of Douglass as a public figure. Second, it is a demand for scholarship that no longer treats women as invisible, but instead, as subjects and agents of political action who warrant our attention. Third, turning our attention to the women in Douglass's world shows that "Douglass's friendships with white women were also a form of protest."[56]

When we look for imagination—and radical politics—only in the public domain, we risk missing quite a lot. As Camp writes, "the valorization of the organized and the visible veils the lives of women"[57] who engaged in politics by feeding and supporting runaways and seeking for themselves "temporary escapes from the oppressive regimes that compelled them to work"[58] through absenteeism. Actions like "women's work supporting truancy complicated the distinction between individual and collective resistance, and between the personal and the political"[59] and such actions are instead examples of the way that resistance and radical political action are complicated and multiple in their manifestations. Groups like enslaved women, LGBTQ+ people, and racially dominated groups are often obscured by a focus on public acts and practices because this is not necessarily the sphere of their political action.

Imagination *does* have an important public dimension, but it is a plural, multifaceted political tool. Placing "the anxiety of publicness"[60] at the heart of our study of dominated groups and their imaginations can be problematic. This conceptualization of subjectivity "accepts race as the singular and definitive aspect of black life"[61] rather than seeing political expression as multiple and layered. "The

54. Leigh K. Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2017), 2.
55. Ibid., 4.
56. Ibid., 6.
57. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 3.
58. Ibid., 36.
59. Ibid., 50.
60. Quashie, *Sovereignty*, 40.
61. Ibid., 32.

determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist—it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize black people."[62] Quashie helps us see the incompleteness of studying political imagination only as it relates to public resistance. With Quashie, we learn *why* Baldwin claims "'What does the Negro want?'" is "'the most asinine and perhaps the most insulting' question."[63] Quashie's work reminds us that multiplicity is available even in the face of domination. Dominated groups are not monolithic entities determined by their experience of domination. This is important because "by providing a way of not seeing African Americans as individuals, racial images can sustain the kind of forgetting that prevents direct confrontation with questions about what the United States owes its black citizens."[64] In other words, failure to consider the dominated person as thinking, feeling, imagining, expressive, quiet, vulnerable, or unique reinforces injustice and means that we fail to repair our unjust communities.

In conditions of domination, publicness is a privilege not all enjoy. Many marginalized peoples find other means of political expression because "publicness will feel like exposure, and privacy will feel like the closet. The closet may seem to be a kind of protection. Indeed, the feeling of protection is one of the hallmarks of modern privacy. But in fact the closet is riddled with fear and shame. So is publicity under the conditions of the closet."[65] Under conditions of domination, appearing in public can be both dangerous and ineffective. Women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others are often discredited, assumed to be threatening, or ridiculed when they appear in public because of how their actions are interpreted against the prevailing background of social meaning. Misinterpretation can make action in public ineffective and can even invite violent response. For example, Sharon Krause describes the simple act of holding hands.[66] For a straight (white) couple, this act is nothing more than an everyday affirmation of love and intimacy. But a gay or interracial couple that holds hands might be understood as partaking in "an aggressive assertion of perversion, a hostile attack on sacred family values, an anarchical challenge to civilized social order."[67] Given the prevailing background of social meaning and values, the act of holding hands may

---

62. Ibid., 4.
63. Balfour, *Evidence*, 79.
64. Balfour, *Evidence*, 83.
65. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002). 52.
66. Sharon Krause, *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
67. Ibid., 36.

generate effects that are at odds with the couple's own understanding of the action and with their intentions. The act may also put them at risk, for "it is not much of a stretch to think that under such conditions it may well elicit a violent response, or at least insults and threats."[68] Because the couple appears against the background of domination, their action is misunderstood and their visibility itself can threaten their safety.

Turning to nonpublic forms of political imagination can help us answer Quashie's question: "What, then, would a concept of expressiveness look like if it were not tethered to publicness?"[69] What does political imagination look like when we expand its horizons beyond the public sphere? What does it tell us about political life, community, and freedom for those groups that cannot appear in public? Political imagination can inspire visible, public acts, but to study it in all its plurality is also to attend to the everyday politics in which marginalized peoples engage.

