The Art of Repair: On Crises, Resentment, and the Power of Creativity (Excerpt)

Markus Messling and Christiane Solte-Gresser

Times of war are times of regression. Sigmund Freud's *Thoughts for the Time of War and Death*, written during World War I, could hardly be more relevant today. The culture that civilization has painstakingly built up—a thin veneer covering our primal instincts—is quickly being stripped away. Society is increasingly unable to uphold the value of symbolic forms of thought, of literature, film, visual art, or public discourse and ritual in navigating the complexities of living together. It finds itself retreating into a kind of childish stubbornness that appears to offer a sense of security. It is regressing. And the outcome of this process is polarization, hatred, and aggression.

Freud questioned the enthusiasm for war among the supposedly civilized societies of Western Europe that had spiraled into a murderous conflict in 1914. But today, this problem of regression seems to be a global issue—as a matter of wounds and woundedness. It is not only the West that is now being forced to grapple with the violence of modernity. After centuries of colonialism, this violence is affecting global society, emerging as a fundamental problem, and demanding action, in so many relationships, be they North–South or East–West. Even if the globalization of recent decades has not necessarily fostered a sense of human unity, we can only understand the world today in its entirety: there is no "outside" anymore; we're all in the same world. This is what media coverage shows us every day. And the various wounds inflicted by this violence—from postcolonial traumas to fears of decline—are leading to a "great regression," which tries to simplify the complexity of global interconnections by retreating into the "self," into what is claimed as one's "own," and curbing the openness of democratic forms of life.[1] Today, this regression is affecting not only the West, but many societies worldwide, from South America through Africa to Southeast Asia.

The fear of losing one's self, the "authentic individuality" of one's own culture and identity, stems from intense struggles over resources and representation that are

being mercilessly fought today in the form of neoimperial endeavors and politics driven by decolonialization. Such fears can only be effectively addressed through rigorous economic policies of redistribution aimed at providing social prospects for the future. The task of culture, by contrast, is to create meaning, to offer space where wounds can be acknowledged, to initiate processes of recognition while also spurring liberation from regressive impulses. Culture involves the experience of complexity, contradictions, and ambiguity. It demands that we acknowledge wounds and their irreparability. Retreating into regression, by contrast, fosters the illusion that we could reclaim an old world—that we could place ourselves at the center unchallenged and restore a supposedly idyllic state of self-contentment. But this is something that cannot exist, and has never existed in this form, within the complexity of relationships that exist to the world, as psychiatrist and philosopher Cynthia Fleury explains in *Here Lies Bitterness: Healing from Resentment*. “In fact,” she writes, speaking of the patients with whom she works, “what they aim for in this fantasy of a return to the past is a state of carefreeness, the illusion of happiness, indeed happiness itself—and this remains possible. But the happiness in question will never be the old happiness. It will be something that never existed, and it is quite impressive when the patient is able to tackle this challenge.” [2]

A retreat into isolation and an emphasis on identity, which often erupt in fascist fantasies of power, cannot alleviate these fears. Instead, these impulses fuel fear with resentments by continually translating what cannot be attained into a rejection of the Other and the world: if we cannot possess a “self,” then we must attack and belittle everything else to feel and elevate this self we would claim. Such dynamics can also be observed in many places in the history of the complex relationships between Europe and Africa, and they continue to fundamentally shape these relations to this day. As Fleury writes: “The will to compare betrays the emptiness that moves us, the fear of being nothing, so we search and we compare to ensure that we are better or, inversely—to point to a form of alienation that is different but no less damaging—that we are inferior: this is what becomes unbearable, so much so that it is necessary to sully our values and denigrate the other in order to invalidate this comparison that has given us such a poor image of ourselves.” [3]

To break free from this cycle, one must propose processes of meaning-making that address irreparability by transforming fears into something productive—something oriented toward the future, remaining to be created. In response to the “dehumanization” of people under colonialism and apartheid, as described by Frantz Fanon,[4] the Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne invokes the concept of *ubuntu*—at once a political idea and a concrete practice focused on “shaping humanity together (Fr.: *faire humanité ensemble*).” [5] The shift from wounds to a process of worldbuilding is essential but challenging to achieve: “Our entire history, the entire

historical path of our civilization, is constructed upon [resentment]. It is thus by no means easy to abandon this classic motor of history and implement something different: a justice that conceives of itself through action, engagement, invention, sublimation, and not reparations." [6] Yet this is precisely where cultural practices can have an impact: by providing the complexity necessary to explore the tension between the irreparability of life destroyed, and the necessity of carrying on, to make this tension available to experience and transform it into something new. As the author W. G. Sebald notes—and one could extend this point to artistic and aesthetic practices in general: "There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship." [7] By restitution, though, Sebald does not mean compensation. He is more concerned with a fragmented recovery of irretrievable historical experience—by means of intricate processes of witnessing and remembering that are indispensable for envisioning a future. Many of the works exhibited in THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA vividly illustrate this by creatively working through both individual and collective traumas, shifting focus toward what comes after the wounds: toward the forms and possibilities of survival, of living on, and of living a good, just life.

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1. Arjun Appadurai, "Democracy Fatigue," in *The Great Regression*, ed. Heinrich Geiselberger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 1–12. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of sources by Michael Thomas Taylor.
2. Cynthia Fleury, *Here Lies Bitterness: Healing from Resentment*, trans. Cory Stockwell (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 41.
3. Fleury, *Here Lies Bitterness*, 38–39.
4. Originally published in 1961 and translated most recently by Richard Philcox as Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, with a foreword by Homi K. Bhabha and a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (New York: Grove Press 2004).
5. Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "Ubuntu als Antwort auf den Konflikt der Kulturen," in *Rhinozeros: Europa im Übergang, vol. 1*, "reparieren," ed. Markus Messling et al. (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2021), 93–105, on 93.
6. Fleury, *Here Lies Bitterness*, 39.
7. W. G. Sebald, "An Attempt at Restitution," *New Yorker*, 20 and 27 December 2004, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/12/20/an-attempt-at-restitution, accessed

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