

## When things fall apart: On the dialectics of hope and anger

ANA DEUMERT 

University of Cape Town, South Africa

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the dialectics of hope and anger as responses to what Lear (2006) called ‘devastation’, the colonial-capitalist destruction of the ontological groundings of life. Lear argues that ‘radical hope’ allows for ‘survival’ in such contexts, and his work has been influential. Yet, I want to be careful with relying on hope as a political affect. Hope is also a sociality-sanctioned emotion. Anger, by contrast, remains frowned upon and discouraged. However, anger can have liberatory potential: it constitutes a communicative act, articulating the urgent need for political change. I explore the semiotics of anger by considering the complex affective contours of a musical performance, ‘Protest’, created by Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach (1960). The expression of anger is reflexive and performative. It is a recognizable register as well as a politically passionate communicative act that resists its own foreclosure and that intersects with hope in complex ways. (Hope, anger, affect, music, negative dialectics, philosophical sociolinguistics)\*

‘No, I won’t light these candles with you.’

Max Czollek, in correspondence with Sasha Marianna Salzman  
(Cited in Olivia Landry 2021, *Theatre of Anger*)

Hope sucks!

Coop in *All American* (Season 4), 2022

### INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I wrote a short paper on citation practices in sociolinguistics. When I sent the paper to a colleague, I was taken aback by their response; namely, that I sounded ‘angry’. It was not an emotion that I had intended to express, yet the word ‘angry’ stayed with me because—my initial resistance notwithstanding—it did reflect some of my feelings. While writing and researching, I was indeed experiencing various forms of anger: anger at epistemological oppression, and anger at ontological oppression. It seems that this anger showed in the tone of my prose and imbued it with an affective quality, indeed an affective politics. At the same time, my anger seemed out-of-place: an academic text is meant to be written in a different tone, articulating a more objective, less personal, less invested,

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and certainly less angry voice. In this article, I explore the semiotics of anger and—in line with the topic of the special issue—hope. Theoretically, the article contributes to ongoing sociolinguistic work on affect, the enregisterment of affective practices, and our understanding of politically passionate speech acts (see also Borba 2021).<sup>1</sup>

My argument is structured as follows: The first three sections reflect, from different perspectives (philosophy, political science, and sociolinguistics), on the affective and semiotic contours of hope and anger. My discussion of hope is critical rather than affirmative since hope is a troublesome term for me. Like Monica Heller, ‘I am not a hope person’ (Heller & McElhinny 2022:110)—yet, at the same time, I revel in ‘freedom dreams’ (Kelley 2002). This is the positionality that I bring to the article—an unease and nervousness with socially sanctioned discourses on hope that can move, all too quickly, into forms of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011); that is, fantasies of a better life that appease yet remain unattainable in our neoliberal present. At the same time, I too have a longing to dream, a commitment to the imagination of better futures, which is grounded in my anger at the injustices and violences of past-and-present. Following the discussion of the broad conceptual terrain, I consider a musical performance to think through the semiotic articulations of (hope and) anger. The performance is ‘Protest’, created by Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach (1960) as part of a larger composition titled ‘Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace’.

The concept of dialectics that I draw on is inspired by John Holloway’s (2010) use of ‘negative dialects’, that is, a form of dialectic reasoning that—going back to Theodor Adorno—does not move along the Hegelian process of thesis–antithesis–synthesis, but that looks at the cracks that disrupt such linearity; that thinks ‘the world from our misfitting’ (2010:9); that acknowledges the political (and expressive) importance of refusal; and that accepts that ‘synthesis’ (a positive ending or, at least, a form of resolution) might (will?) never happen. The text that emerges from my engagement with the dialectics of hope and anger is not the kind of text that one would usually consider to be ‘sociolinguistics’—and this might unsettle readers and reviewers. Following Jonathan Lear’s (2006) description of his own work as ‘philosophical anthropology’, one could call this genre ‘philosophical sociolinguistics’, that is, a form of sociolinguistic reasoning that seeks to contribute to political philosophy through a careful reading of the semiotic practices that articulate political affect to oneself and to others.

#### HOPE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Scholarship on hope emphasizes the capacity for imagination, that is, the ability to move outside of ourselves and our realities, to envisage complex future-oriented temporalities. Ernst Bloch—most clearly, perhaps, in his conversation with Theodor Adorno (Bloch & Adorno 1988)—has argued that hope links to ‘utopian thinking’ and not to ‘utopian accomplishments’. In other words, hope

articulates a ‘theory of possibility’ and a preconscious presence of the future (the ‘not-yet-conscious’). Bloch writes:

Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them ... The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. (1954/1995:3)

Hope, according to Bloch, is thus grounded in *Vorstellung* ‘imagination’, not *Darstellung* ‘representation’, and he remains hesitant in naming the world that one is imagining. Thus, hope is ‘a longing, completely at all without consideration of the content’ (Bloch & Adorno 1988:5); it is experiential and not propositional (see also Miyakazi 2004; Muñoz 2009/2019).

