

Horseradish

Let me begin with horseradish, that is, a Yiddish saying that I first heard from the lips of Canadian journalist Malcolm Gladwell:

“To a worm in horseradish, the whole world is horseradish.”

Well, as the phrase suggests, someone who is entangled in a single kind of substance is only capable of perceiving the world through that substance. This is how we might begin to think about the ways people form their opinions and narratives: we are all worms entangled in some sort horseradish, an amalgamation of ideas, words, people, images, foods, attitudes, that inform our ideas about ourselves and the world that surrounds us. This is how identities and opinions are constructed, through the equation of the self, to an external structure to which we have some sort of connection. In other words, who we think we are and what we think the world is like, is always dependent on our relationships to the things floating in and around the spaces which we have and do inhabit.

These are the fields in which we form our friendships and allegiances, our antagonisms and our memories, these are the liminal spaces from which we can pronounce “this is who I am.” Our imaginations then, are what we believe could exist beyond our horseradish, informed by our oh... so familiar... horseradish.

Now before I move on, picture the mossy husk of a log lying on the forest floor, the critters living under its weight, a spider weaving a meshwork it calls home, moths fluttering nearby, a worm wriggling towards a puddle, a bird with big eyes watching intently, cold morning air, microorganisms in and around everything, oyster mushrooms growing on the bark, an expanse of white oak, shrubbery and berries, picture the whole forest. How are all of these things

connected? How can we organize them into a single entity? Where does the forest end and begin? Our language and education are structured in such a way, that we could be tempted to describe every single one of these things as separate things, in fact, that's what we've been doing for thousands of years. We taxonomize the actually ineffable world around us into some sort of order which can be more easily understood, we create libraries, definitions, methodologies, we archive everything into little nooks, species, classes, identities. And here we run into trouble: environmentalism has taught us that in order to understand a systemic issue, we must think of the system itself, not simply of individual actors and components to be added to a list, but of the relationships between them. And is this not the case with any complex gathering of living and non-living things?

Archives are human attempts at organizing the world. They determine and maintain a static order, a logic which compartmentalizes, packages what they contain and describe. Archives are places of *disambiguation*. But how else can we think about the world?

Assemblages are what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls "open-ended gatherings," that, "[...]don't just gather lifeways; they make them."¹ Assemblages are not human creations, they exist without our fetish for categorization. The forest we described earlier, is not simply the sum total of the individual things that exist within it, but a living, changing system of indefinite organisms and objects all constantly engaging in complex relationships with each other. Assemblages are not static and deterministic, but ambiguous and indefinite.

Human beings are not archives. Human beings turn other things and themselves, all entangled in complex assemblages, into archives. Only when we conceive of beings as separate beings, of things in the world, of ourselves and other people, as stable, insular and individual,

¹ Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015. p. 28.

relegated to their borders, definitions, purposes, singular identities ready to be described, do we find archives. What I call archival identity is what happens when the self solidifies, is definite, when it can, with certainty say: “this is who I am.” And because of that, with the same confidence it hypostatizes difference into order: “you are not like me,” it pronounces. The word identity originates from the Latin *idem*, meaning sameness. Sameness is the condition for the fragmentation of things into parts, it is the condition for belonging into categories. And the idea of a stable identity turns identification into property. To be X is to own a share of X.

But in reality we are all worms in horseradish, assemblages traversing through a multiplicity of perpetually entangled... assemblages.

My thesis, is about identity politics. It’s about the ways we use language and categorization to reduce the complexity of reality, to fragment what we perceive into arbitrary categories that then become real, that we absorb as part of our identities, that we impose upon others. My thesis is about nationalism, xenophobia, individuality and depression. But my thesis, is also about poetry.

Poetry is that part of language that is most in tune with chaos, with indeterminacy. It’s a method to formulate, enunciate beyond what we can currently describe, beyond the slow apocalypse which we are undergoing.

“Language is a virus from outer space,” theorized William Burroughs. And the outer space of language is what we might call the horseradish, the psychosphere, the all too real non-place where signs proliferate, producing viral tendencies in meaning. We all traverse the world beyond our little bodies in our respective but inevitably infected, indeed, contaminated psychospheres: interwoven spaces from which we interpret the semiotic and material flows of reality

with or against each other, arbitrarily, subconsciously, but never without meaning. Meaning is a *filionotic* virus, a virus that spreads through friendship, *mutual understanding*.

What I call social poetry is an attempt to collectively take hold of our relationship to meaning, to create spaces where what is highlighted is not the order of identities, but the dizzying and vulnerable experience of being alive. Social poetry means forming a collective symbiosis with the virus of meaning, with the assemblages we are, and with the one's we inhabit. It means turning identity politics beyond its current archival and fragmentary mode and to approach it more in a systemic and entangled manner. What does identity politics look like without the individuation or the ethnocentrism? What does a politics centered on relationships look like?

Epicurean materialist philosophers believed that the soul was not a single thing you'd find buried in the depths of your being, an essence that gave life to who you were, no, the soul was always in between. It was the *clinamen*, the force that made bodies lean against each other, that liminal space of utter and perpetual transformation, always in between: between you and I, between these words and the ones surrounding them, between one state and the next, between all atoms, between all the things that constitute my frame. In the assemblage of assemblages, the soul was their relationship, the soul was that which made the world vibrant, erotic, vital.

Politics, like everything else, are already relational, they are the space in which we deal with those relationships. But we forget this, individuation and archival modes of organization make us think in terms of separate categories, in terms of same and different, they obfuscate the soul, render it muddy, imperceptible.

In an age of wide spread identarian fragmentation, social and economic precarity, we are faced with at least two choices: one is to take the route of the ethnonationalists, the route of

tribalism, of division which will lead us to what Italian philosopher Franco Berardi calls “global civil war,” or we can take the route of internationalism, of collaboration, of cross identity, empathic, systemic thinking. We can remember that every identity is socially constructed and contingent, not set in stone, but the result of the limited frameworks with which we perceive reality, the result of our mutual but limited understanding, the result of our friendships of our horseradish.

I have only a few questions to leave open: How do the labels and stories used to describe other people determine their behavior? What would feminism look like if it didn’t structure its political foundations on the basis of identity, but on the basis of relationships? What about anti-racism? Can any politics of otherness truly achieve its goals without an Other to identify and help give shape to?

I leave with a quote from my favorite pessimist, Emil Cioran:

“What surrounds us we endure better for giving it a name – and moving on. But to embrace a thing by a definition, however arbitrary [...] is to reject that thing, to render it insipid and superfluous, to annihilate it.”²

² Cioran, Emil. *A Short History of Decay*. “In the Graveyard of Definitions.” Trans. Richard Howard. Arcade, 1949 (2012). p. 7.