Shangri-La Democracy: Accessorizing the Neoliberal Subject

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Abstract

Bhutan—the tiny Himalayan country currently installing radical democracy—is sometimes mythologized and orientalized in popular media through utopian projections. Of special interest to westerners is the Bhutanese "Gross Happiness Index," which seems to found democracy on a unique set of assumptions about interdependence. But who projects? This essay explores the possibility of an evanescent neoliberal subject, and the utopian daydreams cast up by experiences of dislocation and broken promise in "Western" democratic capitalism. It relies on Fredric Jameson's foundational speculation that persistent cultural narratives and images constitute symbolic management and resolution of disjunctive lived experience. Rather than presenting a univocal thesis, the essay offers a braid of related theses or blink apercus; rather than offering a thick, ethnographic catalogue of representations, it investigates a single National Geographic article, treating that article as emblematic rather than representative.

> "All subjectivity suspected of not being democratic is deemed pathological."
>
> —Alain Badiou

On May 29, 2008, The *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* both opened their world news sections with an identical seductive headline: "The Last King of Nepal." Both stories covered the abolition of Nepal's monarchy by its newly elected assembly. Meanwhile, Nepal's own National News Agency titled its May 29 news brief with the much less fanciful "Proposal on Federal Democratic Republic Approved." This triad of synonymy and juxtaposition is purely anecdotal, and I would not want to over-read its signification; however, it does suggest the familiar romanticization of "East" by "West" claimed by Edward Said and the strain of post-colonialism following *Orientalism*. Bracketing the longstanding debates over Said's historical method (not to mention Indian critic Aijaz Ahmad's scorching reproach of Said's complicity with High Humanism), I want to begin with the argument that Western imaginations seek compensatory renewals of their own preoccupations in imagined Others. Said's basic claim has been more recently rearticulated by scholars like Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Brett Neilson, both of whom have moved and narrowed the focus in order analyze Tibet and Tibet-in-Exile, still represented within the potent mythography of Shangri-la. Lopez especially, in *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, has examined extensively how western scholars and popular media alike have tended to project *lack* onto a romanticized Tibet, which manages that lack through magical geography that is accessible yet outside of Western spacetime, and through "spiritual" history that retains the pure origins lost in our consumer culture.

But another Himalayan Kingdom—the tiny, landlocked, never-colonized, recently democratized Bhutan—has received little attention from Humanities scholars and critical theorists. This is surprising, for two reasons. First, in the Humanities there has been an abundance of theoretical scholarship on failed, incomplete or impossible democracy in recent years, much from some heavyweights: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; Slavoj Žižek's *Living in the End Times*; Jacques Derrida's *Rogues*; Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis*; Henry Giroux's redux *Against the Terror of Neoliberalism*; even Cornel West's *Democracy Matters*. The list goes on. Second, Bhutan is currently attempting to install a radically unique version of democracy—not unlike those imagined in Theory—the centerpiece of which is the Gross National Happiness Index (GNH). The GNH must seem baffling and enticing to the western democrat and hoary French Maoist alike. It is officially inspired by Himalayan Buddhism, and the specific ontology of interdependence entailed by Bhutan's version of Mahayana Buddhism. More importantly, as advertised by social science scholars and by Bhutan itself, the GNH invokes the fully Westernized, "contemporary, world-affirming view of interdependence" described by David McMahan in *The Making of Bhuddist Modernism*: it presents interdependence as beautiful, not "dreadful" or samsaric (182).

The GNH aims to enshrine a full, working reconciliation of four pillars that, in the West, are often irreconcilable: environmental preservation, cultural promotion, economic development and good governance. It folds competing logics into itself, dialectically. Thus, as a foundational policy, the GNH surely manifests what are deep wishes embodied in Western democracy gone wrong, and resists what has often been sloganeered as our toxic "Enlightenment" heritage. The GNH expresses what is often theorized on campus: that democracy cannot work when enmeshed with a full-force neoliberalism that treats everything in the world as commoditized resource and aims to penetrate every nook of experience with market logic.