Attending only to the public resistance and action of marginalized groups fails to see the multiplicity of life available in domination. While public action and resistance are certainly important to gain new rights and repair injustice, appearing in public can be impossible, dangerous, or ineffective for marginalized groups. Other forms of political expression are possible and important. With Romand Coles, we might turn to what I call *counter*imagination. Coles's book "set[s] the stage for exploring a counterimage that might illuminate meaningful radical democratic work, action."[70] Coles makes clear what Quashie and Warner show: a lot of meaningful democratic work is not public, and for many, publicness is not an option. Studying counter and alternative circulation[71] can transform existing political and social structures in positive ways, Coles's work suggests. In fact, Coles writes: "*The most important and powerful public work and political action anyone ever does is the work of cocreating new publics.*"[72] With Coles, we might consider what this work looks like for marginalized and dominated groups as they cocreate new (counter)publics. With Coles's imperative, then, we turn to a discussion of counterpublics and counterimagination.

Counterpublic Politics

Warner's discussion of counterpublics helps to illuminate the kinds of imagination that exist beyond the public radar and among marginalized groups. What

68. Ibid., 36–37.
69. Quashie, *Sovereignty*, 20.
70. Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism*, 83.
71. Ibid., 90.
72. Ibid., 157, emphasis in original.

Warner calls "counterpublics" are a response to—and in "tension" with—a "larger public"[73] where "a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse."[74] Counterimagination and counterpublics are overlapping concepts, and counterimagination can help us understand how counterpublics emerge and are sustained. Imagination is necessary to making and sustaining publics and counterpublics; "a nation or public or market in which everyone could be known personally would be no nation or public or market at all. This constitutive and normative environment of strangerhood . . . requires our constant imagining."[75] Warner's definition of counterpublic is useful because it helps us see how counterimagination relates to political imagination as described by Frank or Anderson. Warner writes:

> Within a gay or queer counterpublic, for example, no one is in the closet: the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended. But this circulatory space, freed from heteronormative speech protocols, is itself marked by that very suspension: speech that addresses any participant as queer will circulate up to a point, at which it is certain to meet intense resistance. It might therefore circulate in special, protected venues, in limited publications.[76]

In other words, counterpublics suspend aspects of publicness that dominate or exclude. Counterpublics make "different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying."[77] Counterpublics are limited—eventually, the suspension will meet its edge and one will once again be in public and given, in this case, to "presumptive heterosexuality."[78]

Counterimagination has certain qualities of counterpublics: it is nonpublic, intersubjective, and quotidian. Unlike Warner's counterpublics and closer to Nancy Fraser's *subaltern* counterpublics,[79] counterimagination helps us better understand the political lives of marginalized peoples specifically. For Warner, the counterpublic does not necessarily reflect a dominated status: "Counterpublics are often called 'subaltern counterpublics,' but it is not clear that all counterpublics

73. Warner, *Publics*, 56.
74. Ibid., 90.
75. Ibid., 75–76.
76. Ibid., 120.
77. Ibid., 56.
78. Ibid., 120.
79. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 56–80.

are composed of people otherwise dominated as subalterns."[80] In the counter-communities I describe, the people who gather and bring into being a community for themselves *are* marked by their inability to be safe, received, or understood in public.

One distinction between the kinds of counterpublics Warner describes and counterimagination is that counterimagination is not necessarily constituted by attention to an object, even as objects can invite shared relations. Warner argues that the "concatenation of texts through time"[81] constitutes counterpublics. Here, for example, we might think of the kind of Egyptian counterpublics that Charles Hirschkind describes—communities that are constituted *as* listeners of cassette sermons.[82] These are not communities of Muslims, Arabic speakers, or coffee drinkers—although they may also be that. They are necessarily constituted by their relationship to an object of circulation: the cassette, or in Warner's account, a "text."[83] This is partly because of Warner's argument that "even as a subaltern counterpublic, this subordinate status does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways by which its members' identities are formed and transformed."[84] My account of counterimagined communities includes those communities that *do* affirm identities formed elsewhere, even as participation in the community can be transformative. In Baldwin's words, "perhaps we were, all of us—pimps, whores, racketeers, church members, and children—bound together by the nature of our oppression."[85] In counter-communities, people may speak in shared languages, dress in traditional attire, celebrate holidays together and inhabit identities that are "formed elsewhere" and affirmed together but are often forbidden or ridiculed in public.