Lear’s (2006) work echoes aspects of Bloch’s thinking, and his concept of ‘radical hope’ has been influential in sociolinguistics (Heller & McElhinny 2017; Pennycook 2022; Silva & Lee 2024). While I am sympathetic to the idea of ‘radical hope’—as a kind of meta-hope, that is, a hope for the return of hope (Ratcliffe 2013)—I struggle with Lear’s text. Lear explores the ability of the Crow Nation to carry on in the face of the colonial-capitalist devastation of their being-in-the-world. He argues that it was radical hope that allowed the Crow Nation to envisage and shape a future within the violence of settler colonialism. This radical hope developed out of suffering, articulating a broad sense of resilience, of not-giving-up. It did not contain a clear vision of what the future should-would-or-could look like, but rather it was a state-of-mind in which the future remained unspecific, yet broadly positive and possible. Lear links this experiential state to the Indigenous practice of dreaming:

[D]reaming provides an unusual resource. It enables the dreamers to *imagine a radically new future without becoming too detailed about what this future will be* ... [it] manifests a commitment to the idea that *the goodness in the world transcends one’s limited and vulnerable attempts to understand it*. (Lear 2006:76, 95; my emphases)

A commitment to the idea that ‘something good would emerge’ is fundamental to Lear’s (2006:94) argument, reverberating the religious groundings of hope. Hope is positioned as a desirable emotion, while not having hope makes one an outcast and ‘affect alien’ (Ahmed 2010:49, 182); it marks one as someone who does not believe in the possibility of a better tomorrow and in ‘the goodness of the world’ (on ‘ugly feelings’; see also Ngai 2007).

That an appeal to hope can, at times, be read as a form of appeasement, as a wish to prevent insurgencies, becomes evident in the final chapter of Lear’s book, which is titled ‘Response to Sitting Bull’. Lear argues that while the Crow Nation (under the leadership of Alaxchíia Ahú/Plenty Coups) found hope—and a future—in their collaboration with settlers, the Sioux Nation fought these settlers through insurgencies and military action (under the leadership of Tháthánka Íyotake/Sitting Bull). Lear is unsympathetic to militant resistance. He validates the path of cooperation/collaboration (glossed as ‘facing up to reality’; 2006:118), and pathologizes

resistance because—in this case—the resistance failed, and the Sioux were defeated. Yet, can one negatively judge resistance simply because it did not achieve its aims in a given historical context? Would radical hope not be equally evident in the anticolonial battles of the Sioux Nation, seeking the defeat of the colonizer? Or is the problem that for the Sioux Nation the future has more detail, a definite goal that can be articulated (namely the defeat of the colonizer, the end of colonization)? Lear does not consider the possibility that such resistance too could be a form of radical hope and concludes that Thathánka Íyotake/Sitting Bull ‘deployed ... imagination in the wrong sort of way’, leading his people astray (2006:150; for a critical discussion of Lear’s work, see Goldstone 2008).

Bloch and Lear position fear and despair as the opposite of hope. A kindred emotion is what David Theo Goldberg (2021) calls ‘dread’. Like hope, fear, despair, and dread articulate anticipations of the future. Yet, theirs is an anticipation that is the opposite of the trusting and positive anticipatory contours of hope. Goldberg (2021:44–47) writes about our current moment as follows:

Prolonged dread, then, is the mark of this moment ... Repeated raging hurricanes, the quaking earth, indeed pandemics, are rationalized as acts of nature. But like famines, floods and fires, the destruction they manifest is invariably anthropogenic ... The world is awash with uncertainty, both phenomenal and conceptual. Dread now is literally at the door, at the home. We are living in its grip ... hopelessness [is] now haunting life’s prospects.

Goldberg’s imaginary is visceral, evoking the destruction of our habitat: hurricanes, floods, and fires, unbearable uncertainty, dread that has seeped into our lives, creating hopelessness in its wake. Decades of hope-based narratives notwithstanding, the climate emergency is imminent; indeed, to talk about hope can be seen as a form of denial that might prevent one from recognizing how desperate the situation is, creating false hopes about possible futures.

The concept of ‘dread’ evokes a world without hope. But one does not need to think in binaries of hope/hopelessness; political futures can be bracketed differently. Hans Jonas (1979) replaces ‘hope’ with ‘responsibility’ (*Verantwortung*), arguing that what drives one to act is not an anticipation of, or a belief in, the ‘goodness of the world’. Rather, it is the fact that one is accountable to others and that therefore one cannot allow the world to be destroyed and suffering to continue. That political action without reference to hope is possible, is evident in the activism of the *Letzte Generation* ‘last generation’ in Germany. Being aware that there is only very little time left to turn-around the climate emergency, they speak about *notwendige disturbances* ‘necessary disturbances’ and *Entschlossenheit* ‘determination’—not about hope.<sup>2</sup> Even more explicit is the slogan of the *Extinction Revolution*: ‘hope dies, action begins’, articulating a political strategy that disavows hope, because hope can keep us chained to ways-of-thinking that have failed us, and does not always encourage us to act with urgency (on hope as an impediment to political action, see Pettit 2019).

Similarly, discourses of hope did not feature prominently in the heydays of the anticolonial struggle, a struggle which relied on coordinated collective action,

militant defiance, and a deep commitment to fight against the oppressor. The following comes from *Sechaba* (a publication of the African National Congress) in 1968: ‘Harsh sentences and the hanging of our people will not cower us. It will only make us bitter ... we shall continue to fight’ (*Sechaba* 1968:11). Thus, in the interlinked actions against colonialism, racism, patriarchy and capitalism, hope is not a word that one encounters often. Yet, its opposite is not hopelessness, but committed and militant struggle. The liner notes of the record *This Land is Mine – South African Freedom Songs* (1965), reflect on the change in lyrics and music that took place in the 1960s: songs no longer emulated hymns, lamenting the oppression of black South Africans and the hope for a better life; they were now openly militant: ‘*sizakubadubula ngembayimbayi*—we are going to shoot them with a cannon, reflects the present-day mood ... [the] songs are full of fight’. In this context, one is also reminded of the black consciousness poetry of James Matthews: *Cry Rage!* (with Gladys Thomas, 1972) and *Black Voices Shout* (1974). In *Cry Rage!*, Matthews articulates a political temporality that is firmly located in the present, and that will not hope, and wait, for a future: ‘It is yours, you will not be denied any more/Cry rage—freedom’s child’ (Matthews & Thomas 1972:94).