A brief demarcation is necessary here, since the term "neoliberalism" is disputed—disingenuously in my opinion—by those who believe in its reality most fully. "Hypercapitalism" is one evocative synonym, described by Cornel West simply as "saturation of market forces" and "market morality that undermines a sense of meaning and larger purpose" (27). Other loose synonyms include liquid modernity, Hurrah Capitalism, Turbo Capitalism and Fredric Jameson's "cultural logic of late capitalism." But among the many depictions of toxic neoliberalism one can find in academe, I find the most elegant and contentious definition comes from radical geographer David Harvey, who claims that our democratic capitalist moment operates through "accumulation by disposession" (199), in which the "financialization of everything" (33) is literally maintained through financial crises (188). Most importantly for subjectivity, the "realm of freedom shrinks before the awful logic and hollow intensity of market involvements" (185). I take Harvey's aggressive version seriously, despite its risky anticipation of other subjectivities, and its invitation for dismissal ("Awful Logic? *Really*? Come now you *Beaujolais* Bolshevik!") A perfect example of the risk is Stanley Fish's mocking public essay, "Neoliberalism and Higher Education," blogged for the *New York Times*. Nonetheless, I take Fish's disdain as a boast of entitlement, while Harvey's account informs all my musings here on subjectivity, Bhutanese democracy and projected myths.

The reality of Bhutan's democratic transition is much messier than the myth, predictably, filled with ethnic conflicts and serious challenges to coherent national identity. But despite the lack of critical attention to these contradictions by the Humanities, the country has in the past few years been represented fairly widely in popular culture, in multiple newspaper articles, travel narratives, holiday guides and, for my trip here, in the March 2008 issue of *National Geographic*. Those representations have been largely romanticized, in a straightforward way. Bhutan is celebrated as ancient, isolated, high, remote and Buddhist, with a tantalizing pre-modern history little known compared to Tibet or Nepal. Its last King, as his final project, put himself and his monarchy out of business, despite the objections of the majority Drukpa population. An implicit popular narrative emerges: here is a working Shangri-La, discovered at last, and the "Buddhist" solution to all that has gone wrong with our reified, individualistic, instrumentalist, rationalized, greed-fueled, commodity fetishized, consumption-driven Western attempts to live in freedom.

How to critique this knotty phenomenon? Said's original designation of the imaginary Orient points to contradiction: simultaneously hyper-spiritualized and barbaric, stable and chaotic, the "East" stands in relation to Western democracy as both therapeutic possibility and devalued antimony. In Said's early view, the professional Orientalist begins his project with overestimation and ends with disgust, in a kind of maturing racism (149 ff). But what if we experimentally relaxed the stark opposition between celebration and derogation, to consider Orientalist acts of imagination in popular culture as toxic tinged with therapeutic? This move would first require the identification of two utopian gestures: the authorized projection that recaptures and dissipates collective energies, and the authentic resistant impulse filled with potential for mobilized collective energies. Set in opposition, these two utopias might be designated as almost pointless negations of each other, while a negation of the negation—some form of genuine utopia already latent within the dominant neoliberal apparatus—might be considered a cloudy, but real, possibility.

But before considering the symbolization of a democratized Shangri-La, it is necessary to explore the very notion of a neoliberalized subject. Such a subject might sense, dimly, the fissures and dislocations of hyper-capitalism, and of her own participations, as they are swept into and transmuted within quotidian experience. For such a subject, utopian fantasies would be accessories at no additional price; they would function as projections in which therapeutic tropes whirl with toxic undercurrents. This notion of a neoliberalized subject will require a rehearsal of some of the actual and actualized disjunctions within democratic capitalism, and also a fairly extensive recovery of the well-worn proposition that some Selves in Western democracy feel, periodically, vague sensations of dissatisfaction.

On this view, lived experience is pocked with barely-conscious intimations of contradiction:

the haunting sense of un-kept promises, unkempt hopes, unrealized potentials, uninvited problems. This paper specifically explores the lived experience that hazily conflates Western democracy with the ghostly flux of global capitalism (or at least did so before the Crash of 2008 announced the return of the repressed). Second, I want to explore these democratic dissatisfactions as "shadows"—as what is present in the self but can only be imagined as absent, so that illusory Other folds back into Self. In Freudian terms still useful, this means that projection functions through condensation, idealization, displacement and substitution: shadows are projected and provisionally resolved through fleeting symbolic operations, in what Fredric Jameson has designated more generally as "utopian fancies" throughout his recent *Archeologies of the Future*.