Warner's attention to objects is alive in my account of counterimagination, but the objects and spaces are not what *constitute* the community. Like California's abolitionist print, objects can invite a sense of imagined counter-community. For California, an abolitionist print is a reminder of the allies she has who also believe in her freedom and dignity. But California and her enslaved fellows are part of a counterimagined community insofar as they imagine themselves as free or imagine alternatives to their existing worlds. The print can remind them of

80. Warner, *Publics*, 56–57.

81. Ibid., 90.

82. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

83. Warner, *Publics*.

84. Ibid., 56–57.

85. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993 [1963]), 41.

their imagination, strengthen their resolve, or inspire others to ask questions. But the print is not constitutive of counterimagined community—as Scott's example of Brer Rabbit tales shows us, imagining otherwise can happen orally, intersubjectively, or personally in ways that are not anchored in the circulation of objects. Some imagination of an *otherwise* world constitutes counterimagination.

With Warner, we can agree that one important part of counterimagination is that the communities it brings into being are physically away from public spaces. Places where groups meet to imagine together and build community are often offstage spaces to protect marginalized groups from parts of domination. In Tony Morrison's *Beloved*, Morrison describes a place away from those who "do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick 'em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it."[86] In Morrison's story, such a form of evasion—away from "yonder"—allows for laughter, sadness, relief, and catharsis and can bring an imagined community into being. Here there are "laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed."[87] Morrison's account highlights the danger that exists for dominated groups, but also the possibilities of love, support, and community that are possible. Offstage and counterpublic spaces make possible a form of political expression that can be effective and safe.

The ways that counterimagination deepens an understanding of counterpublics can be understood through a turn to Baldwin's description of "church suppers and outings, and, later, after I left the church, rent and waistline parties."[88] As Baldwin describes the gatherings: "rage and sorrow sat in the darkness and did not stir, and we ate and drank and talked and laughed and danced and forgot all about 'the man.' We had the liquor, the chicken, the music, and each other, and had no need to pretend to be what we were not."[89] The scene appears to be one of joy and carefree celebration, but, as Baldwin observes, there is an "irony" to the scene that "makes one realize how leaden the time must have been" otherwise.[90] Counterimagination acknowledges and mourns the domination and exclusion groups face. There *is* some feeling of rage or sorrow that is set aside or affirmed in these communities. It is affirmed in the togetherness of sitting with

86. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004 [1987]), 103–04.
87. Ibid.
88. Baldwin, *Fire*, 41.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid., 42.

or setting aside the rage, sorrow, and humiliation of being dominated. People enter these communities marked by their experience of being spat at, beaten, and excluded. In community with other marginalized peoples, they no longer have to repress aspects of themselves. Instead, they can talk and laugh and dance, as Baldwin says, without the worry of "the man."[91] They can then be transformed by their interaction with others who imagine other worlds and selves—perhaps into figures that resist, find comfort, or claim dignity. The gatherings that Baldwin describes offer relief from the work of overcoming, managing, or complying with the demands of domination, in alignment with the "suspension"[92] that Warner describes. Counterimagination helps marginalized peoples imagine alternatives to domination and can bring forth shared community. In counterimagined communities, people may inhabit alternate identities, feel relief, and gain strength to resist or survive.

Counterimagination helps us see the kinds of transformative work and political expression that happens in counterpublics that are constituted by dominated peoples. Counterimagination relieves the dangers of humiliation and violence associated with acting publicly and being dominated, in line with Warner's account of counterpublics and publicness. Counterimagination is a focus on the ways that marginalized and dominated groups imagine alternatives. Counterimagined communities are not constituted only by a relation to a shared circulating text or object, but by their very experience with domination and their imagining alternatives to it or relief from it.

