

Climate Consolations
Cara Daggett

In a scathing 1970 essay called “Let’s Spit on Hegel,” feminist Carla Lonzi spits on dialectical thinking. Specifically, Lonzi is suspicious of its action-oriented spirit, the way it propels everything forward to ‘the next’. Gender lies at the foundation of Hegel’s dialectic, and is prior to the master-slave relationship, Lonzi points out. The ontological foundation of the world is the original distinction between masculine (public, community, Spirit) and feminine (private, family), where the masculine is transcendent and active, and the feminine is immanent and passive. The problem is that, even were Hegel’s master-slave relationship to be overcome, this underlying difference would remain.

The distinction between the masculine active, and the feminine passive, generates a tendency toward unreflective admiration for action and power among those who adopt some version of dialectic thinking, which is evident in the importance of labor to both Hegel and Marx. Labor was not necessarily as sacred to Marx as some of his readers assume. David Harvey complains that too many misunderstand Marx, and assume that he meant “the only valid notion of value derives from labor inputs. It is not that at all; it is a historical social product” (2010, 46). In other words, labor is the source of all value only because we live in a capitalist system. Marx aims for the generation of alternative values. At the same time, it is undeniable that Marx is fascinated by labor and movement (and by capital, too, as value in motion), and that Marx has been interpreted in support of many active, progressive, and accelerationist plans.

What is challenging about Lonzi’s essay is that she is not only critiquing the idea of progress – movement toward improvement – but the wider veneration of efficacious action itself. Lonzi writes:

[Philosophers] recognize transcendence by the efficacy of actions, and while they assume it to be originary they deny transcendence where actions do not lead to an increase in power. But to measure transcendence by the efficacy of action is typical of a patriarchal outlook. ... Our message to man, to the genius, to the rational visionary is this: the future of the world does not lie in moving continually forwards along a path mapped out by man’s desire for overcoming difficulties. The future of the world is open: it lies in starting along the path from the beginning again with woman as a subject.

Here, Lonzi shares the insight of many feminists, that the goal is not to capture power, to switch from one heroic protagonist to another, from one mode of action to another, but to have a different relationship to power, efficacy and, I think, to action too.

An open world, one not centered on Man the Hero. Ursula K. Le Guin (1986) might call this a “carrier bag theory” of fiction. Instead of defining humans as the makers and users of weapons – the Man the Killer story that looms large over all Western stories, the epics and tragedies and romances – Le Guin calls for stories about containers, and all the gathering, arranging, and maintaining that goes on with them, from food to home and community building. The carrier bag

story is everywhere, because it is everyday life, but it is hard to compete with Heroic Man. Look at the box office receipts for Marvel movies. Le Guin knows this well:

It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrestled a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites, and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats.... No, it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood sprouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain.

That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heroes are powerful.

Much as feminism and anti-racist theory has been taken on board by the Left in recent years, there is still a valorization of action, oriented toward the future, judged by its efficacy, that suggests what Lonzi calls a “patriarchal outlook.” More starkly, I read Lonzi (and Le Guin) as speaking to climate scholars and activists, in writing that the future should not be about “man’s desire for overcoming difficulties.”

This is a difficult message to digest.

Don’t we want to overcome the difficulty of petrocultures, and their seductive stickiness? Or capitalism, with one enormous General Strike? The blazing desire for action is evident, for instance, in Andreas Malm’s recent work, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline*, where he laments the passivity of climate activism, and advocates a ‘climate terrorism’ that uses physical force against fossil fuel infrastructure. Much as I cheer for elements of this manifesto, and have appreciated the clarity of Malm’s writing, I also see this book as the crystallization of what can go wrong when movements venerate capital-A action uncritically.

We are unhappy with the Now, and we want it to change, and quickly. When things don’t change, when heroic action is not forthcoming, we sink into despair. Too little, too late, won’t work, failure. The triumphal and the apocryphal are also aspects of the genre of Man the Hero; Le Guin writes that “the fiction embodying this myth [Man the Killer] will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now).”