Jameson is a most useful critic here: since the *Political Unconscious* he has refreshed and reoriented anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's speculation that persistent cultural narratives function as symbolic resolutions of lived contradiction. In order to turn this Jamesonian lense on a *National Geographic* article, I will provisionally treat Orientalist representations as magical realist texts, tucked in that slippery genre once characterized by Homi Bhabha as the "language of the emergent post-colonial world" (Introduction 7). This may seem an oddly detoured hermeneutical move, but the contours of magical realism offer the advantage of helping us grasp how contradictory and self-defeating utopian fancies of a therapeutic "Himalayan democracy" finally are, even as they retain traces of political potential and energy. Such representations function as simple negations, in the same way that "magic" negates "realism" in an impotent re-assertion of the very realist terms it supposedly resists, in the way that a magical East is also a symbolic maintenance of a rational West. But, as I will speculate at the conclusion, the representations also contain, as pure possibility, the negation of the negation. This third term might arise from the apparatuses of Western democracy itself, as a paradoxical efflorescence, and may yet serve as the finger pointing at the moon. And, as some Buddhists say, never mistake the finger for the moon.

It is almost a truism to claim that consumerism and the media help sustain consumption as a mode of subjectivity. But it is an important claim, to be made over and over. We know ourselves partly because our world is a marketplace of Others to be desired, shopped, price-compared, attenuated to their "features" and submitted to cost-benefit analyses. I want to stress here that, if this problematic is "ideological," then ideology must be seen less as clustered ideas and more as pulses of affect: gut feelings, fleeting images and physical twitches that rise up in response to disjunctions and contradictions that are unnamed, insoluble or—worst of all—explicit but re-routed paradoxically into the market swirl. Many of us feel a gap between the promises of market culture—satisfaction, fulfillment, connection—and the deeply embodied signals that those promises have not been kept: the fidgeting, the flitting attention, the road rage, the real-time thrust into the next sip of Starbucks, the next text-message, the compressed dread and relief that accompany each moment's end....

Those sips are partly sustained by popular narratives of freedom, which offer choice, yet tempt us through their very absence of coherent content. Of course we all desire freedom. But what exactly is it? Scott Wilson—who with Fred Botting coined the provocative "econopoiesis"—has argued that Western democracies not only enhance market forces, but themselves operate "according to economic processes and techniques of marketing and public relations" (561). On this view, democratic capitalism helps create vague desires that can neither be satisfied nor clearly identified, in a loop of consumption that de-spatializes our world. Enormous waste and excess are generated, in evanescent forms like frustration and rage, and in very real (but concealed) forms like poverty and abjection. As consuming subjects, we perpetually lose our reference points even as we anxiously project short-lived versions of them.

Freedom of choice, freedom of movement, freedom of preference—democracy and capitalism currently seem inextricable yet incompatible, married and divorced by great codes of freedom (either positive or negative, depending on how one interprets Isaiah Berlin's classic distinction). Elections can be imagined as temporary markets, markets as permanent elections. Politics deliver the goods; goods deliver the politics (a Che T-shirt, a Prius with a liberal bumper sticker, a distressed Eddie Van Halen replica guitar). At the same time, as so many have remarked, democracy and late capitalism have an obviously dysfunctional relationship. R.C. Longworth, *Chicago Tribune* economics correspondent and hardly a radical, summarizes: democracy aims for "the creation of a civilization based on fairness and equity," while "capitalism's priorities are inequality of return" (qtd. in Street).

The conflation is historically manifest in the "democratic peace" hypothesis, famously identified with Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, in which the free movement of capital and goods guarantees that democracies do not war with each other. But is that conflation inevitable? Neither Russia nor China has yet been democratized by global capitalism. We might consider that "choice" combined with efficient means of distribution sometimes creates less diversity (consider Internet social networks or texting language). If this process is even partly true, then we have a funhouse in which democratic capitalism turns its mandates inside-out precisely through its own technologies, evolved to serve those very mandates, which can now be understood only as absent causes from the past, residual ideologies from the present, and implosive slogans from the future. One felt contradiction here is freedom of choice manifesting as paralysis, at the ballot box or supermarket. In a delightful and depressing irony, this phenomenon has been widely reported as, variously, "choice paralysis," the "paradox of choice" or the "tyranny of choice." One can go to the Amazon *Books* site and dither over Oliver James' *Affluenza* or *The Selfish Capitalist* or Benjamin Barber's *Consumed* or *Jihad Vs. McWorld* or Barry Schwartz's *Paradox of Choice* or Maich and George's *The Ego Boom* or David Loy's *Money, Sex, War, Karma* or Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, which together demonstrate the very problematic they critique (this is not a derogation of any of them as individual analyses).