Counterimagination

Counterimagination moves between interiority and intersubjective political life. As Quashie notes, "The concept of imagination is useful in . . . the politics of identity and the wild vagary of inner life."[93] Forms of political imagination including counterimagination bridge between the inner life and intersubjective, shared politics. In this sense, counterimagination moves between the interior, the shared object, and the intersubjective relations. Its effects are also internal and external: to shape one's identity, dreams, or sense of belonging, but also, to guide the boundaries of a political community that distributes, represents, resists, supports, gathers. As a form of political imagination, counterimagination can bring into being communities of peers, affective relations, and illuminate sacrifices or distributions of resources.

91. Ibid.
92. Warner, *Publics*, 120.
93. Quashie, *Sovereignty*, 42.

Like political imagination, counterimagination can be transformative. It holds possibilities for transformation both for the subject and for the wider political order. For example, Saidiya Hartman notes the ways that participating in a counter-community can help women of color imagine themselves differently. She writes, "as the women drank tea and ate shortbread, they planned ways to prevent such things from ever happening . . . Only *us* and *we* and *still here* allowed them to utter one atrocity after another without breaking."[94] The women share shortbread and their experiences of trauma in ways that affirm their experience, remind them that violence was not done to them because they were inferior, but because they were born into a particular position or group. The women relive and relieve trauma, but they also imagine the possibilities of dignity and justice for themselves. They imagine themselves and each other as something more than victims and perhaps as agents who deserve better. Togetherness and shared space preserve the women, strengthen them, and offer solace. Alone, trauma might sow doubt, convince one of her inferiority, or, as Morrison notes in *The Bluest Eye*, cause a complete break. In Pecola's case, Morrison notes, "indifferent parents, dismissive adults and a world . . . re-enforces [sic] despair"[95] and that brings about Pecola's collapse. By contrast, other characters—with siblings, strong communities, and "supportive parents"—"grow beyond it" where *it* is the contempt and rejection that comes in a racial hierarchy.[96] Participating in and imagining together in counter-communities can transform the doubt sowed by domination: "suppose, after all, the World is right and we are less than men? Suppose this mad impulse within is all wrong, some mock mirage from the untrue?"[97] In Hartman's example of women taking tea together and Morrison's story of Pecola, communities transform the dominated subject. They offer strength and relief that can empower both a sense of self and a wider resistance.

Counterimagination happens in the iterative movement between personal experiences of domination, everyday interactions with others, and ordinary moments like sharing tea and cookies. As Zerilli notes about political imagination above, counterimagination, too, is not "the privilege of the artist"[98] but is grounded in quotidian activities. In Camp's account of slave life in the Antebellum South, we see

94. Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2019), 50.

95. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Vintage International 2007 [1970]), x.

96. Ibid.

97. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018 [1903]), 86.

98. Zerilli, *Feminism*, 69.

that everyday actions like stealing bread and hosting parties were the backbone of social life and slave community. Similarly, Jhumpa Lahiri notes that immigrant communities can be anchored in these kinds of everyday activities that build and sustain relationships amongst peers. In the dinner party that Lahiri describes, people inhabit identities learned elsewhere and that are repressed in public. They eat, talk, and sit together such that "in a way there is little to explain. There had been the same parties to attend when they were growing up, the same episodes . . . the children watched as parents feasted in another part of the house, the same meals served to them on paper plates, the carpets lined with newspapers."[99] In a public that mocks the smell of ethnic food and insists on a singular version of American English and conformed patterns of dress, inhabiting one's identity is imagining oneself not as the dominant would. In this dinner party, like in California's abolitionist print, objects can metonymize imaginations of what the world and the self that one inhabits could be. For Lahiri's immigrant dinner parties, to use certain objects like paper plates or steel *batis* (bowls) is more than a choice in dinnerware. This is also a choice about the kind of identity that can be inhabited safely, without the danger of microaggression or humiliation.

Even as it can point us to alternatives that are liberating and emancipatory, counterimagination is not always positive. Even within counter-communities, some parts of domination are reproduced. For example, as Michael Dawson notes of black counterpublics, "the adoption of the norms from the dominant society shifted Black politics from the type of inclusionary participatory debate . . . to limit the participation of women in Black public discourse."[100] Even within counter-communities, relations of domination can prevail. In Lahiri's immigrant communities or the picnics that Baldwin describes, we see that counter-communities might still be organized along gender hierarchies and sometimes discriminate along the lines of caste, religion, or skin color.