A critique of hope also informs the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015a, b, 2017). He argues that hope reflects a hagiographic understanding of humanity and prevents us from seeing and acknowledging those moments when things have truly fallen apart; and when radical action is required. Written during the presidential years of Barack Obama in the United States—a presidency that explicitly emphasized the possibility of hope (‘yes we can’, ‘the audacity of hope’)—Coates argues that decades of black resistance notwithstanding, white supremacy stayed on and, indeed, returned, stronger and more vicious than ever, with the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates writes:

It was a calm December day. Families, believing themselves white, were out in the streets. Infants, raised to be white, were bundled in strollers. And I was sad for these people ... reveling in a specious hope. (2015a:19)

Theirs was a hope—false, deceptive, and superficial—that was not possible for him as the very reality of his blackness made his dreaming of the world’s goodness impossible. Instead, the (American) dream for a good future was a burden and a fundamental impossibility. Yet, again, this does not mean hopelessness and the end of the struggle. Coates notes that, even without hope,

the struggle, in and of itself has meaning ... This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope. (2015a:112, 115)

Thus, the opposite of hope is not despair, fear, or dread. Action is not necessarily grounded in hope-as-a-future-imagination. It can be grounded in the present, in a commitment to, and responsibility, for the struggle (see also Silva & Lee 2021

on ‘Marielle, presente!’). It is about ‘freedom in our lifetime’, not ‘to be offered pie in the sky/pacified by pious platitudes’ (Matthews & Thomas 1972:14).

#### ANGER AND ITS POSSIBILITIES

In *Made in South Africa*, Lwando Xaso (2020) writes about her rage at the persistent racism that shapes society more than two decades after apartheid.<sup>3</sup> The stories she tells are violent, yet mundane: encountering racism at an ice-cream parlour, or at a friend’s house over a pasta dinner; seeing racist cartoons in the newspaper; or reading a racist tweet on New Year’s Day. And she notes how a ‘politics of respectability’ seeks to stop the expression of one’s anger, yet ‘racism did not deserve a respectable response, at that moment it deserved my rage and I am unapologetic about it’ (2020:location 63). Xaso articulates her anger, but also her tiredness and ‘nagging cynicism which I strive to stave off every day’ (2020:loc. 193). She speaks about her horror at the possibility of a world where ‘race will forever define who we are, and our screams are nothing but dog whistles—ultrasonic but silent to white ears’ (2020: loc. 152).

There has been a growing interest in the politics of anger over the past few years. In the *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra (2017) argued that the current moment is characterized by anger at the failures of modernity and its promise of freedom and equality. While I agree with his comments on the failures of modernity, his analysis of anger is problematic. He locates anger primarily among ‘frustrated men’ who, driven by ‘ressentiment’, are seeking ‘revenge’. The imagery he employs is stereotypical and hyperbolic: ‘[people] foaming at the mouth with loathing and malice’ (2017:9). The personae that he invokes are not only racist white men, like the Proud Boys. He also refers, explicitly, to ‘Maoist guerillas in India, self-immolating monks in Tibet’ (2017:9) and compares nineteenth-century French anarchists to ‘ISIS-inspired young EU citizens’ (2017:10). Thus, Mishra—by unifying very different articulations of anger into one category—ignores what Myisha Cherry (2021) has called variations of anger—some of which are liberatory and progressive, others politically and morally reactionary (also Tanesini 2021).

Audre Lorde’s text *The Uses of Anger* (1981) is central to the political philosophy of anger. Lorde identifies the origins of anger (the violence of ‘oppressions, personal and institutional’), its potential for political clarity and conscientization (‘when focused with precision’), its grounding in a desire for revolutionary change (‘a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives’), and its ability to mobilize (‘a powerful source of energy serving progress and change’). Cherry (2021) draws on Lorde’s work to theorize what she calls ‘Lordean rage’ in the fight against racism and oppression—and it is this kind of anger that is at the centre of my own reflections.

Cherry engages critically with western philosophy which—following Seneca—has often viewed anger as socially destructive and politically excessive.<sup>4</sup> This tradition informs Martha Nussbaum’s (2016) work which argues that in contexts of

revolutionary justice, anger should be replaced with generosity and love. Nussbaum states her negative view on anger as a political emotion from the outset: ‘anger is *always normatively problematic*, whether in the personal or public realm’ (2016:5, my emphasis). She positions anger as the foe of hope and defines it narrowly as an emotion that is oriented towards the past, demanding ‘payback’ or ‘revenge’ for injuries experienced. Indeed, she asks of revolutionaries to be ‘part Stoic, part creatures of love’ (2016:8) and argues that revolutionary success requires a commitment to overcoming anger; indeed, to dedicate oneself to ‘non-anger’ (2016:212). Her examples are Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela, who—in her interpretation—‘clearly show us the strategic superiority of non-anger: for it wins world respect and friendship, and it also eventually can win over the adversaries, enlisting their cooperation in nation building’ (2016:236). Her interpretation of, especially, Mandela surprised me. Mandela was the commander-in-chief of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the liberation army, and he never denounced his commitment to armed struggle. Moreover, the current politics in all three countries—the continuation of poverty, exploitation, and dispossession; the continuation of racial violence and discrimination—show that too little has changed, and that perhaps anger should have been persistent, rather than—all too quickly—making space for love and the generosity of forgiveness? Nussbaum’s work also raises the question of whether one needs to choose between love and anger. Cherry (2019) argues—drawing inter alia on James Baldwin—that liberatory Lordean anger and (agape) love are not opposites: both seek to eliminate hate and violence; both are grounded in a sense of care for others; both seek to change the world by holding others to account.