What are some other ways in which codes of freedom might generate lived experiences of disjunction and discomfort? If choice often equals disappointment, then it also carries the potential to trivialize itself through constant iteration. This is an ironic process, since it implies a narrative of choice that dims other possible modes of freedom, like classic Hegelian or Rousseauvian versions, which Bhabha updates as "freedom *from* humiliation, suffering, racism, class, or gender exclusion" ("Savant" 44). Economist, consultant and former ambassador Kimon Valaskakis refers to this process as "dumb democracy," whereby a surplus of ornamental choices combined with a lack of genuine alternatives weakens the closing system and generates "counterproductive results" (A13). Within a dumb democracy—to be sharply distinguished from a smart one—the expanding market of trivial choices hardly needs further elaboration. Think of the Octomom's reality show, or Obama lava lamps, ice cream and commemorative dinner plates. The obvious rejoinder is that choice and freedom are not necessarily synchronous, let alone synonymous. It is a compelling counter-argument. However, the very objection can also perform the problem it seeks to solve: we desire freedom, but are rarely sure of what it is; democracy is a great idea, but we are unsure if we have ever achieved it. The contradiction is only antagonized by attempts at definition and distinction, which highlight their own failures at resolution.

There is a whole catalog of similar felt contradictions, which exist as subjective possibilities within democratic capitalism, and which can only be mentioned here. One would be the simple loss of community and the reification of the individual, so fully theorized by the Frankfurt School and its inheritors, and increasingly analyzed by social researchers like epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson, who has studied how systemic inequities are bad for one's personal health (in *The Impact of Inequality* and other sources). Competition in capitalism becomes antagonism within democracy, resulting in a marketplace of competing voices, special interests and slivered constituencies. The market can never be a family and the village can never be a brand, though we are advised to invest in a future in which they are. And if one token of both capitalist venture and democratic perfectibilism is the metaphysics of meliorism, then it is a token that can no longer buy anything except itself. This point is demonstrated by a recent tension between Christopher Hitchens and Ann Coulter, in which Hitchens identifies Coulter's teleological commitments, and insists that we instead "shake our own innate belief in linear progression and consider the many recessions we have undergone and will undergo" (A13). Coulter, and others who are committed to incoherent mellennialist combinations of social and fiscal conservativism, will shop at their own fire sale.

But democratic capitalism hardly owns the patent on disjunctive lived experience. Voices that celebrate Bhutan's experiment often do so exactly by imagining toxic western democracies enmeshed with capitalist protocols, directly descended from some vague "European" grand narrative of "Enlightenment." They thus tend to uncritically validate not only the Bhutanese experiment, but the 1970's pro-democracy movement in Thailand, the democratic initiatives of Tibet-in-Exile, and the current situation in Nepal, all of which are better served by careful scrutiny and qualification. A more productive approach would be to see lived disjunctions as the subjective component to the "antagonistic pleiotropy" inherent in all evolving systems. I borrow this term from studies of senescence—where it describes how single genes can express in both adaptive and maladaptive phenotypic traits—and used metaphorically to indicate how any context-sensitive feature can promote welfare in one situation and pathology in another.

Antagonistic plieotropy, then, bears a resemblance to Paul Virilio's notion of the *integral accident*, which he famously illustrates: "to invent the sailing ship or steamer is *to invent the shipwreck*" (10). The spooky sense that innovation is always pregnant with its own catastrophes is manifest in the "panicky insecurity felt by whole populations" (39), a rather grand statement, but useful nonetheless in its correlation of subjectivity and the ontology of complexity. Lorraine Code has recently offered a third rich model to explain this process, as she takes up the project of feminist epistemology: "Ecosystems—both metaphorical and literal—are as cruel as they are kind, as unpredictable and overwhelming as they are orderly and nurturant, as unsentimentally destructive of their less viable members as they are cooperative and mutually sustaining..." (6). So what kind of ecosystem is democratic capitalism? Lived experiences of disjunction must arise from the actual materiality of the situation. As C. Robert Mesle neatly puts it, "I push and the world pushes back" (60). The world also pushes back at itself, in consequences that cannot be predicted and do not reflect their original constitution, an ambiguous process that can be noted or experienced by the subject who arises from, interacts with and feeds back into that world.