The examples noted here of counterimaginative communities are ways of "imagining an entirely separate existence for the subordinate group"[101] and are largely extra-institutional. Counterimagination can sustain community and allow people to feel free and together. But normatively, perhaps we want more. Only some have access to these communities. For example, a person of color living in rural Iowa might not be able to access the same kinds of extra-institutional

99. Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake* (Boston: First Mariner Books Edition: 2004 [2003]), 211.

100. Michael C. Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics." *Public Culture*, 7. No. 1. (1994): 195–223, at 200.

101. Scott, *Domination*, 22.

solidarity the same way as someone living in New York or Los Angeles. Groups imagine alternatives precisely because they share the experience of domination or marginalization. The examples of parties where children eat food from paper plates on the floor and church picnics are instances where the people that moved in these spaces *could not* feel free in public. Even though counterimagination allows these groups a nonpublic form of community and political life, it remains offstage and is necessarily an experience of incomplete equality and freedom.

Counterimagination brings into being communities that can be liberating, transformative, and supportive. Counterimagination, like imagination, can happen through daily activity and ordinary practice, can be brought forth through relations with objects and spaces, and can have transformative effects. Attending a church picnic or dinner party, being stopped by a police officer, reading the news, sharing tea, and listening to music might induct a marginalized person into a counterimagination. The results of starting to imagine alternatives, supporting communities that are sometimes subversive, and gaining the strength and tools to resist have political importance that affects the ways we study resistance and freedom.

The Importance of Plural Imagination

Categories of "formal-informal, individual-collective, public-anonymous, those that challenge the system-those that aim at marginal gains"[102] are constituted by power structures and are riddled with domination themselves. As Scott notes, these categories do not tell us much about the political lives of marginalized groups, but rather, "what we may actually be measuring in this enterprise is the level of repression that structures the available options."[103] In other words, the lack of public, visible acts of resistance does not mean that groups are not resisting. It might instead indicate that the level of oppression forecloses certain possibilities of political action, making other, more quotidian, discrete forms of action safer and more effective. To appear in public in ways that are effective is a privilege, one that may not be enjoyed by marginalized groups. Looking beyond public, visible forms of imagination shows the diverse ways that marginalized groups experience their political lives and how imagination might be a resource not only for social change or resistance but also for being in community together.

---

102. James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 299.

103. Ibid.

In short, "privacy is publicly constructed."[104] Private or nonpublic matters are not apolitical or prepolitical. As Warner notes: "the distinction between public and private . . . is not just a distinction but a hierarchy, in which the space of the market or the assembly is given a special importance . . . being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private."[105]

For example, Warner notes that "intimacy is publicly mediated" as in the ways that heteronormative conventions "conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return . . . Intimate life is the endlessly cited elsewhere of political public discourse."[106] In other words, the home is taken to be the intimate, personal, private sphere. But as Warner's work as well as much scholarship in feminist theory shows, the very sustenance of the public, political sphere depends on this so-called prepolitical home base. The converse is also true: the intimate, private nature of the home is sustained by heteronormative institutions and policies. *Private* matters—like a conversation over tea and shortbread as in the example from Hartman's work, an abolitionist print in an enslaved woman's room as in California's example, or an argument between two spouses about paying for childcare or forgoing one salary—are imbricated with power relations and can affect them in turn. As with Warner, politics is not only about the state, but rather, many and varied relationships of power. A more expansive view of politics that does not conform to the categories Scott describes instead gives attention to those who evade forms of visibility and publicity because of their politically marked and marginalized status.

To contest the line between private and public is to claim a political space for oneself. When we turn our attention to counterpublic or counter-community, we expand the territory of what counts as politics and who may act politically. Politics and political life, and the limits of both, are defined by power. In conditions of powerlessness, marginalized people are excluded from the public and may not participate in politics. When power controls space, time, habits, and the distribution and circulation of objects, having a place to not feel exposed, to be safe, and to be more than dominated is itself monumental. Such a form of political expression—and literal space—is "won and defended in the teeth of power."[107] Refusing "the terms of visibility"[108] is a form of political action, resistance, and expression.

