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Bad Habits, or, Can Reflexivity Be Good Again?

Pooja Rangan

In her response to the forum on Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary *(Duke University Press, 2017), author Pooja Rangan takes up a range of issues that emerge in responses to her book by Rey Chow, Lucas Hilderbrand, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Naomi Waltham-Smith. Rangan's response revolves around the question: Has reflexivity become untimely? What is the role of reflexive critique in a time of existential crisis? In answering this question, Rangan argues that alongside a "non-naive commitment to a notion of the truth" (a topic that emerges in several of the responses as well as in recent literature on documentary), documentary scholars must pursue a radically uncynical commitment to reflexivity. Redefining reflexivity as a form of "restoration work" (Eli Clare) or "wake work" (Christina Sharpe), Rangan traces the shared investments of documentary critique and contemporary analyses of disability and Black existence.*

Keywords: documentary, reflexivity, climate change, reality, critique

I am so grateful to Rey Chow, Lucas Hilderbrand, Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan, and Naomi Waltham-Smith for these responses, and to Ato Laud Quayson for proposing a forum on *Immediations* for the *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*. Because Ato and his colleagues at the journal are consummate professionals, they did not reveal the names of these respondents until the day I received a dossier of their writings in my inbox. Reading them, I was taken aback, as one often is upon experiencing an act of profound generosity. To hear my arguments processed and spoken back to me with such forceful intelligence has been disorienting and reorienting in equal and generative measure. Each of these responses is a gift of time and intellectual companionship, made even more meaningful by the fact that Rey, Lucas, Ragini, and Naomi are scholars I have read, thought with, and admired for years, in addition to being incredibly busy people with numerous demands on their time. Naomi aptly describes being called on to respond as an experience of being disarmed. Writing a tenure book often feels like the scholarly equivalent of arming oneself for battle. It is a relief to be able to put down my arms—what Ragini calls my "critical habits"—and to have a chance to scrutinize their affordances, their stakes, and yes, the obstacles to their longevity, from the distance that time affords.

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Except that time, as it turns out, doesn't always afford critical distance. In revisiting *Immediations* through these responses, I am taken aback in another sense: by time's capacity to narrow our range of response. I am not referring solely to the glacial pace of academic publishing (this forum will be published a full decade after I began writing *Immediations*) although that certainly shapes our profession's perpetual belatedness. I am referring to something I hear in both Lucas's and Ragini's responses, even if they don't name it in so many words: the neoliberalized, humanitarian world (or perhaps worldview?) that *Immediations* describes and fixes in its crosshairs no longer exists. It has been replaced, to quote the title of McKenzie Wark's latest book, by "something worse."[1] The humanitarian concern for the lives of imperiled others "out there" seems somehow quaint or at any rate less urgent today than it was ten or even five years ago. After all, we are living in times when the very conditions that support existence have been shown to be at risk. *This is no time to pontificate or overthink our methods*, we are told. *It is time to act. We must act NOW to save ourselves from ourselves. We cannot afford to squabble over minor differences. We can only defeat our common enemy—time—if we speak and act in unison.* I can understand why Lucas finds it soothing, even pleasurable, to hear David Attenborough speak these words on all of our behalves, for all of our sakes, for Planet Earth itself. "Dare we ask," Lucas writes, "what if the voice of empire is what will effectively change individual actions and consumption?"

I hope Ragini will forgive me for borrowing her simple but effective device of italicized text for ventriloquizing the larger, existential consensus that has become the de facto ground—the real—from which we feel we are able to pose theoretical questions. I sense that Lucas intends his question to be speculative, and not a rhetorical one whose answer is self-evident. (The answer is not self-evident. I don't think Lucas really believes that the kindly, rational voice of an elderly, White British man is the human microphone for our times. Nor, he admits, is "do it yourself" an adequate means for dismantling the neoliberal economic and political structures that have alternately devastated and weaponized any possibility of collective subjectivity.) No, what I hear Lucas asking is this: When existence itself is at stake, is it not worth the risk to question the critical habits shaping our scholarly consensus—or bolder yet, to reject that consensus? A similar question is on Ragini's lips: How do our critical habits circumscribe our readings, and indeed, the very questions we are able to ask?

We would be hard pressed to find a better articulation than this of the ethos driving the sound art collective Ultra-red, analyzed so exquisitely by Naomi. Ultra-red effectively reconfigures the "human microphone" used to great tactical effect during Occupy Wall Street. Instead of having persons gathered around the speaker repeat what the speaker says, thereby "amplifying" the speaker's voice without any hi-tech equipment, Ultra-red listens for, records, and amplifies those reactions that question the terms of the proposed conversation. This is a reflexive process, in the estranging, Brechtian sense that Rey has elsewhere defined as "a conscious form of staging … which materializes as an intermedial event"; an artificial device or prosthesis formalizes the process of estrangement whereby thought is made aware of its own activity and made explicit.[2] Ultra-red's

1 McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019).
2 Rey Chow, *Entanglements, or Transmedial Thinking about Capture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 15–19, esp. 18.

