

Interrupting Ethnographic Spectacles In Eric Valli's *Himalaya*

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Learning from Below

"Learning from below" is Gayatri Spivak's mantra for planetary justice,¹ and it is, ironically, also the motto of Eric Valli's adventures in the Himalayas. In the introduction to *Himalaya*, a text composed to introduce and promote Valli's widely acclaimed film on the Dolpo-pas of Nepal, he very emotionally remarks that the film is an outcome of his friendship with the principal actors/characters in the film. He continues:

It was important to me to catch the essence of this world [which he had already described as a genuine hidden country, where the heart of an intact Tibet continues to beat] that, on the outside, is so very different from ours. My work as director therefore involved letting my characters express themselves in their own way. I had to be as transparent as possible; I had to make myself disappear before the power and wealth of their own lives. I was telling their stories; they were the teachers, I was their student. (8-9)

This artful staging of self-disappearance on the part of the director is exactly what renders his subject matter, in this case the Dolpo-pas, completely transparent as if representation were contiguous with its referent. Once the director assumes this position as transparent medium, he not only takes on the role of an objectivist, but by the same token, he also escapes bearing responsibility for what or whom he depicts. My essay on Eric Valli's work about "Nepal," especially his feature film *Himalaya*—which was nominated for an Academy Award in 2000 for Best Foreign Language Film—is guided by a critical impulse that interrogates ethnography's attempts to create exotic spectacles out of its subject matter at the expense of history. I contend that in spite of Valli's commendable efforts to bring marginal landscapes and cultures to the

¹ The notion of "Learning from below" traverses Spivak's writing, from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to *Death of a Discipline*. In her "Afterword" to Devi's *Imaginary Maps*, for example, Spivak juxtaposes "learning from below" and the idea of confining the tribals to mere spectatorship (200). In *Death of a Discipline* she proposes a new project of Comparative Literature that takes into account the pluralization of languages in the "areas" of Asia and Africa, and makes it possible to "think our way into considerations of subalternity" and "perhaps take a step, learning to learn from below, toward imagining planetarity" (100).

forefront of national and international media,² his portrayal of the Dolpo-pas in the movie remains subjected, perhaps unwittingly, to the violence of an orientalist anthropology.³

This is not to make light of Eric Valli's love for Nepal in general and the Dolpo region in particular.⁴ One can safely argue that he is for Nepal what Robert J. Flaherty was to Quebec or Samoa. Fatima Tobing Rony, in her book *The Third Eye*, talks about Flaherty's fame as an ethnographic filmmaker. Rony argues that *Nanook*, Flaherty's documentary on the Inuit, not only created a sort of "nanookmania," but there is also "an aura around the Flaherty name: he is praised as the father of documentary and ethnographic cinema, as a great storyteller and humanitarian" (99). This comparison is deliberate, for I will be coming back not only to Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and *Moana* in order to compare and contrast them with Valli's *Himalaya*, but I will also look at the work done in the Pacific Islander studies that critically examines Flaherty's cinematography in relation to its problematic representation of the native Other.

In an interview for a vernacular daily in Nepal, Valli recalls his meeting with the late King Birendra, during which, according to Valli, the king told him, "You made me discover my own country."⁵ Valli not only made the King "discover" his own country—which in itself reveals what Rey Chow calls "primitive passion" both in the east and the west,⁶ cautioning us against any simplistic binary view of east and west when

² Bhimsen Thapaliya, in an English Daily in Nepal, writes that Eric Valli "captured and showed the world" the magical "wonder of the Nepalese wilderness"; in other words, Valli is also tacitly being compared to Columbus, who "discovered" the wilderness of America.

³ *Himalaya*'s Oscar nomination reveals an interesting pattern of selecting only certain types of films for the "Best Foreign Language" category. For example, I am grateful to Amrita Ghosh, who pointed out to me that *Born into Brothels*, which won for best documentary film in 2005, and which claimed to represent the traumatic lives of children born in brothels in Calcutta, was found by many viewers and critics to be flawed in its details and neglectful of the work done by Calcutta activists and social workers.

⁴ The history and significance of the Western ethnographer or film-maker as a friend of the natives is still to be written, but it is a fact that the concept of friendship in anthropology, together with the practice of exchanging gifts in the field, is associated with a precarious bond that more often than not verges or culminates on the friend "saving" (a concept I am borrowing from Gayatri Spivak's much debated "Can the Subaltern Speak?") the natives. Thus the "love" of an anthropologist is never free from the historical-political facts of colonialism and hegemony. One of the chapters in Trinh T. Minha's *Woman, Native, Other* has an epigraph from Barbara San Severina, in which a faculty member asks, "why are you in Anthropology?" and the answer is "because it's so much easier to love all of Mankind than one solitary man" (47).