For the same reasons, antagonistic pleiotropy can only be described after the fact. Take the public return of violent racism in democratizing countries formerly of the Soviet bloc. Or the Shia Family Law signed by president Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, possibly in an accidental misreading, but certainly in line with the protocols of the majority vote. Or the 2008 election of Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the Maoist former guerrillas in Nepal, to the embarrassment of the U.S. embassy and dismay of many committed to the exportation of democracy. Take the second Bush administration, determined to fight expensive wars *and* cut taxes, then compelled to borrow from the Chinese, by many accounts the very model of systemic human rights abuse that exported democracy is seen to cure. Or consider the freedom of movement manifest in the immigration policies of Western European countries, now anxious over large blocs of non-Europeans who supposedly will not integrate.

None of these examples would surprise or offend the practitioner of *realpolitik*. (For that matter, none of these examples are criticisms of democracy *per se*.) But *accidents* are a little more distressing to those committed to unfettered markets, perpetually busy concocting apologetics for how uncontrolled competition leads to monopolized control, or how "nanny state" is a valid insult but not "corporate welfare," or how neoliberal policies have resulted in catastrophic misallocation of housing resources but stalled pharmaceutical invention. Hot money, complex investment bundles, business channels looped into the the 24-hour news cycle—our official economies seem more volatile by the hour. Michael Heller, an expert in real-estate law, argues that private property has slowly evolved into a free-market liability, so that ownership and innovation are now antagonistic (in Allemang). Deepa Narayan, senior advisor at the World Bank, makes the fascinating case that official capitalist economies— entangled with globalization—have generated circumstances whereby the principle paths out of poverty now run through unofficial "grey" economies (see *Moving Out of Poverty* for a thorough analysis from Narayan and her team of analysts).

Darin Barney, who studies network technology, notes that "the same liberty that gives us free and open-source software delivers hackers, viruses, worms, privacy invasion, spam and illegal downloading," and argues that the very generativity that produces open systems also creates their vulnerability to "fatal instability" (D3). For the unqualified neoliberal, the problem is not so much political error as ontological miscalculation. Antagonistic Pleiotropy is not simply irony or blowback or the chickens coming home to roost, but one explanation that admits to complex nonlinear systems at work, evolving and interacting with other systems. Lived experience of disjunction, then, can be theorized as an evolving contradiction: the promise of freedom grows to compromise the promise of control. Control offers boundaries and borders, destinations and maps, investments and homes. Freedom—however characterized—takes them away.

Already in the early nineties, Nick Land proposed that hyper-capitalism is "always on the move towards a terminal nonspace" (480), which must to some extent be an integral accident, given traditional capitalist orientations toward colonization, expansion and display (suburbanization, the discovery of untapped markets, the straightforward advertising of real products). But now the instantaneity of communication, proliferation of simulation, bewildering social spaces, progressive miniaturization of technology, virtuality of economics, speculative bubbles, creation of desires and markets—everything theorized by Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, Virilio and others—have surely left their marks on our subjectivities. So one more felt disjunction, alive in the bones, would be the promise of unlimited satisfaction compromised by technologies and procedures operating at the limits of perception and cognition.

To offer the same point as a fanciful provocation: we sometimes ride within the de-territorializing machines of democratic capitalism, which denude the landscape, un-make themselves, and leave us few myths to live by.

The Himalayas offer both mythical territory and alternate democracy, the raw materials for fanciful projections and therapeutic counterpoint. A potent myth would tell of democracies that finally reconcile Self and Others, in re-territorialized landscapes that paradoxically precede and transcend our own. Travel writer Pico Iyer, discussing Tibet-in-exile, imagines that "Buddhist democracy" might offer means to integrate "independent choices within an interdependent network" (233). The *OpenDemocracy* website has carried, as its banner, the slogan "the reality of the 21st century is that the processes of independence and interdependence are one and the same." Ethicist David R. Loy imagines, in *Money, War, Sex, Karma*, a reformed capitalist democracy that is more "dharmic" in its institutionalization of "generosity and compassion, grounded in a wisdom that realizes our interconnectedness" (140). All these beautiful wishes are utopian; we would be right to admire them, but also to wonder if such impulses, explicit and grand or tacit and modest, will always invite accidents. Will their strategies to exclude what they cannot tolerate—namely, their own failure—always return to haunt them? Code, anticipating the antagonistic pleiotropy of her own epistemology, submits that "ecological thinking is as available for feeding self-serving romantic fantasies as for inspiring socially responsible transformations" (6). We might wonder if the two are always mutually exclusive. We might wonder, along with Brooks Larmer in *National Geographic*, whether Bhutan can "join the modern world without losing its soul" (124).

