

GATHERING UTOPIAS

WEEK 1: FRIDAY SEPT 27 7PM

URSULA K. LE GUIN'S *THE CARRIER BAG THEORY OF FICTION*
ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS'S "EVIDENCE" FROM *OCTAVIA'S BROOD*



The Word Is Change

368 Tompkins Ave

THE CARRIER BAG THEORY OF FICTION

(1986)

In the temperate and tropical regions where it appears that hominids evolved into human beings, the principal food of the species was vegetable. Sixty-five to eighty percent of what human beings ate in those regions in Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric times was gathered; only in the extreme Arctic was meat the staple food. The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein. And we didn't even work hard at it—much less hard than peasants slaving in somebody else's field after agriculture was invented, much less hard than paid workers since civilization was invented. The average prehistoric person could make a nice living in about a fifteen-hour work week.

Fifteen hours a week for subsistence leaves a lot of time for other things. So much time that maybe the restless ones who didn't have a baby around to enliven their life, or skill in making or cooking or singing, or very interesting thoughts to think, decided to slope off and hunt mammoths. The skillful hunters then would come staggering back with a load of meat, a lot of ivory, and a story. It wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story.

It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested 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 spouted 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. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his.

When she was planning the book that ended up as *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf wrote a heading in her notebook, "Glossary"; she had thought of reinventing English according to a new plan, in order to tell a different story. One of the entries in this glossary is *heroism*, defined as "botulism." And *hero*, in Woolf's dictionary, is "bottle." The hero as bottle, a stringent reevaluation. I now propose the bottle as hero.

Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else.

If you haven't got something to put it in, food will escape you—even something as uncombative and unresourceful as an oat. You put as many as you can into your stomach while they are handy, that being the primary container; but what about tomorrow morning when you wake up and it's cold and raining and wouldn't it be good to have just a few handfuls of oats to chew on and give little Oom to make her shut up, but how do you get more than one stomachful and one handful home? So you get up and go to the damned soggy oat patch in the rain, and wouldn't it be a good thing if you had something to put Baby Oo Oo in so that you could pick the oats with both hands? A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.

The first cultural device was probably a recipient. . . . Many theorists feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

So says Elizabeth Fisher in *Women's Creation* (McGraw-Hill, 1975). But no, this cannot be. Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard

thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don't know. I don't even care. I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks and spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.

And yet old. Before—once you think about it, surely long before—the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool; long before the useful knife and ax; right along with the indispensable whacker, grinder, and digger—for what's the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug the ones you can't eat home in—with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. It makes sense to me. I am an adherent of what Fisher calls the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution.

This theory not only explains large areas of theoretical obscurity and avoids large areas of theoretical nonsense (inhabited largely by tigers, foxes, and other highly territorial mammals); it also grounds me, personally, in human culture in a way I never felt grounded before. So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought that I had, or wanted, any particular share in it. ("What Freud mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of *loyalty* to civilization," Lillian Smith observed.) The society, the civilization they were talking about, these theoreticians, was evidently theirs; they owned it, they liked it; they were human, fully human, bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing. Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence that I was; but if that's what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all.

That's right, they said. What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket. You just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how

the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man.

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again—if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.

Not, let it be said at once, an unaggressive or uncombative human being. I am an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off. However I don't, nor does anybody else, consider myself heroic for doing so. It's just one of those damned things you have to do in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories.

It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story.

It sometimes seems that that story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished. Maybe. The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.

It's unfamiliar, it doesn't come easily, thoughtlessly to the lips as the killer story does; but still, "untold" was an exaggeration. People have been telling the life story for ages, in all sorts of words and ways. Myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels . . .

The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse

to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting *here* and going straight *there* and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it.

I differ with all of this. I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.

One relationship among elements in the novel may well be that of conflict, but the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd. (I have read a how-to-write manual that said, "A story should be seen as a battle," and went on about strategies, attacks, victory, etc.) Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag / belly / box / house / medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.

Finally, it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.

That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them.

So, when I came to write science-fiction novels, I came lugging this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world, and a mouse's skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don't understand. I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks, I didn't say it was impossible. Who ever said writing a novel was easy?

If science fiction is the mythology of modern technology, then its myth is tragic. "Technology," or "modern science" (using the words as they are usually used, in an unexamined shorthand standing for

the “hard” sciences and high technology founded upon continuous economic growth), is a heroic undertaking, Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. The fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now).

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.

It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality.

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is 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 sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of things; there is time enough to gather plenty of wild oats and sow them too, and sing to little Oom, and listen to Ool’s joke, and watch newts, and still the story isn’t over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.

Evidence

Alexis Pauline Gumbs

By reading past this point you agree that you are accountable to the council. You affirm our collective agreement that in the time of accountability, the time past law and order, the story is the storehouse of justice. You remember that justice is no longer punishment. You affirm that the time of crime was an era of refused understanding and stunted evolution. We believe now in the experience of brilliance on the scale of the intergalactic tribe.