It is not that I am against action, but reading Lonzi, it’s worth considering how the celebration of Action fits into a problematic schema, where action is judged according to its efficacy at increasing power, and is contrasted to a feminized passivity, chaos, and lassitude. Look beneath action, at its foils: these include the paralysis and passivity that haunt the climate movement, yes, and allow global capitalism to keep reproducing itself through a complicit, and numbed public. But there are also all the activities that Le Guin attends to, including gathering, laughing, rest, slowness, smallness, sitting and thinking (the vilified armchair activist, or the scholar who is not also a scholar-activist), the HUMANITIES writ large, playing, sleeping, and all acts that do not

result in any effective action, any production, or any obvious shift in power, including the everyday deeds of so many feminized bodies worldwide, like cleaning toilets, changing diapers, washing the dishes we use during a conference, watering plants and pulling weeds, holding back a child's hair as she vomits, sketching a bird building a nest, washing clothes, or taking extra time to set a beautiful table for a community meal.

A heroic protagonist does not vanquish evil, or capitalism, through such experiences. Some of these things are lovely and peaceful to do, but many are boring, dull, and dirty, if still utterly necessary to keeping the world going. Many of them are the work of maintaining and nurturing interdependence and relations, what feminists call care work, or reproductive forces (Barca 2021).

In other words, in the Left's eagerness to smash the stability and security of the disastrous status quo, there is always the risk of adopting the same genre, as the mirror image: against stability, and for disruption! Against security and for change! Against consumer comforts and for discomfort! Against bureaucratic order and for disorder! Not only does this ignore that humans desire security and change *both*, but it also commits itself, over and over, to that underlying patriarchal ontology that sets a higher value on efficacious action toward power, and a lower value on immanence and passivity, qualities mapped not only onto women's bodies, but onto the 'nature' that sits outside of civil society, too. Someone has to sweep the floor after the heroes have their meetings, someone needs to cook when the climate saboteurs get back from slashing tires, and someone needs to follow the toddlers around while the protestors go to jail.

Ecofeminists are not the only ones who have noticed how Westerners are devoted to a certain genre of heroic action, and how this produces the desire for rapid change. Anishinaabe scholar Kyle Powys Whyte (2020) writes of the insidiousness of climate urgency, the notion that something must be done to address global warming, and quickly. Instead of the feeling that we are up against constantly shrinking deadlines, and must act soon, Whyte writes that it is already 'too late.' It is too late for Indigenous climate justice, he says. With all the other ecological tipping points looming, we have already passed the "relational" tipping point.

The work that would be required to repair relations is slow and careful work, much slower than the rapidity of ecological destruction that we are witnessing. Whyte observes that the slow time of building new relations of trust between White settlers and Indigenous peoples, for instance, often appears to obstruct the rapid implementation of green projects. But broken kin relations caused the crisis, Whyte argues, and therefore repairing them will be necessary to respond to the damage. In other words, that repair work is not just as a matter of justice, of paying back what is owed. It is also a matter of taking care of those who care for us, human and more-than-human. It is a matter of all those activities of a carrier bag theory of fiction, which make up the bulk of real life, as opposed to the Heroic Action of saving the planet.

When I first read Whyte, I felt deeply uncomfortable with his assertion that it was 'too late.' I am still quite attached to the feeling of urgency when it comes to climate crisis, to the need to bring about dramatic transformation as soon as possible. However, I have come to realize that my attachment to urgency and action are borne of extractive cultures.

What would our thinking about “What comes next” look like if we sat with Whyte’s imposition that it is “too late”, or with Lonzi’s call to step away from the forward momentum of dialectical thinking? The problem with urgency is that it rules out slow work in advance, or demotes it as always less important, impractical, insufficient.

The question of “What Comes Next” for petrocultures is a genre question, a question about how to tell a climate story, in that stories are how humans make sense of the world, of the reality of successive moments in time – the next, and the next, and the next. In his famous lectures on literary criticism, *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode argues that fiction makes sense of the world by translating reality, or the ordinary succession of events (*chronos* time), into moments that are charged with greater meaning (*kairos* time). This meaning comes by conceiving an event, and ourselves, as in the middle, “poised between beginning and end...our way of bundling together perception of the present, memory of the past, and expectation of the future, in a common organization” (46).