A reclamation of liberatory, Lordean anger has taken place in recent years. For example, in Spain and Greece, the *indignados* ‘the angry ones’ and the *aganaktismenoi* ‘the indignants’ took to the streets during the anti-austerity protests between 2010 and 2012 and embraced anger as a politically productive emotion. *Escuchad la ira del pueblo* ‘Listen to the people’s anger’ echoed across the Puerta del Sol in Madrid in 2011 (Cossarini 2015). Such acts of reclamation notwithstanding, anger remains an ‘outlaw emotion’ (Jaggard 1989). Unlike hope (and love), anger tends to be silenced and discouraged; it is, all too frequently, seen as excess, as a problem, as a negative emotion, and a negative action (Frye 1983; Campell 1994). Amia Srinivasan (2018) positions the suppression of anger as a form of ‘affective injustice’: being ‘too angry’ or ‘sounding angry’ is a charge that is frequently levelled against minoritized groups, and their anger is dismissed. In the extreme, this can result in people ‘toning down’ their anger which, in turn, can lead to political demotivation and frustration. And while the anger of dominant groups might not be overtly celebrated, it is often allowed and excused. In American politics this is clearly visible in the expressive styles of two presidents: Bill Clinton, who regularly articulated sentiments of anger in his speeches, and the calm restraint of Barack Obama (whose lack of anger was legendary, giving rise to the popular Obama-anger-translator skits). Indeed, research shows that white Americans—and the politicians that seek to



appeal to them—have normalized the expression of anger in their articulation of political grievances, aimed at the maintenance of privilege. Black Americans tend to be more restrained. They articulate political anger less frequently than their white counterparts, thus policing their expressions (Phoenix 2019).

Policing the anger of the oppressed is not just a phenomenon of the United States. Kudzaishe Vanyoro (2020) showed how, during the 2019 anti-government protests in Zimbabwe, protesters were stigmatized in news reports as ‘criminals’ and ‘mob’; their anger and rage were seen as extreme and unjustified by the post-colonial elites. In mid-2022, when I started writing this text, Tembisa, a township in Gauteng, was on fire; so-called service delivery protests had escalated and, as in Zimbabwe, the media was quick to label the protesters as ‘angry’.<sup>5</sup> This was just one of many protests that have come to shape everyday politics in South Africa (Bekker 2022). The hope of the Mandela-era has evaporated and ‘the same system that had given oxygen to the apartheid government continues to be in existence’ (Wa Azania 2014:5). The long arm of coloniality and the realities of neoliberal capitalism continue to shape life in the settler colony, long after the formal end of colonization (Robinson 1983/2000). And within the violent system of capitalism-coloniality, to be angry is, as argued by Chabani Manganyi (1977:68), a reasonable response to oppression. He writes: ‘When all is said and done we ignore, suppress and abort the violent reverie and the subsequent image at our own peril’ (see also Fanon 1963:52).

#### ENREGISTERMENT AND ITS LIMITS

The concept of enregisterment has been productive in sociolinguistics. Enregisterment describes a process of semiosis whereby culturally recognizable registers—ways of acting and being—are being produced, reproduced, and circulated (Agha 2007). Enregisterment is also helpful in thinking about the sociolinguistics of anger: in addition to discourses about anger and its variations, there exist socially, culturally, and historically recognized ways of expressing anger.

Registers of anger not only articulate particular personae—such as the militant and defiant revolutionary or the activist—but perform speech acts that communicate resistance against injustice and that demand an end to it. Anger, as noted by Alessandra Tanesini (2021:159), is an ‘appeal emotion’ that seeks to engage with others. As a communicative act, anger demands from its audience an epistemic, political, and affective recognition that the present cannot persist and that one’s collaboration with status quo renders one’s very being, ultimately, as unethical (Wilderson 2014). Anger thus pushes against the walls of our present; it does not imagine finding a home somewhere inside them; rather it seeks to tear them down, thereby making space for something new. Anger, as Sara Ahmed (2004:174) notes, ‘is a form of “against-ness”’, a refusal and resistance to accept the present-as-it-is and a demand for change in the here-and-now.

In sociolinguistics we have some work on the enregisterment of anger. Writing about the expression of anger in the online engagement of the *aganaktismenoi*



'indignants' in Greece, Irene Theodoropoulou (2016) observes that they engage in distinct communicative 'styles', or registers, to express and strengthen their political vision. Similarly, Daniel Silva (2022) explores the forms of semiosis that shape activist talk—*papo reto* 'straight talk'—in Brazil. Silva (2022:251) notes: '*Papo reto* ... invokes the "right to live and voice" by being direct, that is, by avoiding curves and reticence'. It is a register that seeks to 'speak the truth', propositionally, indexically, and iconically; it is a register that articulates dissent and defiance. Daniel Silva & Junot Maia (2022:6) link such forms of expression to the 'Black Atlantic', that is, to Africa and its Diaspora, sociohistorical formations that have given rise to a diversity of transmodal practices that yield 'illocutionary force for the defense of black lives'.

Looking at transnational theatre in Berlin, Olivia Landry (2021) explores anger as a performative register; it is an iterable communicative structure that refuses acceptance of the status quo; that 'is meant to incite reflection' (2021:21) and that is relational, asking the other to listen (and not to block or dismiss the anger). She emphasizes, in particular, 'the postmodern practice of the monologue' in the interactional expression of anger (2021:20; thereby echoing Tanesini's, 2021, description of anger as an 'appeal emotion'). The 'disruptive candour' that shapes the use of monologue as a confrontational genre creates presence. The monologue says, loudly, 'I am here, listen to me'. It is a form of direct address, linking back to Silva's reflections on *papo reto*. Landry writes that '[a]nger provides tone and self-determining assertion' (2021:181), and that it is often embedded in a 'corporeal hecticness', reflecting the embodied nature of strong emotions (2021:182).