Larmer's article, "Bhutan's Enlightened Experiment," is organized around a series of juxtapositions, as are some of Lynsey Addario's accompanying photographs. At a basic level of reception, the technique is simply a reliable hook. I do not want to underestimate how narrative tensions simply appeal to the human brain as it is wired for story. But given the scope of this essay, my question here is not "why juxtapositions?" but "why *these* juxtapositions?"

Many of the photographs are straightforward idylls or depictions of isolation, rural simplicity and religious symbol. But one striking picture shows three monks in traditional garb, in their traditional domicile, with a coke machine as the focal point. This same trope begins the essay, which first describes a context of ceremonial trumpets, Buddhist pilgrims, sunlit mountains, robed peasants, and "ancient mysticism" (128), then introduces the blare of Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie," piped from a "sleek white Macintosh," and the spectacle of a young boy break-dancing in red Nikes and Adidas sweats (130). The prose itself channels a bit of the *frisson* of William Gibson's early cyberpunk, which explored the ironies of extreme market logic: romantic desires are always supersaturated with brand-name poetry, producing narratives that both parody and honour their "mystical" hopes, through ironic gestures that display and mimic the protocols of late capitalism. In "Bhutan's Enlightened Experiment" something similar is happening, as the knick-knacks of globalization are strung like ironic prayer flags throughout a phantasmagoria of "ancient" and "remote" geography. Or, in a miniaturization, photos of Bhutanese monarchs are described in their proximity to "a mural of another king, Elvis Presley" (148).

The trope continues throughout, as the author wonders how this ancient, mesmeric, isolated, forested, sacred land at the roof of the world—the "last Shangri-la" (130)—will respond to a king who plays basketball and is most interested in putting himself out of a job, or to the introduction of television, gangsta rap, electricity, fashion, Game Boys, MTV, drugs, karaoke, nightclubs, and golf. Indeed, Bhutanese golf courses seem of particular interest in western media. On offer is the very incarnation of suburban leisure unfolded decoratively atop the peaks of this most un-suburban of ancient kingdoms. Golf courses themselves are geographies of contradiction, greeneries embedded in suburbia, bonsai natures literally manicured through artifice and death. The vision of golf in Shangri-la is delicious and repulsive, invitation and violation, yet perhaps at its core a visceral bid to resolve felt contradictions that can be articulated, consciously, only in the starkest terms.

Larmer has no difficulty presenting those stark terms. His descriptions of the tensions in Bhutan's attempt to "balance tradition and modernity" (139-40) are clear, as are his citations of Bhutanese citizens who recognize the same tensions. How to reconcile tradition and development? How to leap from the middle ages to the 21st century? How to transition from monarchy to democracy? How to ameliorate poverty without exploiting natural resources? How to maintain collective identity under pressures of globalization, monoculturation and "one of the world's most intractable refugee crises" (141)? (This last is a legacy of Bhutan's attempt to assimilate its Nepali immigrants, and an example of the inevitable *accidents* in systems where difference and unity create friction.)

On this level, at least, Jameson's political unconscious is *conscious*, in that the real, lived contradictions that manifest in subjectivity may cry out for symbolic resolution, but are not yet distorted by symbolic resolutions. At the same time, Jameson would be right to suspect that Larmer's article also functions as a compensatory text, located in that blind zone that hints at realms of freedom outside the horizons of the political and historical.

The article's juxtapositions, then, can also be productively read as fields of tension between the "realistic" problems of western democracy and the "magical" solutions of Himalayan democracy. Those fields, in turn, instantiate the utopian fancies of subjects living the *accidents* of democratic capitalism. At a fundamental level, the fields organize a tensive union between emblems of progress and symbols of weak nostalgia, and project a set of atavistic hopes where magical solutions from the past re-appear to solve the riddles of the present. Stated another way, lived disjunctions are temporarily relieved through a paradoxical set of tropes whereby democracy advances backwards, in a simultaneous affirmation and displacement of perfectibilism. Master narratives of progress remain in some virtual form, but are taken out of themselves and reenacted within Orientalized narratives of Buddhist geography. That geography is Shangri-la, which cannot be located in time or space, yet somehow locates *us* in a therapeutic cocoon untouched by the long shadows of globalization. If lived experiences of disjunction include dissatisfaction, loss of connection with world and community, and anxiety over freedom, then a Buddhist geography is an ideal site for projection, since, as we are told by the plethora of western Buddhist handbooks, Buddhism is all about recognizing our inherent freedom and ameliorating *dukkha* through re-connection and the falling away of delusion. The issue here is not what the various Buddhist traditions are "really about." As Lopez describes in *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Orientalizing romances take the form of projections when the West "perceives some lack within itself" and fantasizes that the answer "is to be found somewhere in the East" (6).