104. Warner, *Publics*, 62.
105. Ibid., 22–23.
106. Ibid., 191, 193.
107. Scott, *Domination*, 119.
108. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 29.

As Patricia Hill Collins notes, "'the colored girl . . . is not known and hence not believed in.'"[109] Silencing dominated groups is part of domination: "Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization."[110] Domination depends on suppressing the experience of the dominated. As Cheryl Harris notes, American inequality persists because there exists a "studied ignorance" that sustains it.[111] One reason to consider the multiplicity of political imagination is precisely to undo the "studied ignorance" to which Harris refers. Seeing the multiplicity of imagination also helps us expand "the knowledge and authority" necessary to contest injustice: "The privacy or obscurity of Negro life makes that life capable, in our imaginations, of producing anything at all; and thus the idea of Bigger's monstrosity can be presented without fear of contradiction, since no American has the knowledge or authority to contest it and no Negro has the voice."[112] To study the political life of the dominated is to arm ourselves with tools to contest Bigger's monstrosity—the monstrosity of stereotypes and caricatures. When we marry an attention to the multiplicity of subjectivity to the political importance of understanding the counter-communities that dominated groups build, we can undo the "studied ignorance"[113] that perpetuates injustice.

Counterimagination is itself a claim to freedom. As California's enslaver wrote, she "has an idea that she is free."[114] In the communities that imagine alternatives to domination, it is possible to create the kinds of dignity, affirmation, and relief associated with a form of freedom: "consciously cultivated sentiment[s] of self-respect intended to reverse the internalized stigma"[115] that marginalized groups face in public. We see this clearly in Hartman's example of the women drinking tea, sharing trauma and shortbread, and claiming dignity for themselves. Counterimagined communities provide opportunities for reception and dignity such that one can "be at home in one's identity."[116] In these communities, people can imagine themselves and their peers not based on "details and symbols of your

109. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 3.

110. Ibid.

111. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, 106, No 8. (1993): 1709–91, at 1762.

112. Baldwin, *Price*, 76.

113. Harris, "Whiteness," 1762.

114. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 98.

115. Krause, *Freedom Beyond*, 155.

116. Ibid., 156.

life [that] have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you,"[117] effectively evading power.

Counterimagination gives us an account of how marginalized groups imagine differently, bring into being counter-communities, and express themselves politically. Counterimagination can, indeed, spark "treason en masse"[118] in ways that mobilize visible, public resistance and demand freedom through the transformation of unjust social and political structures. But it is also important to discussions of politics that contest and evade publicity, ways of political expression and community that are nonpublic, and forms of freedom in domination.

Conclusion

Political imagination can offer important resources for democracy and racial justice. On the one hand, it is vital to the formation of political communities and can be a tool for political change, as contemporary democratic theorists tell us. Yet to make good on the value of imagination for democratic politics we need to understand it in all its complexity. Imagination can sustain domination as well as movements for social justice. When we focus exclusively on the emancipatory or public instances of imagination we can fail to see both how domination operates and the many forms that radical politics can take. By contrast, when our vision is not clouded by a "preference for open, institutionalized politics"[119] we are awake to otherwise invisible forms of domination and the multiplicity of radical political action that sometimes rises in response.

Turning to counterimagination shows, in Camp's words, how "enslaved people were many things at once, and they were many things at different moments and in various places"[120]—and each of these different things, while not public or readily visible, might have been part of creating counter-communities and contesting the prevailing political order. What we see when we attend to counterimagination is the plurality of forms that radical politics can take. The concept of counterimagination developed here illuminates the multiplicity of ways that imagination shapes political life, and by understanding this multiplicity, we are better able to see the plurality of forms that characterizes democratic politics itself.

117. Baldwin, *Fire*, 8.
118. Hartman, *Wayward Lives*, 21.
119. Scott, *Weapons*, 297.
120. Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 1.

Gauri Wagle is a lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London in the department of politics, international relations, and philosophy. Her work theorizes political imagination with particular attention to race in the U.S. She can be reached at gauri.wagle@rhul.ac.uk.