Enregisterment and speech act theory are helpful for thinking about meaning-making, semiosis, and the sociolinguistic expression of affects. Yet, they have their own blindspots. One such blindspot is a focus on seeking to provide accounts of how things happen (i.e. how registers emerge and how speech acts work), creating—through scholarly publications—a social reality that might appear more ordered and structured than it actually is. It is a social reality that—many would argue—can be studied appropriately through empirical-positivist analysis, that is, by collecting data through interviews and interactions, and by analysing such data systematically. In a recent publication (Deumert 2022), I queried (following Steinmetz 2005) the 'empirical unconscious' of sociolinguistics and argued that the very idea of analysis needs to be radicalized to include not only what we can record and archive as 'data' (written texts, recordings, transcripts, photographs, even spectrograms), but also everything that we experience with our senses. To draw on all of our senses, all of our sensing, is especially important when one looks at affective communicative acts, that is, speech acts that necessarily transcend the semiotic order in which language is located and becomes indexically meaningful.

The American philosopher William James (1912) referred to this approach as 'radical empiricism', an epistemology that emphasizes affective resonances and ontological diversity, thereby rethinking modernist ideas of individual agency. James views the self as leaky and incomplete, fundamentally relational and affectively

porous. The self, in James' account, is not the agentive—if processual and interactional—producer of sociolinguistic registers or communicative acts. Rather, social practices evolve in a rhizomatic manner and in a context where 'experience outstrips language' (Stuhr 2023:4; see also W. James 1907; Livingston 2016). To adopt such a perspective towards social and physical life complexifies one's understanding of how ways-of-speaking come into being. They are not the result of an ordered sequence of actions that bring about a relatively well-defined object (a register that can be described and delimited), but they emerge through a necessarily partial and indeterminate process in which exigencies and agents are always ill-defined, interacting with one another in unpredictable ways, creating vocalizations that are of language and beyond language. Thus, enregisterment—as a process not an object—is always open-ended, and there exist multiple ways to encode and experience the sensuous complexities, and ontologies, of affective reasoning.

Consider, for example, Fred Moten's (2020:ix) preface to Tendayi Sithole's *The Black Register*, a preface that starts with a question: 'What precedes the black register?'. Moten's question speaks to the importance of working with multiple temporalities—registers might emerge out of observable processes of enregisterment at a particular point in time. Yet, they carry multi-layered histories, including the *longue durée*. These are histories that shape them and that are simultaneously absent and present in the moment of articulation. Moten reminds us that enregisterment is about more than the acknowledgement of the historical context, described and captured in conventional academic language. He asks: How can we approach the traumas of slavery, colonial dispossession and oppression, and their semiotic effects? In this context, Moten boldly argues for 'empirical mysticism' and articulates the need for semiotic excess, affect, as well as the articulation of refusal:

The black register overflows and undercuts itself, is always more and less than itself, and this non-fullness and non-simplicity is shown, registered, recorded, discorded, disordered, and practiced ... let's call this *being empirical without an attitude*: no settled position, no emotional or epistemological truculence, just *this deep, shared, entropic sensing* ... [b]lackness does not give an account of itself in the black register ... and then there's the fact that blackness won't be registered. (Moten 2020:x–xi, my emphases)

Sithole's (2020) discussion of the 'black register' engages Pan-African thought and complexifies sociolinguistic work by asking how those who have had their humanity denied by anti-black racism can express themselves as 'black-in-an-antiblack-world' (2020:2). Sithole is not a sociolinguist and his work does not engage with the concept of 'enregisterment' as such; yet, his thinking is relevant for these discussions. Sithole argues that a register is not just language and signs; it refers to 'ways of thinking, knowing and doing that are enunciated from existential struggle against anti-blackness' (Sithole 2020:2). Thus, the black register is not only expressive, but also epistemic and ontological. Sithole writes:

As a form of assertion, the black register is oppositional. It is the refusal to be interpellated, appropriated, diluted and tamed by the liberal consensus ... The black register is an 'unknown tongue' ... It is the black sayability in the face of unsayability ... The black register is, then, a radically

transformative force, the insistence on life ... It is not about giving a voice to blackness. It is, more properly, blackness rewriting the world. (2020:4-5)

Refusal and rewriting under conditions of sayability/unsayability do not lead to the creation of more or less well-defined registers (describable and observable as sociolinguistic objects), but rather ‘reverberations’ (Moten 2020:xiii) and rhythmical resonances. These complex semiotic formations reflect ways of speaking-thinking-acting that defy:

normative scansion and the grammar it attends ... in a black musical way, in a real, in an arithmetical way, an Arethametrical way, a real, the real, arerererererethmetical way, an a-rhythmical way, a nonmetrical way, an acousmetrical way, a matrical way. (Moten 2020:xii)

And this brings me to music and sound as forms of political expression. It is a mode in which emotions, such as anger, can be articulated and performed publicly, emphasizing their affective contours and stretching language beyond its ‘normative scansion’, allowing expression to explore ‘unknown tongues’.