⁵ See Devendra Bhattarai's "Valley ma Valli" ("Valli in [Kathmandu] Valley") in *Kantipur Dainik* 12/31/2005.

⁶ In her book *Primitive Passions*, Chow examines the dialectic of seeing in cinema that implicates both the West and China; one relies on primitive passions to predicate modernity and the other detests visuality in order to promote a culture of modernist literary signs juxtaposed to primitivism. The cultivation of this passion for primitivism results for her in sinocentrism or in colonizing places like Tibet, Taiwan and Hong Kong (51).

analyzing (western) representation of the native ⁷—but Valli’s name is also associated with “discovery.” He is supposed to have “discovered” the Rajis of the western Nepal in his book and the documentary, *Hunting for Honey: Adventures with the Rajis of Nepal*. He repeats the same type of discovery, this time of the Dolpo-pas, in his film *Himalaya*.

Valli loves the Dolpo-pas, and his film brought them and their region out of obscurity and into international light.⁸ Unlike many western tourists and visitors, who either stay in the cities or trek in the mountains without ever looking deeper into the social realities of their surroundings,⁹ he stayed in Nepal for a long time, continues to visit, and plans to make more movies about the native peoples and cultures of Nepal. In his books and films, he has tried to bring to light politically, socio-economically, and even geographically remote and marginalized sectors of the Nepalese society. Especially in his film about the Dolpo-pas, which was shot “on location” in 1997 and 1998 in one of the virtually inaccessible plateaus hidden in the Himalayas in Nepal, he attempts to narrate the bravery and courage of the native people in the face of political neglect and the geographical and climatic severity of their region.

While the nation’s film industry, “Kallywood,”—obviously named after Hollywood and its Indian counterpart, Bollywood—busies itself by spinning off run-of-the-mill films, almost always mimicking Indian popular cinema, Valli boldly chose to portray a picture of a native culture. His choice of subject matter definitely has some representational and performative value within a context where both politics and cultural representations are dominated by the nation’s ruling majority—the (upper) caste Hindus. Valli’s focus on the ethnic and religious minorities, the janjatis (as the natives and the ethnics are called in Nepal) is undeniably a powerful political act which, as Mark Langer notes of Flaherty’s documentaries, makes his filmography into a sort of “oppositional film practice” (Langer 39).

However, one also needs to ask: precisely what sort of oppositional and political practice is it? Who is the agent in this performative, and who is being “acted upon”? What sort of gaze is invoked in it? Does it objectify what it sees for its own pleasure? These questions are crucial in

⁷ Again it will be instructive to refer to Spivak’s insightful remarks in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that “there is something Eurocentric about assuming that Imperialism began with Europe” (37). That is to say Valli’s problematic representation of the other is not just informed by a simple east/west or insider/outsider binary. We need to take into account larger patterns or traditions of exclusion and hegemony.

⁸ Valli’s *Himalaya* is an internationally acclaimed feature film that won awards at the “Città di Trento” international festival. Even though it was made by a French director and producer, with some Nepalese investment, it was submitted to the Oscars as a Nepalese feature film. Aside from being nominated for Best Foreign Language film in 2000, it was also a prizewinner at the Locarno, Autran, and Banff (Canada) festivals. It was awarded two Césars, one for soundtrack and one for photography. This brought fame to Valli who, before the film, was a photographer with *National Geographic*.

⁹ An example of such an account of the country can be found in Pico Iyer’s *Video Night in Kathmandu*, which recounts the arrival of the hippies in Kathmandu.

dispelling the euphoria around Valli's cinematic exploits in Nepal. It becomes imperative to critically examine his film and the context in which it was produced and marketed. Contrary to Valli's claim that the movie is a realistic representation of Dolpo, and contrary also to the claims of sympathetic reviewers like Dixit, who argues that "it is a movie with a story, simply and powerfully told,"¹⁰ the film is indeed another instance of the search for an exotic Shangri-la in the Himalayas. Like Flaherty, Valli's art is humanitarian—bent on highlighting, to quote from the intertitle in *Moana*, the dignity and nobility of the race. Neither would it be accurate to describe Valli's film as the representation of the colonized by the colonizers, for Nepal never had a direct experience of colonization. Rather, as I mentioned earlier, his is a story of "love" and learning.

