Other Presents: Imagining the Human and Beyond

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Abstract

Recognizing the current moment as one dominated by high capital, this piece articulates the kind of labour necessary for the imagination to dream the human, the nonhuman and the earth elements out of the unjust present into a more just future, without foreclosing what justice might mean. I recognize our embeddedness in history, which for me includes the persistence of the technological, the inescapability and productivity of a politics of difference, as well as the recognition that the Western tradition contains alternatives to the Cartesian subject. Reading Lewis Hyde, I propose an economy of the imagination, the terms of which shift as we generate the kind of wealth that increases through the act of giving rather than taking.

I want to begin in a speculative mode. Why not? The world of high finance which structures the everyday lives of anyone hooked into global capital relies on speculation as the mode through which it drives the international economic engine. We are so committed to the story of progress that we bring it into being through repeated iteration of that story in practice. The market is a teleology with tentacles that reach into the material fabric of our dreams, our lives, the earth itself. I’m not proposing that I know how to break free. I understand that my being is sedimented through histories of social practice that materialize me in all kinds of ways that, were I a creature of pure essence, I might or might not consent to—as consumer and producer, as woman, as Asian, as queer, as middle-class as more or less able-bodied. But I’ve lived through the culture wars of eighties and nineties and I know that there is no such thing as pure essences. So how then to put the imagination, my imagination, to work as a liberatory force in a world and at a time when liberatory movements and revolutions seem to have burnt out their potential? In other words, after the Russian Revolution, after the Communist Liberation of China, after the Vietnam War, after the Pinochet overthrow of the democratically elected Allende government in Chile, after Glasnost, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, after the Asian economic downturn, after the crash of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, after the bailout packages and the return of government interference in the economy, as the

War on Terror continues, as the planet keeps getting warmer and as Canada stays committed to its presence in Afghanistan, where and when are we, and what on earth is possible? After the media spin, after fractured narrative, after the shiny postmodern surface, is it really the End of History, and if so what time is it and where did I put my watchdog?

My speculation is already a mimicry. If I’m lucky, it’s a repetition with a difference. I would like to imagine an Age of Imagination in which the information of then and now becomes newly malleable. If history is over, will genealogy set me free? Can I also draw from the future, the people that Deleuze and Guattari tell us are yet-to-come? Or has Second Life and World of Warcraft already reterritorialized the imagination in the image of the same? Or, to gesture towards Ray Kurzweil’s notion that soon every atom that makes up the universe will, through the magic of nanotechnology, be as smart as my iPhone and able to cure me of cancer: If the world is waking up, is it waking up to Maxwell House? Do we want the world around us to be imbued with (extra)human intelligence? And if whether we do or don’t, can we grow with it if it is what’s coming?

It’s hard to be a radical these days. It’s all been done before. The farthest I’ve got says that hope lies in return, and the job of creative people is to imagine the best possible kinds of returns that might jostle the future into becoming its unpredictable best. Prediction and prescription are suspect because in their direction lies totalization, fascism, the exclusion of all that which does not fit. Imagination, then, is about seeing—seeing what is already there but seeing it differently and returning it to the present in order to make the future, again, never prescriptively, but in resonance with the random we have all been waiting for.

How do I know what to look for, and how will I recognize it when I see it? And there’s the question—if how I see is always already conditioned by my entry into language, by the frames I’ve already been given, how do I produce better frames? Perhaps I could begin by putting aside my “I”, all the traditions that bring that “I” into being, and the sedimentation of experience through which I know that “I” to be me. What happens to the “eye” of this “I” then? Can its visual field be displaced? How to see or otherwise sense if not from where I think I am standing?

The French feminists, Kristeva in particular, would suggest using the powers of horror—to write from the site of abjection, at which the “I” is not fully formed, does not yet have its objects but is circled by spectres and images not-yet-fully differentiated from the self. Rosi Braidotti offers multi-faceted insect-vision, creepy, but satisfyingly plural. Donna Haraway, in her work on companion

species, notes the ways in which what we presume to be the human “I” is actually a “we” made up of fungi, protists, and bacteria—all working in symbiotically to produce a collectivity that can be newly experienced as “I”.

None of these thinkers throw out the human(ist) “I”, but they do displace it, offering differently gendered, differently speiced, and differently counted ways of being that put us (as me and as we) in touch with other collectivities that might really gross the human(ist) “I” out.