Today the evidence we need is legacy. May the public record show and celebrate that Alandrix consciously exists in an ancestral context. May this living textual copy of her digital compilation and all its future amendments be a resource for Alandrix, her mentors, her loved ones and partners, her descendents, and her detractors to use in the ongoing process of supporting her just intentions.

We are grateful that you are reading this. Thank you for remembering.

With love and what our ancestors called “faith,”
the intergenerational council of possible elders

Exhibit A

Excerpt from Drix’s Lecture Capsule: “The Black Feminist Time Travel of Self in the Twenty-First Century BSB [Before Silence Broke] Era”

“Therefore self should be understood as a vessel open to time and fueled by presence, where presence is as multiple as it is singular. This is what black feminist scientists called ‘integrity,’ a standard for affirming the resonance of presence across time, where action was equal to vision embodied through variables. Our ancestors reflect this reality in the self-inscribing letter process

evidenced in algorithmic email retrievals from a twenty-first-century palimpsest called google. It is unclear, however, whether the authors of emails wrote them in order to remember or in order to not have to remember. Can you hear me?”

Exhibit B

Be Is for Brilliant

Letter from Alandrix, age twelve, sent via skytablet during dream upload, third cycle of the facing moon, receipt unknown:

Ancestor Alexis,

I’ve heard about you. I’ve even read some of your writing. Everyone says I have an old soul, and I’m really interested in what it was like back when you lived. It seems like people were afraid a lot. Maybe every day? It’s hard to imagine, but it seems that way from the writing. I have to remember that no one knew that things would get better, and that even people who were working to make it happen had to live with oppression every day. I read your writing and the writing of your other comrades from that time and I feel grateful. It seems like maybe you knew about us. It feels like you loved us already. Thank you for being brave.

I’m twelve and last year I did a project for our community about your time, the time of silence-breaking. I made a poster and everything and an interactive dance. A friend of mine did one on the second abbreviated ice age instigated by oil on fire, but I thought writing about the time of silence-breaking would be harder. The ice continents were in your imaginations, the limits of your memory melted, you spoke about the hard things and you could see your own voices. It must feel almost like a force of nature when you live. I’m 12 and you would have thought of me as part of your family, even though now we

do family differently; we have chosen family now, so maybe we would just be comrades if you lived here in this generation. Who knows? But I think that if you met me, you would feel like we have some things in common. I'm a poet and I use interactive dance so maybe you would choose me as family. I know I would choose you. You could have been at my wow kapow ritual that happened recently. In our community, 12 is an important accountability age. We named this ritual for how it feels in our bodies around now. Wow kapow. I think you used to call it the pituitary gland.

We are here five generations after you and a lot has happened. A lot of the things that used to exist when you were 12 and even when you were 28 don't exist anymore. People broke a lot of things other than silence during your lifetime. And people learned how to grow new things and in new ways. Now we are very good at growing. I'm growing a lot right now and everyone is supportive of growing time, which includes daydreams, deep breaths, and quiet walks. No one is impatient while anyone else is growing. It seems like people are growing all the time in different ways. It was great to learn about you and a time when whole communities decided to grow past silence. It is hard to read about the fact that sexual abuse, what we would now call the deepest violation of someone else's growing, used to happen all the time. It is hard to imagine what it felt like for people to walk around with all that hurt from harming and being harmed. But I can tell from the writing that people were afraid so much. History was so close. But the amazing thing is how people spoke and wrote and danced anyway. Imagine being afraid to speak.

Anyway. I wanted to say thank you. Now in the 5th generation since the time of the silence breaking we are called hope holders and healers. There are still people doing a lot of

healing, but it seems like generation after generation people got less and less afraid. People took those writings and started to recite them and then another generation hummed their melodies and then another generation clicked their rhythms and then another generation just walked them with their feet and now we just breathe it, what you were saying before about how love is the most powerful thing. About how everything and everyone is sacred.

I read a really old story where the character believed that time travel was dangerous because if you change one thing in the past the whole future changes and then you might never get born. I am still here writing this though so I think it's okay to tell you that everything works out. That it's okay. And it's not easy all the time, not even here, because so much has been broken, besides silence, but it is possible, it does feel possible. My friends and I feel possible all the time. So when you get afraid to speak, remember that you all were part of us all learning how to just do it. And most . . . take it for granted. Except poets like me. I remember you. I feel it. Wow. Kapow.

love,
alandrix

Exhibit C

Notes from Drix (age twenty-five), dissertation research notebooks on the time that silence broke:

found as a zoomed-in image of a stained subway cave:

a.k.a.

the writing on the wall

"Wait for the time when blood is all we have left to write with," they said, first in a blog post, then in circulated emails, then on scraps of cloth, then scrawled on the remaining walls, then in dirt when they could find it at the end. "Wait for the

time ... when a woman must eat her own sorcery to bleed the ink of her existence. Let her write it and leave it. Let her call it future.”