Once we critically examine these loaded concepts of "love" and "learning," it is not difficult to argue, as I will in this essay, that Valli's *Himalaya* is informed by "ethnography" and orientalism, and that it portrays the other as exotically primitive. In other words, *Himalaya* is neither about Nepal (as Nepal as a political entity gets mentioned nowhere in the movie) nor even about Tibet, even though there are critics who have argued that it follows the line of Hollywood/Disney's support for a "Free Tibet." For these critics, *Himalaya* follows in the footsteps of films like Martin Scorsese's *Kundan*, a film based on the life of the Dalai Lama, Disney's *Seven Years in Tibet*, or even independently produced films such as *Windhorse* and *The Saltmen of Tibet*.¹¹ In spite of the possibility of genealogically relating *Himalaya* to this set of films, I contend that no healthy politics can come out of such a project as *Himalaya*, as it is devoted to shoring up a mythic Shangri-la devoid of history and time. As a result, Valli's film cannot be about the natives of the Dolpo either. However, neither is it merely about Valli's personal vision of, or longing for, the Tibetan golden age. Rather, it reveals a tradition of exoticizing the other for the sake of creating, in Rony's apt phrasing, an "ethnographic spectacle."

In the process of interrupting this spectacle that is overlaid with strong streaks of eroticism and exoticism, I will be drawing heavily from a very remarkable body of work produced in the field of ethnographic cinematography, especially in Pacific Islander native studies. I will be looking at the documentary and cinematic traditions about the Pacific Islands (which also include what is known as the South Seas Genre) as a

¹⁰ In his review of the movie, Kanak Mani Dixit writes,

It is natural in these days of cinematic Himalayan hype to be skeptical about yet another celluloid offering on the "exotic" Shangri La-esque communities and landscapes of the Tibetan plateau and surrounding areas. It was therefore a pleasant surprise to find in Eric Valli's "Caravan," [*Himalaya*]. (Dixit)

¹¹ For more discussion of the support for "Free Tibet" in the fields of film and music in the West, see Kenneth M Bauer's *High Frontiers*, where he purports that *Himalaya* may be read as a political film that tries to perpetuate "the meaning and myth of 'Tibet'" (170).

parallel to *Himalaya* not just because Pacific Islander native studies provide an illuminating critical framework, but also to suggest that *Himalaya* is not an isolated instance of ethnographic cinematography. It belongs instead to a larger tradition in which natives are portrayed as exotic others by anthropologists, missionaries, painters, literary figures, writers of travelogues as well as cinematographers. The parallel, however, does not imply the universality of the native experience. Unlike Gananath Obeyesekere, who seeks to solve the Captain Cook mystery in Hawaii by pointing out the absence of similar experience in Sri Lanka,¹² I believe that the assumption of universality in “the Fourth World” history and experience is only a self-delusional pleasure. Both regions are so historically different and culturally unique that any suggestion of sameness between them is not only naïve, but is also a distortion of the historical fact of difference. Nevertheless, one cannot simply overlook some structural convergences, especially with regard to the representation of the indigenous “other” in ethnography. Moreover, the amount of work done in the Pacific Islander native studies in response to the ethnographic representation of the native provides a useful critical scaffold to examine Valli’s problematic “ethnography” on Dolpo, a region which is hardly talked about other than by a few Western ethnographers.

This essay is divided into three broad arguments, the first of which explores possibilities of reading Dolpo in the light of the Pacific Islander native studies. I argue that the Pacific Islander native studies, despite some remarkable differences between the two regions, provides a unique perspective to expose ethnography’s mystification or distortion of the native cultures in Dolpo. I will draw from works by Rony, James Clifford, Margaret Jolly, and others, who will help articulate my second argument in the paper; namely, that Valli’s *Himalaya*, like other ethnographic films, is an orientalist project that exoticizes the other. However, I will not confine myself to the colonial discourse analysis of anti-orientalism, which has its own limitations as, in the process of critiquing and exposing the colonial representation of the native, it does not offer what can be called a sub-alternative view. For that vision I will appeal to cultural critics like Vandana Shiva and Vicente Diaz to argue that imagining and constructing a form of indigenous modernity are “essential” in the process of decolonizing native cultures.

Ethnography and Cinema

One can view *Himalaya* by comparing it with the classic Westerns, films that show the frontier lives of the European settlers in America. In fact, Valli repeatedly alludes to this comparison as he refers to *Himalaya* as a

¹² See his *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*, especially the pages where he critiques European myth models. But in the process Obeyesekere tries to create a homology between Hawaiian and South Asian experiences of colonialism. He writes, “I could not think of any parallel example [to Captain Cook’s deification in Hawaii] in the long history of contact between foreigners and Sri Lankans or, for that matter, Indians” (8).