#### WE INSIST! FREEDOM NOW!

In turning to sound and the performance of anger, I focus on an analytical ‘center-piece’: ‘Protest’, performed by Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach as part of the composition ‘Triptych’ (1960; I borrow the concept of a ‘centerpiece’ from Gal & Irvine 2019:270). The album on which the performance appeared—*We Insist! Max Roach’s Freedom Now Suite!*—reaches outward into the world of resistance and politics, across Africa and the Diaspora, across then and now, embedded in the ‘unboundedness of semiosis’ (Gal & Irvine 2019:271), and thereby also the unboundedness of revolutionary action. In reflecting on this performance, I draw on James’ concept of ‘radical empiricism’, Moten’s ‘entropic sensing’ and Sithole’s emphasis on refusal and the complex articulations of ‘existential struggle’; that is, I recognize that experience can exceed language (including the language we use in our analyses), and that it is important to draw on the diversity of our senses when we encounter affective communicative acts. Therefore, before continuing to read, I encourage readers who are not familiar with the performance to listen to it.<sup>6</sup> By asking the reader to listen, I deliberately resist the temptation to reduce sound to words, and to articulate—what Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015) called—‘the figure of sound’, that is, the idea that sound is knowledgeable and that it can be approached, and described, as ‘a stable index or signifier’ (2015:18; see also Deumert 2023).

The *Freedom Now Suite* was recorded at a time, the 1960s, when large parts of the world were gripped by a revolutionary spirit. In 1960 alone, seventeen African nations gained independence (and many more followed in the years to come), the Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah addressed the United Nations on the future of Africa, and the All-African People’s Conference took place in Tunis. 1960 was also an important year for the civil rights movement in the United States. In Greensboro, North Carolina, African-American students staged a sit-in at a

segregated restaurant, an event that was repeated across the country in the months that followed. The sit-ins established mass direct action as a new form of activism and led to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which—a few years later—was led by no other than Stokely Carmichael aka Kwame Ture (who later joined the Black Panthers and founded, in 1968, the All African People's Revolutionary Party). 1960 was also the year of the Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa, and the ever more violent clampdown on anti-apartheid activists by the government. A year later, in 1961, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, was founded, and the struggle for freedom entered a new phase.

*We Insist!* emerged in these turbulent times and reflects the struggles for freedom and equality. The cover photograph establishes the link to the Greensboro sit-ins visually. The image restages the photograph that was taken by Jack Moebus at the Greensboro lunch counter, with the subversive twist of having a white waiter taking the order and the black customers looking directly into the camera. Unfortunately, the masculinist original left little space for Abbey Lincoln's female presence (Holiday 2020). However, she is mentioned first in the line-up of contributing artists, followed by Coleman Hawkins and Olatunji. The five compositions move from slavery ('Driva' Man) to Emancipation Day ('Freedom Day') to the civil rights struggles ('Triptych: Prayer/Protest/Peace') to pan-African solidarities ('All Africa', 'Tears for Johannesburg'; on the complex history of the album, see Monson 2007, 2020). The album is militant. It is not about freedom-in-the-future, not about a temporality-to-come, but a firm demand for 'Freedom Now!'. That the album was seen as 'politically dangerous' by white supremacy is evident in the fact that it was banned in South Africa (Monson 2007).

In the following, I focus on 'Protest', performed by Abbey Lincoln and Max Roach as part of the composition 'Triptych'. A triptych is a panel painting that consists of three sections. The middle panel is usually the central panel, and this centrality—politically and affectively—also applies to 'Protest', which is framed by 'Prayer' and 'Peace'. Max Roach in an interview with Charles Hersch (1991:89) explains the structure of the composition as reflecting, sonically, the experience of struggle:

[It] was a prayer not of supplication, but a prayer of preparation. And the protest section followed the preparation section, which meant that then you went out, and you, if you will, *screamed* ... Your pain, you just expressed your pain in the protest thing. And then the peace wasn't a peace that you got that was any peace; there was no peace. It was the peace that you get from exhausting yourself ... Alright, so that's 'Prayer, Protest, and Peace'. You prepare yourself to work and do something, and you work until you get tired. And peace is the exhaustion you get from knowing, well I did everything I possibly could. Then you wake up the next day and do the same thing over and over again. (Emphasis in the original; see also the liner notes by Nat Hanthoff, cited in Monson 2007:178)

Roach's explication echoes Coates' reflection on 'struggle over hope' (which themselves echo Douglass', 1857, 'If there is no struggle' speech), as well as the actions of countless freedom fighters who prepared for the struggle, protested, spent their energies—only to continue to fight the next day.

Central to the performance are Abbey Lincoln's vocals. Lincoln was a radical artist. Her career started at so-called 'supper clubs', a glamorous circuit where the songs performed were intended for easy entertainment. This was followed by performances in Hollywood movies, where she emerged as a sex symbol akin to Marilyn Monroe. Yet, she soon realized that this could never be a space for her, or her work. She left for New York, where she no longer straightened her hair, and soon fired her voice coach who was meant to reduce her black intonation (Goldman 2007:129). In New York, she developed a unique instrumental approach to singing. The radicalness of her vocal art is perhaps most evident in 'Protest', which unsettled listeners by resisting language and any genre expectations of what a 'song' should sound like.

'Scream' is the descriptor that is often used to name Lincoln's non-lyrical vocalizations (Mbowa 2013; Holiday 2020). Acoustically, a 'scream' has unique features that set it apart from speech and singing; it is characterized by irregular phonation (such as percussive rolls and dissonant intervals), and listeners respond to these sounds instinctively (Anikin, Canessa-Pollard, Pisanski, Massenet, & Reby 2023). The 'scream', in other words, might well be universal as a response call (signaling pain, fear, a cry for help). Yet, its meanings will always be contextual, grounded in its unique articulation. Jayna Brown (2021:107, 110) describes the experience of listening to 'Protest' as follows:

The drums suddenly erupt, as we enter 'Protest'. As the drums rise, Lincoln abruptly screams. For one minute and 20 seconds, Lincoln hollers, whoops and shrieks, her voice holding a deep affective register, expressing exhaustion, urgency, rage, sadness, fear and physical pain. It is demanding to listen to, and for some of us very satisfying to hear ... Her voice recognises the fundamental violence of the US racial regime, and the futility of appeals to moral reform or inclusion in the body politic ... Abbey Lincoln's voice on 'Protest' operates as a complex polyphony. It carries a myriad of 'ugly feelings': grief, fear, frustration, defiance and blind fury ... Such affectivity is about calling and responding to one another. It is about inviting communal sharing of hard-to-bear-emotions.

