



Unlearning and the Art of Losing is No Easy Task: A Response To Isabelle Bishop's Review of *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution: Aesthetics, unlearning, and the Sensations of Struggle*

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I returned from a joyful social and educational trip abroad in August 2017 jet-lagged from the 13.5-hour time difference, the jam-packed weeklong itinerary, and the spontaneous requests my hosts were happy to accommodate. Friends, family, comrades, colleagues, and media outlets were interested to hear about my time away. They reacted to my accounts in various ways, from enthusiasm and surprise to skepticism and even complete disbelief. Eight years later, Isabelle Bishop's thoughtful review of *Teaching the Actuality of Revolution* (Ford 2023) has me thinking and feeling in productive and new ways about these points of contact, particularly the dismissals of my accounts. The opportunity to respond to her review affords us the opportunity to do so.

Before beginning, however, I want to highlight Bishop's observation that the book "does not provide many tangible examples of his pedagogies in practice." I appreciate how she views this not as a deficit but as an attribute that reinforces "the importance of the historical conjuncture in which these pedagogical practices are taken up." Indeed, what I found most helpful in Bishop's reading are the ways she takes some of the pedagogical practices in new directions and wields them against the forces she finds determinant at this moment. For example, she takes the two mentions of taste in the book and briefly opens up avenues for theorizing the "gustatory" aspects of the sensations of struggle. For her, the struggle is against the "fascist" assault on education and universities specifically. Her riffs that open new explorations are what I want the educational forms developed to serve as: raw materials for expanding our collective imaginary and openness to the actuality of revolution, both as an accomplished fact and as an act to be accomplished. That said, I hope she forgives me for harping on a concrete example in my response, but it is of an experience in the actuality of revolution that heightens my senses to the difficulty of unlearning capital's perceptual apparatus.

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Just days after former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced the U.S. would prohibit its citizens from traveling to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), I landed in Pyongyang along with the delegation of people traveling on U.S. passports I had organized with my dear friend, Professor Kiyul Chung. Fortunately, our trip concluded before September 1, 2017, when the travel ban went into effect (unfortunately, the U.S. state has renewed this travel ban each of the eight years since then). I traveled to the southern part of the peninsula and spent time with DPRK citizens in Japan the year before and had some knowledge about the history and politics involved, yet I was still surprised to see, hear, feel, smell, and yes, even taste how deeply the ideological and perceptual regime of U.S. capital (which is inseparable from white supremacy and national chauvinism) structured my thinking and sensing. The encounters that I remember most are those that most radically diverged from similar experiences in the "land of the free" (where I am not free to visit my friends in the DPRK again).

These encounters didn't structure my recollections of the trip mentioned above, however, as my accounts were generally linear and chronological. We boarded the plane in Beijing—all at the same time, without military or first-class passengers getting privileges—and landed in Pyongyang a few hours later, where we entered the country successfully after an easy entrance process where we were only asked if we had any pornography or bibles with us. We went out to eat at an American-themed restaurant, as our friends thought we would be excited for the familiar taste of Coca-Cola. I was seated across from two college students who asked question after question about the U.S. They were particularly interested in whether or not sexism (specifically sexual assaults on college campuses) and racism (specifically racist violence) were social problems that were actually as serious as they had read. "Oh, it's far worse than that," my friend John and I replied. I wish we could have answered differently, but what sticks out here is the students' open-mindedness and healthy curiosity about the veracity of their knowledge obtained in the "hermit kingdom."

Speaking of taste, a few days into the trip I asked to stop by a pharmacy to pick up some Pepto-Bismol to help settle my stomach. To my dismay, my friends insisted I go to the Pyongyang Friendship Hospital. Somewhat stunned by what I thought was an overreaction, I resisted before relenting. Just two months earlier, a white U.S. student who was arrested for trying to steal and smuggle a cultural artifact from the oppressed nation, returned from the DPRK with an illness and, shortly afterwards, died. This incident triggered another round of U.S. threats to destroy the DPRK, which it did between 1950 and 53. In fact, I was eating in a restaurant when Trump threatened to bomb my friends and me. Kiyul explained that the country could not risk another U.S. citizen returning home with any kind of illness.

I wanted to hurry the process along, as I was eager to return to the itinerary. "We have a moral obligation to fulfill. You cannot leave until we are certain you are in good health," the doctor said to me. We had some fun during the hours I spent there, with my doctor joking about my "weak American stomach." Walking outside the hospital—without passing any receptionist, handing over any insurance cards, money, identification, or anything other than walking together—we took a photograph at the request of my doctor and the two nurses who tended to me.

Gestating on Bishop's words, I find myself replaying the doctor's initial remarks in my head, trying to listen to them, thinking about them and the obstacles that still prevent me from fully hearing them. I find myself still struggling to imagine a place where homelessness, commodified healthcare and education, racist violence, and other forms of oppres-

sion are difficult to envisage; a country where students read news of patriarchal violence on campuses in disbelief. Could it be that my Korean doctor was right about the average American diet? That our gastrointestinal systems have difficulty digesting the reality of another perceptual ecology? That would explain why those who would trust me to care for their family members would doubt what I say about a place I have been and the experiences and people I encountered as I moved about freely and spontaneously in the northern half of the peninsula. I have tried to listen to those who rejected my narrative on the belief that an entire state and its 26 million people were forced to act in an orchestrated play for five U.S. citizens, but it is completely inaudible.

Bishop assesses the book “as accessible to professional academics, graduate students, and activists.” I hope this is true and believe such an evaluation is possible because Bishop operates on the assumption of revolution’s actuality or, in other words, because she operates on the *presumption* that revolutionary alternatives are possible even in the most oppressive formations. In my experience, particularly in the U.S., the book resonates less with the first and more with the latter two audiences; perhaps organizers and students today proceed in a similar fashion, remaining open to the radical fissures in the present that define political educational experiences. We are all in the midst of a world-historic transformation. We don’t need more critiques lamenting the loss of “democracy” or the “public sphere.” We need explanations for our exploitation, oppression, and dispossession, just as we need positive visions for alternative worlds. My wager is that to shape the interregnum in which we find ourselves, those of us in oppressor nations need to engage in what Simon Choi (2017) calls “the art of losing,” the point of which is to “share and create something that is otherwise impossible” (p. 247). If we’re willing to unlearn—especially to unlearn the anti-communist and white-supremacist dogma that there is no alternative to U.S. imperialism—we can glimpse the *existing and potential* revolutionary alternatives that are latent here and explicit there.

References

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