Tibetan Western. In an interview with Aseem Chhabra, he not only describes his film as a Tibetan Western, but he also characterizes the Dolpo-pas as the last of the Mohicans.¹³ Again, in an interview with Adam Nayman, he claims that his film is a document, rather than a documentary. He recalls that a friend told him that *Himalaya* was very similar to Howard Hawk's second Western, *Red River* (1948), which was based on Borden Chase's novel *The Chisholm Trail*.¹⁴ *Himalaya* indeed resembles *Red River*'s narrative, which relates the tale of two men—Dunson, the cattle baron, and Garth, his unofficially adopted son—who compete to lead the caravan of the cattle to Texas. Some scenes are unmistakably similar visually, especially the ones that show long trails of cattle. The theme of animosity within the group of herdsmen further brings both movies together. As we know, the treatment of the native Americans in most of the Hollywood westerns is brutal—there are at least two encounters with the natives in *Red River*, and both culminate in the killing of the Indians—and therefore it is only ironic, and perhaps it is justifiable, to call *Himalaya* a Tibetan Western.

Yet greater forms of violence surface in Valli's cinematography as soon as we realize how closely he follows the ethnographic documentaries and films of even earlier period, namely, 1920s and 1930s, that deploy more simplistic or "primitive" narrative structure and seemingly unobtrusive approach in depicting their "subjects." Inasmuch as *Himalaya* is a simple story told in a simple way, it betrays ethnography's "primitive passion" in the same way as do Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926). The formidably rugged and icy geography of the arctic with, to quote from *Nanook*, its "[l]ong nights—the wail of the wind—snow smoking fields of sea and plains—the brass ball of sun a mockery in the sky," seem only to replicate the Tibetan plateau in Dolpo where, as in the world of the Inuit, nothing grows. *Nanook*, the Bear, "Chief of the 'Inuits' and great hunter famous through all Ungava," reminds us of the proud and brave chief Thinle, who, despite his age, braves the mountains and the snowstorm to lead the caravan to "the land of the grain." The theme of the hero's grooming in *Moana* reminds us of *Himalaya*'s Pasang, the chief's grandson, who accompanies the caravan to learn the trade of the race from his grandfather. Aside from these Flaherty documentaries, Cooper and Schoedsack's *Grass* (1925), which shows the Baktiari migration of herds in search of grass across the snowy pass of Zardeh Kuh in Iran, and *Chang* (1927) by the same directors, bear intimate resemblances with *Himalaya*. The likeness runs deeper than just the similarity between narrative structures, subject matter or setting.

The magical correspondence beyond parallel narrative structures in

¹³ He told Chhabra, "You look at TV in America and Europe; it is so brainwashed by consumerism, by advertising and by what you should do and not do. These are the last free people on earth. Tindle is the last of the Mohicans. I am in no hurry to see my Dolpo friends change."

¹⁴ See Adam Nayman's "Home on the Range: Eric Valli's *Himalaya* celebrates the mountain culture he adopted two decades ago," in the *Eye Weekly*.

these films lies in the element Rony, via Claude Levi-Strauss, calls the “ethnographability” of the native as opposed to the “historifiability” of the (western or para-western) audience of the ethnographic films or writers of the archives of history (7). *Moana* exemplifies this magical moment of ethnographability through its portrayal of Samoa’s edenic beauty and its tropical simplicity. As Flaherty’s subtitle makes clear, it is a “Romance of the Golden Age” that takes us to the pre-contact promised land of Samoa, the lush land of plenty and profusion, the exotic island of dancing and hunting. As we see Moana, our hero-in-the-making, hunting for tortoises, killing a wild boar for food and fun, courting and flirting with his girl friend, Fa’angase, dancing and romping with other youths, and undergoing the painful ritual of tattooing, which had long been outdated by the time the film was made, we enter, in Rony’s words, “a mythical golden age without colonialism, without missionaries” (140). “*Moana*,” Rony continues, “ends where it begins: in a land without history” (132). It is this element of ethnographability of the native, devoid of history, that pervades *Himalaya* and renders the Dolpo-pas into mummified objects or spectacles for the curiosity and pleasure of an ethnological gaze.