Moten (2003) hears in Lincoln's voice screams that resonate across time, articulating black history and evoking the ghosts of her ancestors. To listen to Lincoln goes 'bone-deep' (Moten 2003:67), asking one to witness multiple 'worlds of sense' (Lugones 2003). Lincoln produces sounds that say 'stop' and 'no', that resists the violence of past-and-present, and that cannot be ignored. She appeals to the listener, articulating a distrust of easy harmony and reconciliation as well as an understanding that nothing is well, that things have long fallen apart and continue to fall apart. Thus, the 'scream' articulates complex political emotions across diverse temporalities and through multiple soundings.

Lincoln said that the screams 'freed her up', allowed her to locate herself in history, and in doing so to express the urgency of protest, of revolution, of insurgency (Goldman 2007:130). Moten cites from notes he took during a presentation Lincoln gave in New York in 1999. Lincoln spoke about her commitment to a struggle that stretches across time, a struggle that is inspired by her African ancestors:

I got rid of a taboo and screamed in everyone's face ... My instrument is deepening and widening: it's because I'm possessed of the spirit ... This is the music of the African muse/I just want to be of use to my ancestors/ It's holy work. (Lincoln, cited in Moten 2003:23)

Originally, 'Triptych' was meant to be performed with dancers, visualizing its corporal intensity (which also affected Lincoln's vocal cords). Lincoln and Roach realized this in the 1980s with choreographer Dianne McIntyre. McIntyre recalls how dancing 'Protest' was extremely challenging—physically visible in the 'scrapes and bruises' she incurred; psychologically painful too, 'feeling the socio-historical weight of Lincoln's sound' (Goldman 2007:132).

Lincoln's art affected audiences deeply and can be interpreted as an example of sonic transduction, that is, 'the transformation of one type of energy into another' (Eisenlohr 2018:8), affecting bodies and creating affective resonances, vibrations, and echoes. Transduction needs to be understood materially/physiologically not merely metaphorically/psychologically: listening to soundings such as Lincoln's scream affects bodies viscerally in diverse ways, leading to changes in heart rate and blood pressure, creating tactile sensations on the skin (Goodman 2010). It is, as noted above by Brown, 'demanding to listen to'. Kalamu Ya Salaam (2007) remembers the performance of 'Triptych' at a concert in 1968. Listening and sensing, the performance created political clarity for him, and mobilized him, providing imagination of a different world and strength for the 'battle':

The band challenged every preconception I had about how much music four instruments and a voice could make. It was akin to a heart transplant. When they finished, I was not the same. I had new ideas swirling in my head. I stood taller, my stride was more deliberate. I believed I could do and be anything, and more importantly I could now truly imagine a brave new Black world. I was ready to do battle, emboldened. The air tasted fresher.

While Lincoln's vocalizations do evoke, in some sense, work on 'the semiotics of noise' (Storch 2018), they do so without the condition of 'intentional unintelligibility'. Anger is not a form of 'hidden' resistance, Lincoln's scream is not 'unintelligible'; rather, it is bold and communicative; it issues a firm demand for change through its 'subversive tonality' and 'revolutionary vocalization' (Brown 2012:109, 110; see also Mbowa 2013). A scream cannot be ignored (Dolar 2006:loc. 476); it demands recognition and interpellates the listener. John Holloway (2005:1) argues that 'the scream'—which he describes as 'critical vibration'—is politically primordial: 'the starting point of theoretical reflection is opposition, negativity, struggle'.

While the articulation of political anger can be enregistered, anger—as a political affect—might be most effective when it is experienced not as the repetition of a more-or-less sedimented structure (a register), but when it pushes sonically against the status quo. The scream, as Mbowa (2013:135) notes, resists 'reiteration' (each scream is unique and personal), while being, at the same time, of a deeper reiteration than language (recognizable as a sound of pain and fear, as a call for recognition and response in a particular timespace). Thus, as a speech act, anger ultimately resists its own foreclosure: instead of rendering 'certain kinds of speech

unspeakable' (Butler 1998:250), it seeks their articulation by whatever means possible. Pain and trauma, and the anger they give rise to, refuse to be silenced.

The scream with its visceral gutturals and pitches is also a vocalization—and acoustic frequency—that transgresses 'white aesthetic values' and bourgeois sensibilities by taking up sonic space. It is a frequency that has been 'coded out of dominant political ontologies' (R. James 2019:10, 77; see Monson, 2007, on the responses of reviewers at the time); yet, it demands recognition and, in doing so, redirects unfocused 'wish-dreams' of hope-for-the-future to the realities 'the here-and-now' (Davis 1971:11). Lincoln's scream is not silent and internal (as the ones Xaba describes above when she writes about her 'screams being nothing but dog-whistles—ultrasonic but silent to white ears'); it is confrontational, loud, and cannot be ignored. In the assessment of Harmony Holiday (2020): 'The recording of Abbey screaming is one of the most subversive acts that we have of recorded music'. It is, and I cite Holiday again, an articulation of 'ugly beauty' (thereby echoing Ngai's earlier cited work on 'ugly feelings'), a voicing of 'generous rage'.