Lopez catalogues why a fantastical Himalayan terrain is ideal for these projections. First, the therapeutic geography must be outside of Western, market-saturated, space. In the West, "Tibet" manifests as an endless array of debased knick-knacks for sale, everything from *mani* stones to prayer-wheel earrings (129). The Other, imported to our own geography, will only recapitulate and exacerbate the very tensions we are trying to heal through projection. Second, the therapeutic geography must be located in the deep past, so ancient it is perhaps outside of time, yet somehow available to the present. Third, the therapeutic geography needs to embody the impossible search for pure origins. What we perceive today, almost *anywhere*, is a long history of "contamination and degeneration" (36). What we desire is that ancient kingdom where the "universal message" of healing has been most perfectly preserved (79). One manifestation of that universal message is the imaginary "Buddhist" democracy that somehow institutionalizes open awareness, dissolution of boundaries and engagement with a totality that cannot be commodified or reified into any symbolic or commercial order: a Shangri-la that heals limits, boundaries, closures, strictures, and lapses of freedom, but also is enclosed and demarcated from toxic geographies below and around it. That democracy would preferably be, at the same time, Lopez's paradoxical kingdom: a high forested geography of both austerity and plenitude, one that has always denied proliferating banality and terminal nonspace, and one that escapes the anxieties generated by constant antagonistic pleiotropy.

The persistent iterations in Larmer's article reinforce how high, old, isolated, exclusive and pure Bhutan continues to be: "ancient temples perched high on mist-shrouded cliffs; sacred, unconquered peaks rising above pristine rivers and forests" (130). It is the last country on earth to get television (131); its capital city is likely the only one on earth lacking a traffic light (128); it has many spaces "beyond the reach of roads and electricity" (132). In a preliminary semiotic reading, one would designate the binaries under various categories. The mythical geography would be organized through high/low, hidden/revealed, remote/accessible, the more vaporous democracy through secular/religious, individual/collective, exposed/protected. Shangri-la, of course, would need in every case to be both at once; there would be no dominant signifiers, indeed, no structural difference.

As to Bhutan's spatiality, note how the article's subtitle marks the country as the "tiny Buddhist kingdom," differentiating itself from the expansive globalized world. The article constantly evokes Bhutan's borders or limits, both horizontally and vertically. It is distinct from other Himalayan kingdoms that have been absorbed into world geography; its terrain remains highly forested. At the same time, like other vanished kingdoms at the roof of the world, it is suspended above the traffic and commerce of "our" world, which by its very horizontality and contiguity has allowed the porous movement of markets, hot money and populations. Bhutan presents an open possibility inside and outside of globality: to exist as therapeutic geography its borders are necessarily sealed and open at the same time. Time itself functions in a similar way.

Democratic Bhutan must be simultaneously ancient and progressive, oriental and global, Orientalized and globalizing. The fancy finally projects in a circular way: the utopian impulse seizes the future by letting go of the present and falling into a mythical past that returns us to a mythical future. How indeed can Bhutan survive its transition? The question is practical for the Bhutanese. But for the Western subject—and for the Western critic, namely me—the question is a dialectic of hope and despair, cycling within a symbolic realm that is itself imaginary in its constitution as separate from the material world that enables and constrains it.