Taxidermy in the Himalaya

One may ask what *Moana*, a documentary on the quotidian life of a native of the rich tropical island of Samoa, has to do with a feature film on the Dolpo-pas, who live in an arid land where almost nothing grows, not even a tree. One may wish to conclude that if *Moana* epitomizes the Pacific as a “freakish survival of non-duplicatable utopias,” to quote Teresia K. Teaiwa (73), *Himalaya*, by contrast, is only a dystopia. How can one, then, hold the argument that *Himalaya* is about an exotic Shangri-la? The answer to the question of whether Valli’s Dolpo is an exotic space seems to lie not in its dystopic geography, formidable climate, primitive lifestyle and crushing poverty, but in the way Dolpo is portrayed in the film as the other space, or to use a Foucaultian term, a “heterotopia.” Confirming our assessment that *Himalaya* depicts Dolpo as the other of Europe, Valli accedes to Chhabra that life in Dolpo is much harsher than in Beverley Hills, yet the Dolpo-pas are happier and healthier than people in the West. “Oh, sure, their life is not easy,” he says, “but that is the problem with modern society. It is not because your life is easier that you are happier. You look at TV in America and Europe; it is so brainwashed by consumerism, by advertising and by what you should do and not do.” He continues, “the Dolpo-pas are the last free people on earth” (Chhabra).

In other words, the Tibetan Shangri-la of the Dolpo is a sort of therapeutic place, which is not only the other of the consumerism-ridden West, but it also functions as a sanatorium of health, happiness and freedom. Even a radical thinker like Foucault could not escape the snares of exoticizing the non-West as “heterotopia.” Dolpo, or the perfect picture of a sanctuary for Valli, is sequestered not only from modernization (in a

Western sense), but also from the communist invasion by China. Valli explains that although he does not think his film to be political, he does think that it is “a political film in the sense that it shows what Tibet was like before the Chinese invasion.” He claims, “What I have tried to show is the traditional, untouched Tibetan culture. It doesn’t exist in Tibet anymore” (Chhabra).

In other words, his film depicts Tibet in “diaspora,” and his diasporic Tibet is more authentic than the actual Tibet, which has been invaded and corrupted by communist China. But the diasporic Tibet for him is not a historically conceptualized and dynamic reality. Rather it is an untouched, pristine, prehistoric and static Shangri-la, which existed before the politico-cultural invasions and influences of Europe, China and Nepal. The interesting thing about this “eternal Tibet” is its mythic originality and its perpetual presence, which Valli claims to have captured in his film. This “ontological realism,” to recall a strong concept from the cinema theory of Andre Bazin, helps Valli to preserve what is dead. In his book *What is Cinema?* Bazin claims that image, or cinema, is the only agent capable of casting out the bogey of time. He argues that even though no one believes any more in “the ontological identity of model and image,” all agree that the image helps us to “remember the subject and to preserve him from a second spiritual death.” He explains, “Today the making of images no longer shares an anthropocentric, utilitarian purpose. It is no longer a question of survival after death, but of a larger concept, the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny” (10). Thus Valli’s *Himalaya* is an ontological identity of Tibet that tries to perpetuate the ideal of Tibet even after its death; and the reconstruction of ontological realism is possible only through cinema, the magical instrument of the modern West that can even raise the dead. On the one hand, Valli is playing an orientalist game of knowledge and power, that is, a game of knowing the orient *tout court*, which Edward Said long ago defined as “surveying a civilization from its origin, to its prime, and to its decline, of course it means being able to do that” (32). On the other hand, Valli does not confine himself only to creating this total picture or master narrative of a civilization’s rise and fall, but he also employs the cinematic machinery to resurrect and redeem this eternal image of Tibet beyond its death. The cinematographer’s granting of the unhistorifiable ethnographic present to the native past is what Fatimah T. Rony calls taxidermy—a form of fetishizing, museumizing, and mummifying, or more precisely, killing the other in order to give, or pretend to give, it a new life. *Himalaya*, therefore, belongs to this redemptive mode, which, again in Rony’s terminology, is a “‘taxidermic’ mode of salvage ethnography” (107).

Margaret Jolly extends the discussion of exoticism in Hollywood cinema about Polynesia. Her essay, “From Point Venus to Bali Ha’i,” explores the relationship between the exotic and the erotic and argues that there is a connection between “bodily revelation and imperial might in the Pacific” (99). By referring to Teaiwa’s argument about two bikinis—the