Writing in the 1960s, Kermode saw that, throughout Western literature, making sense of time has involved the recurring motif of Endings, of apocalypse, utopia, and stories of Empire and Decadence, where every Decadence contains within it the hope of renovation. (Sound familiar?) The emphasis on endings (to make sense of the present) invests each generation with the sense that they are special, that they are living “in the midst,” in an especially freighted era of Transition. It's a little embarrassing to read Kermode alongside my own sense that I am truly living through World Historical times, that my lifetime coincides with a most fraught transition era, with climate apocalypse on the horizon. My first instinct is to dismiss prior generations for the comparably limited scope of their doom: my doom is planetary! (But as Whyte reminds me, many people have already lived through the end of the world.)

Kermode is skeptical of the tendency for each generation to invent its own importance, and its apocalypses, and yet he does not think that people can do without these fictional forms. He is not out to banish them. Humans will always desire these “consoling” genres that help to find “concordance” between past, present, and future. Kermode’s concern is that people tend to forget the fictiveness of our fictions, which is when they become myths. Myths are fictions that forgot they weren’t reality. This can happen in totalitarian cultures, but also in science (Energy is a fiction), and with Leftists bent on the reality of apocalyptic doom, or forgetting that their End of the World is not the only world that has or will be ending. I think that is the usefulness of Whyte’s call, “too late!” – to remind readers of the fictiveness of climate urgency. Which is not to say that urgency is wholly untrue or without usefulness, but that it is just one among other possible invented paradigms for deciding what’s next.

To tell another story is hard, especially a carrier bag story like Le Guin calls for, one that is not focused upon heroes or a linear plot, shaped like an “arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead)” (Le Guin). But is it even possible? Le Guin is fully aware of the difficulty, as “the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero” is intoxicating and everywhere beloved. She says that a carrier bag story would seek “a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to

everything else in this vast stack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.”

From Kermode, however, I am reminded that fiction can never fully achieve this. First, because most people don't want stories like that. We want – and perhaps need – stories to offer some kind of consolation about reality and death (what's next?). The modern novel tries to get as close to reality as possible, to “pay adequate respect to what we think of as ‘real’ time, the chronicity of the waking moment,” and yet people can never completely banish the “hunger for ends and for crises,” (the end of capitalism!) and the pleasure to be found in a plot that ties together a beginning, *our* middle, and an end (Kermode 54-55).

Second, the human imagination simply doesn't have the power to describe “what is in fact going on,” as Le Guin longs to do. Fiction (nor the human mind, nor science, nor theology) will never be able to capture the reality of what's going on in the belly of the universe, nor to invent stories that are not already connected to inherited paradigms and grammars of cultures past.

And that is OK. The usefulness of stories, as opposed to science or theology, is precisely in their fictiveness, “because they are consciously false,” Kermode writes, because we know that there is an ineliminable gap between the story and the world. Kermode argues that

it is not that we are connoisseurs of chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers. This may, in the absence of a supreme fiction or the possibility of it, be a hard fate; which is why the poet of that fiction [Wallace Stevens] is compelled to say,

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own, and much more, nor ourselves
And hard it is, in spite of blazoned days.

Hard to hear “too late.” Hard to give up on heroes, on saving the world, on the consolation of a favorite plot, which might even be the plot of truth and justice, of people being held accountable for bad deeds.

If anything, I think Kermode is too sanguine about how appealing myths can be, especially in times of crisis, which is the fount of all fascisms. The question is not so much whether we need carrier bag stories of climate change. I would venture that most Oil School attendees think we do. The question is political, and it is one Le Guin ultimately does not resolve. Will those stories – which are ultimately democratic, about process and everyday negotiations – appeal and persuade? How to find genres of consolation that trump the fascist and capitalist myths of power forever?

References

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