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process makes evident what is *not already* self-evident—what has not already been admitted into the domain of audibility and thus of consciousness—shifting the focus from consensus to dissensus, from voice to listening, from demand to response. In Naomi's words: "Organizing is not about coming together to formulate a demand or a matter of making audible a predetermined demand. Rather, listening is a process of inquiry through which a field of tension of needs, desires, and demands are organized."

Planet Earth and Ultra-red. Two very different models of documentary intervention, representing diametrically opposed tactics of reflexivity. One (Ultra-red) argues that what Rey calls "series 1" (a political message) can arise only if "series 2" (the medium) is recognized as part of the field of action it organizes. The other (*Planet Earth*) argues that the medium (series 2) is, to borrow Rey's words, "a mere conduit—at times a justifiably aggressive conduit—for preformed political attitudes (series 1), a means of mobilizing the viewing public by sensationalizing their perceptions." Which of the two do we need most now?

"The present," writes film scholar Erika Balsom, might be described as "a time when a sense of shared reality lies in ruins."[3] This quote appears in her review of *The Hottest August* (2019), described by filmmaker Brett Story as "a film about climate change, disguised as a portrait of collective anxiety." Balsom's anxiety about the present manifests as a concern about its representation as real; as she puts it in a much-cited and circulated essay, "the critique of documentary constructedness has run out of steam."[4] Any emancipatory or avant-garde potential that medial reflexivity once held, Balsom worries, has been decisively coopted by a political mainstream that dismisses verifiable facts as fabrications and passes off fabrications as fact. She announces, to counter this unholy merger of progressive documentary discourse and conservative post-truth discourse, a sentiment that would have sounded both untimely and unpopular a mere decade ago: "I want to live in the reality-based community. It is an imagined community founded in a practice of care for this most fragile of concepts."[5] Her assertion precedes a forceful defense of observational documentary, once derided (perhaps unfairly) for its naïve faith in objectivity, authenticity, and neutrality. Balsom finds, in the new observational cinema of partial vision and situated objectivity practiced by experimental filmmakers such as Eric Baudelaire, Kevin Jerome Everson, and affiliates of the Harvard Sensory Ethnography Lab, an ethic of care for reality as something "out there," however incomplete, uncertain, chaotic, and unmasterable.[6]

Balsom, who, like me, was trained by poststructuralists, is not alone in wanting to recuperate objects formerly regarded as bad (documentary realism) and abandon habits formerly regarded as good (reflexivity, aka the critique of constructedness presented as natural). Satirist Sacha Baron Cohen, famous for his tireless commitment to staying in character, recently delivered an uncharacteristically sincere keynote address for the Anti-Defamation League as his "least popular character, Sacha Baron Cohen," admitting

3 Erika Balsom, "Historical Present," *Artforum*, November 2019. Accessed November 23, 2019. https://www.artforum.com/print/201909/erika-balsom-on-brett-story-s-the-hottest-august-81060?fbclid=IwAR2mbs7niMu4XCJRHIMRWE-7g-wL-SEVssJ0kkwjyDHofj7cjDrt-2g_4Oo.

4 Erika Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community," *e-flux*, June 2017. Accessed November 23, 2019. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/.

5 Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community."

6 Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community."

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that he found this departure from his tried and tested, but perhaps no longer trusty, modus operandi to be "terrifying."[7] His speech—an impassioned plea for legislation imposing journalistic standards and sanctions on social media corporations trafficking in hate-speech, conspiracy, and lies—is a striking reprise of Balsom's conviction that the indiscernibility of progressive and conservative positions is contributing to a climate ripe for totalitarianism. Balsom's critique ("the notion that we best access reality through artifice is the new orthodoxy") is Baron Cohen's self-critique. For his jokes to work, Baron Cohen jokes (at this, someone laughs in recognition before the crowd erupts in applause), we need to be able to tell truth from lies and reality from artifice.

A thought experiment: let us affirm the religious undertone of these assertions and read them as confessional speech-acts. The media scholar or practitioner waylaid by poststructuralist stratagems recommits, this time without naiveté, to realism, to the "power of cinema as window, however dirty and distorting its panes may be" (Balsom, again).[8] I am struck by this phrase. Not only because Balsom so passionately defends what I described in *Immediations* as the humanitarian ethic in documentary, but also because I sense its attraction for Ragini and Lucas when they ask if this ethic is something we should want to get away from. Faced with eradication, humanity and reality seem precious, worthy of saving by any means, however dirty, however distorting. "The stakes," Lucas writes, "exceed the theoretical." "Dead bodies in the reeds though, or washed up on the shore. Is it any surprise that we want to go back in time to know them … ?" asks Ragini.