new swimsuit of 1946, and the atoll after which the bikini was named, on which “the Americans dropped twenty five nuclear bombs between 1946-1958” (Jolly 99)—she relates the exotic-erotic nexus of the military colonization. The exotic-erotic nexus works differently in *Himalaya*, where, obviously, Valli does not show women in bikinis, but he does make use of the nexus. One does not exoticize women’s bodies by showing them in bikinis only. Use of the “traditional” trappings, which might not be the daily gear in Dolpo anymore, serves the same purpose of reducing the native to a spectacle for the gaze of the civilized, or of confining him or her to what Timothy Mitchell calls the “exhibitionary order” of orientalism (290). As Chloe Colchester in the introduction to *Clothing the Pacific* remarks, the reconstruction of native dress for the camera involves a colonial process of getting the islanders to “act out savagery or the perceptions of native sexuality” (5). While the taxidermic impulse to resurrect the dead is obviously visible in Valli’s invention of traditional dress in the film, it also generates a spectacle out of the dress that eventually strips off native agency. In this context, Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s distinction between alienating notions of otherness and empowering notions of otherness is particularly instructive. Trinh Minh-Ha, herself a filmmaker, remarks that as long as “difference is not given to us, the coast is clear. We should be the ones to define this difference” (185-186).

Just a cursory look at the cover of the DVD marketed by Kino International will attest to the fact that Valli wanted to market *Himalaya* as a romance. On the cover, the photograph of the actor playing Pema towers like the Himalayas over the protagonist of the film, Thinle; his competitor, Karma, whose role is important in the story, does not even make it to the cover. Pema’s identification with the mountains or the land becomes evident in one of the important moments in the story, when Karma, during a stopover in their journey across the mountains with the caravan, approaches her presumably to make love to her; Thinle, who is opposed to all of Karma’s advances to appropriate the role of the leader of the caravan, tries to stop him, but his son, Norbu, implores him to leave Karma and Pema alone. In fact, that moment seals Karma’s fate as the future leader of the caravan, as if his metonymic “claiming” of Pema’s body implied and justified his claim for being Thinle’s legitimate successor. The woman’s body is not only sexualized, as Pema’s character seems to be created just for that erotic moment—she does not seem to have a lot to do in the story apart from this moment and a couple of other instances when she admonishes Karma and advises him to be less stubborn—but she is made to embody the land itself. In other words, the exotic (land) is also, to use Jolly’s equation, the erotic (woman). In another of her essays, “White Shadows in the Darkness,” Jolly examines *Moana*’s outdated ritual of tattooing and other erotic and exotic scenes in the movie to remark that *Moana* is a fabulation of the ancient Samoa, and it presents a “saga of eternal manhood, the fiber of Samoan masculinity, dehistoricized, which alone secures the ‘survival of the race’” (130). This romantic notion of survival of the race also informs *Himalaya*, in which

securing chieftainship is predicated upon possessing woman's body.

As Mark Turin and Sara Shneiderman argue, in spite of Valli's repeated claims that he remained true to his sources, or that he respected reality and had no desire to disguise it, Valli indeed tried to romanticize Dolpo in the film. If he, they suggest, "were to present a genuinely 'unromantic' picture of Dolpo, then it [the film] would have to include election posters, Maoist disturbances, wrist watches, radios, Wai Wai noodles, green Chinese army shoes, a few plane loads of trekking groups, and many more trappings of the modern world" (Turin and Shneiderman). Valli must have been surprised to see some natives in Dolpo in Levi's jeans, Nike hats or Chicago Bulls socks. They must have shocked him with their cheap Chinese shoes, wrist watches, and sunglasses. In order to give them a native touch, he not only commissions tailors to prepare "Tibetan" costumes for them, but he also makes them wear their hair in such a way so as to block off the dazzling sun. Besides these native costumes and outdated rituals, the actors also seem to wear dark make up in order to hide their un-native like fairness.

It is no wonder that *Himalaya*'s characters and storyline are frozen and one-dimensional. Valli not only exoticizes the native, but he also distorts the dynamics of this region's history by presenting it as an entity isolated from world-history. Valli's redemptive filmography becomes even more primitive as he renders the characters of the film into types or archetypes, thereby reducing issues of modernity, sovereignty, history and survival to the popular motifs of an ethnographic documentary.

Modernity and Sovereignty

Before we move further into an examination of *Himalaya* as an "ethnographic" spectacle, we must take stock of two theoretical approaches that we have employed to critique the film: the first was the critique of exoticization or dehistoricization of the socio-political realities of Dolpo, for which we found an interesting parallel in the Pacific Islander studies; and the second approach tried to demystify the ethnographic sediments of exoticization and to insert a certain form of modernity into the insularity that the orientalist ethnography imposed on its subject. This moment is exemplified by Turin and Shneiderman and Bauer, who argue that Dolpo is part of the flow of modernity, where, as far as anyone can guess, modernity for them consists of consumer culture—noodles, shoes, goggles, wrist-watches, etc. When we juxtapose both of these approaches, interestingly, they don't look radically different from one another, at least in the "subject" of their analysis, because their primary emphasis is "colonial discourse analysis," where the stress falls on how the ethnographers have represented or interpreted natives or how globalization has subsumed even the most remote regions and cultures of the world. Both, therefore, limit their critique to colonialism, rather than constructing discourses of decolonization.