It might be tempting to argue that utopian fancies of the type discussed here are literally indexes of untapped political energy and desire, waiting for mobilization. This gesture would follow Old Time critical theorists Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse, especially Bloch's strange three-part masterpiece, *Principle of Hope*, which sees the promise of genuine utopia everywhere, even in advertising. Brett Neilson has recently offered an updated version of this position, in which symbolic Shangri-La daydreams resist globalization *only* because an actualized utopian vision is indefinitely postponed (110). This logic will be familiar to readers of late poststructuralism: it suggests that efficacy and ontological status exist precisely because of the vacancies or deferrals that enable them. It continues to be a compelling and provocative move, and I am sympathetic to it when applied to gender, law and any theory of subjectivity. But I also continue to wonder if the invocation (not the truth) of *différance* sometimes snags on itself and provisionally stabilizes as a simple ideology of resignation. If validations of emergent "Buddhist" democracy are inherently utopian fancy, in that they reintroduce Bhutan as one more fetish, then, contra Neilson's sophisticated argument, it is likely that utopian fancies still reinscribe the neoliberal terms they seek to transcend. As Jameson warns in *Archaeologies*, fancies usually fold back on themselves, often as "perpetual reversion of difference and otherness into the same," so that even the most radical imaginings turn out as "little more than projections of our own social moment" (211).

By formally characterizing democratic fancies as Magical Realist, we can also formally indicate their limits, from the inside, conceding always the possibility for catastrophic misrepresentation. The potential combinations of "magic" and "realism" in such fancies are locked within two-dimensional binary sets, because they remain in one of two forms: as simple contraries of democracy, or as attempts to ameliorate or reverse what is imagined as already present in democracy. In either case, the operation is negation. And, as Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly insisted, in book after book, negation is often the reintroduction of the very terms it attempts to resist or cancel. Žižek is a useful provocateur here: as philosopher Peter Dews has noted, Žižek came of intellectual age in the former Yugoslavia, where "self-managing socialism" was explicitly based on the renunciation of administrative manipulation and control, all the while engaging in them, so that bureaucratic oppression was enabled by its own seeming absence. As Dews puts it, social critique was thus preempted "by the opacity of a system based on the ideal of the transparency of a democratic and social control of production" (237).

Democracy cannot heal itself through appeals to un-democracy, imagined temporally as ancient history, forgotten realm, or "Buddhist" logic; in every case, what is straightforwardly reinstated is the ideology of the freely consuming individual. The constellations of global capitalism and liberal democracy cannot heal their bewildering and implosive spaces through imaginary appeals to un-postmodern space, imagined as magic kingdom, high plateau, grand geography, or sky-gazing; in each case, what is reinstated is the impulse to *think* space, to map from the outside, to stand atop the mountain distinguishing map from territory. The split between Self and Other that actuates, instantiates and fuels our notions of limited resource, competing interest, individual freedom, market freedom and consumption cannot be healed through a projection of Self onto Other, a deeper splitting that can only reinforce itself. Following N. Katherine Hayles' recent work on intermediation, we see that "digital," binaristic modes of analysis can only be made to work when combined with "analogue" ones, so that fine error control is always integrated with and mediated by the "complexity of continuous variation" (100). In other words, we must consider process and emergence in a manner that was perhaps unthinkable during the heyday of high theory, and live with our own, inevitable, critical *accidents*.

A more politically potent utopia might then attempt a negation of the negation, while realizing that such a move is always provisional. It might seek to imagine how the seeds of opposition to a toxic democracy are already present—paradoxically, as traces of untransformed potential—within failed democratic capitalism itself. That would mean imagining from within our hyper-capitalist moment, not from some mountain-top—as Jameson would have it, seeking the "surcharge of multiple or parcellated" subject positions" (214) which could be neither Self nor Other, exactly, nor a superposition of both.

But would it mean the complete abandonment of the Himalayan fancy? It is tempting to agree with Jameson's challenging proposition, in *Archeologies*, that we might supercharge the tension between our "impotent" fancies and our nostalgia for potent utopian modes as multiplicity itself. Far from the simple negation of Orientalism and magical realism, this would mean the complex proliferation of each, and a bleeding out of their toxicities in the very refusal to offer a temporal scene in which "democracy" perfects itself or is replaced with utopia. But I would add a further possibility, in that such a refusal would incarnate its own acceptances, within lived experience: it would pinch the places where we feel exactly those toxicities we can never be freed of. It would indeed be a kind of *tantra*, if by "tantra" we mean the emancipatory and therapeutic use of the very actions and practices that also enslave and bind the delusional Self who continually fractures the world. Jameson implies an exacerbation of the very failure to temporalize or spatialize the relationships between Self and Other, almost a transfiguration of Virilio's pessimism (and indeed, his own), set to a new task. That daunting task is to imagine genuine democracy without projecting democratic fancies or resigning to deferral: to return, over and over, painfully, to genuine recognitions of what we can share with others and what we cannot.

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