Imagination is required to see this way, but where does it come from? C. Allyson Lee: “My mother’s womb -- how about you?” But the condition of late capital is such that what we imagine is always returned from without. Our bodies emerge from our mother’s wombs, but our social being is reflected by culture, absorbed and projected out again in endless reverberations. The markets that are us, the technology that is us, return to us a vision of ourselves that is uncanny because it belongs both inside and outside our human being at the same time. Thankfully, the movements of the market and the movements of technology are unpredictable—fantasies of control are so 20th century. May be it’s a good thing that the truth is not out there. Agency matters, but we don’t control the reverb.

The radical imagination may have very little to do with agency. What if it is a force in excess of the human? It might still include the human, but not to exclusion of the extra-human—what we might call animal, or nature, depending on how we speak. Certainly creativity, fertility and productivity are possible beyond the human. In his contemplation on the conversion of labour into money, in fact, Marx notes how odd and interesting it is that the gold we make our monetary “standard” is a substance that comes from the earth. Does unmined gold lie beneath soil and bedrock, dreaming of human labour? What is its extraordinary creative power that it can become that which it cannot even dream? Can we learn from gold to become that which lies just beyond the edges of our human imagination?

The American writer Lewis Hyde proposes that the imagination is a kind of gift, that it functions in an economy fundamentally different from the economy of commodity exchange. Under capital, under the system of commodity exchange, hoarding is possible, and indeed, one grows rich by accumulating capital. But in a gift economy, the reverse is true. One’s wealth and status increases by how much one gives away. Or perhaps, better, we grow rich when we recognize an economy of the imagination, what Hyde calls “an economy of the creative spirit”.

Witnessing mass arrests in Toronto on the occasion of the G20 summit in June and the clumsy police/government attempt to mark the heterogenous and
heartfelt protests with the sign of a burning police car, I can’t help thinking what weakness of the imagination is at work at the corporate and government levels. As individuals and as a culture, we can do so much more, whether we agree upon what the imagination is, and what it is for, or not.

In my imagination, what would the radical imagination do? What would it wake people up from? Well, a few things. It would wake people from their understanding of money as goods, labour, and ideas; it would wake us from the mind/body split, not to mention the human/earth and culture/nature split; it would open the door for a re-imagination of the state; we would reimagine mutation and uncertainty as productive forces. The imagination isn’t free from history but it could give us history differently in its drive towards... what? Democracy and freedom? Liberation from oppression? The problem is that so much violence and injustice has already happened in the name of these things. Imagination seeks the hook that might unhinge oppressive repetition to propel us into a mutated future that doesn’t return the violence of the past. But what’s the key, the hook, the machine, the technology, the narrative, the idea? Democracy, justice, body, sex, death, surprise, horror, text, food, hope? In language, these things keep moving. The imagination keeps turning the kaleidoscope wheel.

Endnotes

Larissa Lai is an Assistant Professor in Canadian Literature at the University of British Columbia. She is the author of two novels, When Fox Is a Thousand (Press Gang 1995, Arsenal Pulp 2004) and Salt Fish Girl (Thomas Allen 2002); and two poetry books sybil unrest (Line Books 2009, with Rita Wong) and Automaton Biographies (Arsenal Pulp 2009). Her recent chapbook Eggs in the Basement (Nomados 2009) was shortlisted for the bp nichol Chapbook Award. She has recently sent her critical book Slanting “I”, Imagining “We”: Asian Canadian Formations, Relations and Strategies in the 80s and 90s to a Canadian academic press.

ii Elizabeth Grosz’s Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures is a particularly useful text for thinking through the ontological possibilities offered by non-linear temporalities. There is a particularly useful article by John Rajchman in that collection, entitled “Diagram and Diagnosis”, which I have found helpful for thinking through the ways in which those of us who emerge from histories of trauma do not need to be defined by it. We can recognize the traumatic past as a partial, but not fully constitutive moment in the formation of subjects of difference. Deleuze and Guattari are particularly useful for their

notion of “the body without organs” that is criss-crossed by “free intensities and nomadic singularities” (A Thousand Plateaus 40), by which I understand them to mean the (future) potentiality of any ontology, which can also give us a kind of being in the present that we might not imagine or be able to conceive without the concept of the virtual.

iii

C. Allyson Lee was an important Asian lesbian activist writer in the 1980s and 1990s. As far as I know, she still does activist work. Her writing and her organizing work were a great source of inspiration for me when I was coming out. In this current piece, I quote her out of context, in order to make space for her brave and influential work in my present moment. The original poem, “Recipe,” addresses the racism, sexism and homophobia in everyday speech and offers witty rejoinders: “Where are you from, originally? / My mother’s womb—how about you?” (The Very Inside 336)

References