For the discourse of decolonizing indigeneity or "indigenous

modernity,” we turn to Vicente Diaz, J Kehaulani Kauanui, Vandana Shiva, and other scholars who work in native studies. In her book, *Monocultures of the Mind*, Shiva exposes the global violence of the dominant or paradigmatic knowledge of the west. She writes,

The universal/local dichotomy is misplaced when applied to the western and indigenous traditions of knowledge, because the western is a local tradition which has been spread world wide through intellectual colonization...The first level of violence is to not see [indigenous knowledge] as knowledge. (10)

Deepika Bahri's *Native Intelligence* expresses a similar concern about the “survival of threatened knowledge systems in the postcolony” (20). She argues that native intelligence has to be seen at once in conjunction with and in opposition to metropolitan postcolonial native informancy. If Shiva counters this global violence with her project that emphasizes indigenous knowledge and the practice of biodiversity, Bahri proposes an aesthetic that helps to displace utopia through the joining of what she calls locus and topoi (31).

Diaz and Kauanui take the issue of indigenous knowledge further by offering a triangular approach: Native, Pacific and cultural studies. They relate this critical triangulation first to trigonometry and then to Carolinian seafaring. For them, the Carolinian seafarers' technique of triangulation known as *etak*, used in reckoning the distance traveled and one's location at sea by calculating the rate at which one's island of departure moves away from the traveling canoe, becomes an example of indigenous knowledge production. In the triangulation,

the highest point of an island can shift from treetops to mountaintops to particular cloud formations, continuing upward to a range of constellations, depending on one's distance from that island. More profound, perhaps, is the perception that the entities used for *etak* triangulation are themselves on the move. (316-317)

Foregrounding indigenous methods of navigating the seas and mapping the world, Diaz and Kauanui argue that Pacific Islanders developed this sense of “islands on the move” long before modern theories of plate tectonics or postmodern epistemologies. Edvard Hviding follows a similar line of argument, suggesting that his field study of Marovo practices in the seasonal capture of nesting marine turtles, based on a basic local notion of comparability, reveals a complex body of knowledge about life cycles, nesting habits, and hatching periods of two species of marine turtles (54).

In their work, these critics imagine and construct indigenous agency that counters any attempt to impose a monolithic system of being and knowing upon native cultures. Their approach differs both from traditional ethnography as well as from a liberalist bestowal of difference on the native that dehistoricizes native knowledge as “oral knowledge” based on memory rather than writing. An example of this is Louise Grenier's “research guide,” *Working with Indigenous Knowledge*, where she argues that “indigenous knowledge is stored in peoples' memories and activities

and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practices . . . [and] is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture” (2).

In an essay on Guam’s religious and political negotiation with Spanish Catholicism and American liberalism, Diaz writes that the topography and architecture of the land reflect the cultural history of the Chamorro, which, for him, is irreducibly transnational and transcultural, fluid and messy, but which nevertheless reflects Chamorro participation and negotiation in the construction (313). To imagine something like indigenous modernity, we need first to explode hermetically sealed frames that contain the world of the natives in *Himalaya*. The im/possible perspective of indigenous modernity is available only as an absence in the movie, and any critique of the movie, therefore, should begin by articulating these absences.

The Dolpo-pas are traditional traders and farmers, who use caravans to carry out the trans-Himalayan salt trade. In other words, the Dolpo-pas and this “region” are, to appropriate Diaz and Kehaulani Kauanui’s terms, both literally as well as metaphorically “on the move” (316). There is another form of moving in Dolpo, and that precipitates from the waning salt-trade and the “diaspora” that ensues from the Dolpo-pas’ search for alternative means of subsistence both in the cities of the country as well as abroad.

The Dolpo-pas and their cultures, to use James Clifford’s terms for the Melanesians, are as much routed as they are rooted (469). The people are on the move with their caravans; their cultures, like all diasporic cultures, are moving; they are moving at once away from Tibet, but also towards a certain spirit of “Tibet.” The Dolpo-pas are moving with the tourists and trekkers, and they are also moving in their seasonal migration across the country. Dolpa also houses Nepal’s largest national park, the Shey-Phoksundo National Park, and it borders to the north with China’s “autonomous” region, Tibet. In order to regulate the National Park and to check politically subversive activities and movements across the borders, the Nepalese government has banned tourism and unnecessary movement in some parts of the region. In other words, Dolpa district is a militarized zone where the native Dolpo-pas are in constant conflict with the military over resources, like woods and grazing field for their yaks. As a result, the map of the region is constantly drawn and redrawn, which often depends on the whim of the local military or the governments at the centers — Kathmandu and Beijing.