So I waited. And when I couldn't wait any more I waited twenty-eight more days. If you can read this, I am evidence. We had been wrong all along. Blood is not money. Money is not food. The anonymous prophets were right. We cannot afford our own blood.

As I write this, the air is thick with our failure. And I am alone.

Remember us and heal.

Note: Archaeologists say that this engraving came slightly earlier than the other markings all over the planet in small mostly unrecorded places spelled: love love love love love love love love.

Note: According to quantum archaeologists with bone echo data there was more than one person who thought she was the last person on earth. It seems to me that this one had the right timing cycle and materials to write on the wall.

Note: Clearly many aboveground people didn't know about the underground people at this point. This cave writer may have had an inkling because she moved toward a cave that had an entrance to the underground system of root communication embedded deeply.

Note: The historians of the underground people in the transitional time refer to the time the silence broke as their vindication for going underground, but may it not have been that their retreat also caused the silence to break the people who were left?

Note: Unless we find another record, this is our only witness account of the time that the silence broke, but recent historiographic interventions have begun to refer to something

they call the “long broke open” which includes the oceanlogging of the digital infrastructure, the shrinking of populatable land and many other factors that they would argue have a causal relationship to the silence breaking.

Questions: What if I can never find evidence of what the people did to break the silence? Am I looking to the past in vain? Am I depending on evidence to confirm what my soul has evidence enough for?

Exhibit D

Found on Drix's wall at sixteen, rare paper artifact of a printed poem duplicate by Alexis Pauline Gumbs circa twenty-first-century BSB:

*in my dream
my ancestors are written on the walls
lipstick leavings
gold pen graffiti
strips of magazine paper
wheatpasted faces*

*these must be the ventricles
wind blows through
shifting and caressing
the slapstick lovings
the glitter leftovers
the mimeographed urgency
the necessary flyness*

*i must be standing
inside my own heart
tagged with the evidence
of life living itself
i must be walking
through the back alley truth
the criminalized place where love is
where we all end up if we're lucky
or at least move through for a bit*

Exhibit E

Letter from Alexis after capitalism to Alexis during capitalism, retrieved from email residue algorithm, received in inbox alexispauline@gmail.com on 9/13/10, send date category echo, referenced and archived in Drix's lecture capsule:

Dear Lexi,

Breathe deep, baby girl, we won. Now life, though not exactly easier, is life all the time. Not chopped down into billable minutes, not narrowed into excuses to hurt and forget each other. I am writing you from the future to remind you to act on your belief, to live your life as a tribute to our victory and not as a stifling reaction to the past. I am here with so many people that you love and their children and we are eating together and we are tired from full days of working and loving but never too tired to remember where we come from. Never exhausted past passion and writing. So I am writing you now.

Here in the future we have no money. We have only the resources that we in our capitalist phase did not plunder to work with, but we have no scarcity. You can reassure Julia we have plenty technology; technology is the brilliance of making something out of anything, of making what we need out of what we had, of aligning our spirits so everyone is on point so much of the time that when one of us falls off, gets scared, or caught up, the harmony of yes yes yes, we are priceless brings them right back into tune with where they need to be. We have the world we deserve and we acknowledge everyday that we make it what it is.

Everybody eats. Everybody knows how to grow agriculturally, spiritually, physically, and intellectually. No one owns anything or anybody or even uses anything like a tool. Each everything is an opportunity and we are artists singing it into being with faith, compassion, confusion, breakthroughs, and support. It is on everyone's

mind and heart how to best support the genius that surrounds us all. How to shepherd each of us into the brilliance we come from even though our experience breaking each other apart through capitalism has left much healing to be done. We are more patient than we have ever been. And now that our time is divine and connected with everything, we have developed skills for how to recenter ourselves. We walk. We drink tea. We are still when we need to be. No one is impatient with someone else's stillness. No one feels guilty for sitting still. Everybody is always learning how to grow.

Your heart sings everyday because your ancestors are thrilled with themselves, a.k.a. all of us. Just breathing is like a choir. And I have the presence of mind and the generosity of spirit to even be proud of the you that I was when you are reading this, back in capitalism with all of our fear, and all of our scarcity-driven behavior contradicting and cutting down our visionary words. Counterpoetics right? I am proud of you for being queer. I am proud of you for staying present to the meaning of your beliefs and to the consequences of your actions even when they were crashing into each other every day. I am proud of you for letting the tide of your revolutionary heritage grind your fear of failure and lack to sand. I love you. The me that I was.

But breathe this deep because this is the message. We did it. We shifted the paradigm. We rewrote the meaning of life with our living. And this is how we did it. We let go. And then we got scared and held on and then we let go again. Of everything that would shackle us to sameness. Of our deeply held belief that our lives could be measured or disconnected from anything. We let go and re-taught ourselves to breathe the presence of the energy that we are that cannot be destroyed, but only transformed and transforming everything.

Breathe deep, beloved young and frightened
self, and then let go. And you will hold on. So
then let go again.

With all the love and the sky and the land and
the water,
Lex

Octavia's Brood. AK Press.