Documentary humanism, like confession, is a restorative discourse. It aspires to restore its referent to a prior, unsullied state, but the damage cannot be undone. "Talk to anyone who does restoration work," writes Eli Clare, "carpenters who rebuild 150-year-old neglected houses or conservation biologists who turn agribusiness cornfields back to tallgrass prairie—and they'll say it's a complex undertaking." He continues, in stunning prose worth reproducing:

> A fluid, responsive process, restoration requires digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present. And the end results rarely, if ever, match the original state. Restoring a tallgrass prairie means rebuilding a dynamic system that has been destroyed by the near extinction of bison, the presence of cattle, and generations of agribusiness farming and fire suppression. The goal isn't to re-create a static landscape somehow frozen in time, but rather to foster dynamic interdependencies, ranging from clods of dirt to towering thunderheads, tiny microbes to herds of bison.[9]

Clare has cerebral palsy. He likens the discourse of restoration to the ideology of cure, defined as "the restoration of health." Cure, like health, is a ruse. Cure locates damage within individual body-minds, as if each person were a closed ecosystem. And its vision

7 Anti-Defamation League, "Sacha Baron Cohen's Keynote Address at ADL's 2019 Never is Now Summit on Anti-Semitism and Hate," November 21, 2019. Accessed November 24, 2019. https://www.adl.org/news/article/sacha-baron-cohens-keynote-address-at-adls-2019-never-is-now-summit-on-anti-semitism?fbclid=IwAR0SKchgFNsaegOkxjj0ojJd1SBwbzgOdMCrqddUpJ3D4L1es6l8BtexoVw. The personae for which Baron Cohen is best known are gangsta rapper Ali G, journalist Borat, and fashion reporter Bruno.
8 Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community."
9 Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 14–15.

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of health doesn't originate from the lived experience of those whom it would wish to restore to some imagined wholeness. This vision comes from elsewhere, from "some definition of *normal* and *natural*."[10]

Substitute "humanity" for "health," and "documentary" for "cure," and Clare's critique of health becomes the critique I offered in *Immediations* of the redemption of disenfranchised humanity by participatory documentary interventions. I read our arguments as a parallel of documentary maker–scholar Toby Lee's critique of reality. This is Lee, writing about films that represent indigenous and transgender experience as a dysphoric encounter with *un*reality, as form and as concept:

> [The] notion of reality itself and the relatively untroubled relationship it assumes between experience and world is something that has historically been reserved for the privileged few. The alignment between inner and outer worlds that the notion of reality assumes, or perhaps demands, never exists outside unequal structures of power and domination … For many people throughout history—the marginalized, the minoritized, the colonized, the enslaved—the very structure of "reality" has more often been experienced as a tool of oppression than as a stabilizing ground, and is certainly not something that is available, or desirable, to return to.[11]

Representing such misalignments and working to remedy the conditions from which they arise are separate but inseparable processes. These twinned processes require what Thomas Keenan has called a "non-naïve commitment to a notion of the truth," certainly—a commitment that I resoundingly share with many of the colleagues I have cited.[12] But they also require what I described in *Immediations* as a "radically non-interventionist ethic of mediation," which I will now reframe as a *radically uncynical commitment to reflexivity*.[13] Reflexivity, understood this way, is not unlike restoration work. It is a fluid, responsive process, "digging into the past, stretching toward the future, working hard in the present." Christina Sharpe might call it wake work.[14] Even "timely" documentary representations are always belated, reactive, in the wake of bodies in the reeds or washed up on the shore. We will not find salvation in forms because films, like individual body-minds, are not closed ecosystems. Nor will we find it in any consensus regarding reality, humanity, or much less, the present. Only to a privileged few is climate change an extinction-level event, or totalitarianism an exception rather than the norm—this should fill us with optimism, not despair. Reflexivity without cynicism means taking neither mediation for granted nor consensus. Let us pay attention to the frictive encounters among forms and experience, to the dynamic interdependencies these encounters enable and disable, to the exclusions that form the ground on which we stand and from which we speak. We might then have a future in which we are capable of community.

10 Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 15.
11 Toby Lee, "The Radical Unreal: Fabulation, Fiction, and Fantasy in Speculative Documentary," Conference Presentation, Visible Evidence XXV Conference (Bloomington, IN, 2018).
12 Thomas Keenan, "Getting the Dead to Tell Me What Happened: Justice, Prosopopoeia, and Forensic Afterlives," in *Forensis: The Architecture of Public Truth* (Berlin: Sternberg and Forensic Architecture, 2014), 52.
13 Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 157.
14 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 18.

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