#### CONCLUSION

In thinking about the dialectics of hope and anger, I took inspiration from Adorno's idea of a negative dialectics which sees history as permanent revolt, detonating 'concepts ... power ... identity, [detonating] all that is familiar to us' (Holloway, Mataros, & Tischler 2009:11). For Adorno, refusal is central to philosophy as well as to political action, and it is the expression of anger that articulates such refusal most clearly. This is also echoed in Holloway's (2005) reflection on 'the scream' as a sonic articulation that constitutes the beginning of political thought: the scream states—firmly and unapologetically—*NO! The present cannot continue!* Yet, unlike hope, anger—in its expressive, sonic, and corporeal articulations—has often been normatively sidelined and silenced. This is especially evident in Lear's and Nussbaum's work which pathologizes anger, while Cherry and other philosophers remind us about the importance of Lordean rage. Yet, it would be wrong to see anger as existing entirely outside of—or in opposition to—hope, but rather it exists in complex interaction and entanglement with hope, articulating an activist practice in-the-present, combining the urgencies of the present with futurities and imaginaries that are otherwise. The scream is one of refusal and anger, but it is also a call to join the struggle, and as such it nevertheless echoes a fragile hope. A dialectics.<sup>7</sup>

In *Hope and the Historian*, Coates (2015b) reflects on the to-and-fro movement between hope and anger. He notes that '[the] black political tradition is essentially hopeful'—but also urges his readers to 'be open to things falling apart', to injustice, destruction, and violence continuing, to acknowledge the truth of the world, and not to be wedded to 'sweet dreams'. Similarly, feminist scholars such as Ahmed (2004) and bell hooks (1995, 2003) have emphasized hope and anger in their work,



considering both to be necessary for political action. Thus, when engaging in the expression of anger at violence, exploitation, and oppression, at the world-as-it-currently-is, one is nevertheless, as noted by Lorde, oriented towards a future, towards a different world. Anger, one could say, expresses a form of militant hope—a hope that is firmly grounded in the commitment to struggle as a political responsibility and necessity. It is also a hope that—in contrast to Bloch’s reflections—imagines the contours of future. It does not know them in detail but the broad outlines are there: violence, exploitation, and oppression—the ills of the past and the present—need to come to an end. Thus, returning to my earlier discussion of Lear’s work, my idea of hope is closer to the politics of Thathánka Íyotake/Sitting Bull and his imagination of, and battle for, a world without oppressors.

I want to end with a word of caution. When using words such as ‘hope’ or ‘anger’ to describe complex emotions, we always risk to engage in the reification of what we take them to refer to. Bringing other languages into the mix, creates further complexities and raises questions of translatability. Are *Wut* (German), *liget* (Ilongot), *seky* (Malagasy), and *song* (Ifaluk) the same as English ‘anger’? A serious limitation of my reflections is that I discuss anger/hope in largely monolingual terms, implicitly expressing a universalizing stance that is at odds with the decolonial sensibilities that increasingly shape work in the social sciences. ‘Hope’ and ‘anger’ are certainly concepts that have travelled well, and are part of a global lexicon of political struggle; as such they are ‘words in motion’ and appear in various political registers (Gluck & Tsing 2009). Yet, perhaps it is time to acknowledge more firmly that even for us as sociolinguists, language remains ‘the threshold on which we stumble’ (Menon 2022:25), and that, in our commitment to a pluriversal ethics, we could explore, more carefully, the words that activists themselves use, in different places, at different times, using different registers, evoking different affects—while, at the same time, being cognizant of translocal circulations and the ‘unboundedness of semiosis’. And maybe, to return to my opening reflections, sometimes the tone of our own texts could indeed be more ‘angry’, unsettling the reader and pushing for change now, not in the future.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>In the literature a distinction is sometimes made between *affect* (felt intensities) and *emotion* (the expression of these intensities in language/discourse). Yet, it is difficult to maintain such a strict

distinction, and I consider affect/emotion to be intertwined, including felt intensities as well as their semiotic expression.

<sup>2</sup>The discussion is based on the text published in 2022 on the website. In 2024, a similar discourse was employed, emphasizing *ungehorsame Versammlungen* ‘disobedient gatherings’ and *Widerstand* ‘resistance’; see <https://letztegeneration.de/en/mitmachen/>.

<sup>3</sup>I do not make a distinction between ‘anger’ and ‘rage’. Both terms are used interchangeably in black feminist writing (Lorde 1981; hooks 1995; see also Cherry 2021; Landry 2021). I also do not distinguish ‘anger’ from ‘bitterness’, which is the term used by James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; see also Stockdale 2021).

<sup>4</sup>A negative view of anger is not limited to western philosophy. It is also evident in Buddhist traditions which seek to eliminate anger altogether. Kulick (1992), writing about Gapun (Papua New Guinea), notes similar sentiments: anger is evaluated negatively, and its display is tightly regulated (see also Gaffin 1995 for the Faroe Islands; Rebhun 1994 for Brazil; for a review of ethnographic work on anger see Lutz 1998; Scheidecker 2020).

<sup>5</sup>See <https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/news/three-dead-as-angry-tembisa-residents-protest-against-expensive-electricity-bills-ea8141e9-7fa3-4a6f-9c24-662daa895ec8>.

<sup>6</sup>See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMaUDAeiSIY>.

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to Rodrigo Borba for alerting me to the possibilities of ‘hopeful anger’ and ‘angry hope’.

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**Corresponding author:** Ana Deumert

University of Cape Town  
Department of English Language and Literature, Linguistics Section  
Rondebosch, Private Bag 7701 Cape Town 7701, South Africa  
[ana.deumert@uct.ac.za](mailto:ana.deumert@uct.ac.za)  
[ana.deumert@gmail.com](mailto:ana.deumert@gmail.com)