Nothing of the socio-economic and political dynamics of the region finds a place in Valli’s *Himalaya*. Unlike Valli’s claim that in Dolpo beats “the heart of an intact Tibet” (Valli 8), and contrary to the characterization of Dolpos by the French producer of the film, Jacques Perrin, as “a geographically far-off community” (6), Dolpo is more like a diverse frontier where various political, cultural and economic forces interact with each other. Valli’s rendering of the Dolpo-pas therefore symptomatically

betrays his own wish to see the region as an intact island, a Shangri-la or at least a Tibet away from the barbaric communists in the north and the indifferent Hindus from the south. What he doesn't realize is that his very attempt to create an intact place is exactly what exposes it to the external world. Thus when Valli changes the title of the movie from "Caravan" to "Himalaya," he unwittingly translates Dolpo into the mythical region that has high selling value in the West. Not that "Caravan" would have been better. It seems that in Valli's scheme of things there are only two options for Dolpo, either to be reduced to the Sanskritized myth of the Himalayas or to be translated into the old French "caravane," which derives from Persian "karwan." Between "Caravan" and "Himalaya," however, the chances for native agency for the Dolpo-pas are very slim.

In this sense, Valli's portrayal of Dolpo strongly resembles Foucault's notion of "extreme heterotopia" which, in his relatively less known essay "Of Other Spaces," he defines as "a place without a place" (27). As we know, even Foucault's radical theory is subject to this compulsive longing for heterotopia at the expense of the place itself. For example, the ethical blindness of Foucault's heterotopology becomes clear when he concludes the essay by claiming that brothels and colonies, oriental gardens and ships are "the greatest reserve of imagination" and "great instrument of economic development," and, since these spaces are fast disappearing, he remarks, dreams are drying up in our civilization (27).

The important question here is not how Valli's representation of Dolpo imitates Foucault's heterotopos; more urgent is the question of how we can articulate the silences and absences of the non-place. Portraying Dolpo not as a place, but as a space of multiple sites would change it, to use French theorist Henri Lefebvre's distinction, from a mental place to a social space,¹⁵ in which the modes of production (of space) and its representation would be very complex and open-ended. In order to prevent space from being represented as an individual island unto itself, one needs to be aware of its essential multiplicity and of the historical flows that inform and transform it. Once perceived with this awareness in mind, Dolpo would appear as a complex political and historical space.

Valli does not work out the relation between Tibet and Dolpo, nor does he try to relate Dolpo to the rest of Nepal; instead he portrays Dolpo as one homogeneous whole that luckily escaped modernity. The archetypal conflict between Thinle and Karma, who appear to represent tradition and modernity respectively, is therefore a false dichotomy. As we know, in the movie Karma defies the age-old tradition of embarking with the caravan on a date set by the Lamas when he famously announces that he does not believe in such traditions. Contrary to Karma's defiance, Thinle, who is anxious to maintain both tradition and his chieftainship,

¹⁵ See Lefebvre's critique of Cartesian mental space in his masterpiece *The Production of Space*, especially the third section of the first chapter. The Foucaultian notion of heterotopos, however, is more of a political or colonialist, rather than just a mental, place.

follows all rituals and regulations before venturing into the formidable mountains with the caravan of his trusted friends. Karma's rebellion against the chieftain has to be interpreted not as modernity against tradition, nor even as one generation against the other, but as one form of obstinacy against the other, or as simply a family feud. Had Lhakpa, Thinle's son or the heir to the chief of the village, been alive, Karma's rebellion or his leadership of the caravan would have been simply out of the question. Instead of being a productively antagonistic force in the film, Karma is only a product of necessity. To counter this false dichotomy, one needs to locate the site of modernity somewhere else—in the Lama's astrological calculations with which they construct the local calendar, or in the books and murals at the monastery that function as the archives of ancient knowledge, or in the resilience and agency the Dolpo-pas demonstrate in constantly communicating and negotiating between the military, border police, and the customers of their fast-diminishing salt-trade. The inroads made by imported iodized salt, which is being imposed on the locals by the government by citing health reasons, could function as another site to examine the question of modernity in Dolpo.

Thus, Dolpo is a biopolitical world within which one needs to examine the political, cultural and transnational capitalist forces at work that try to produce docile citizenry, toiling workers, and suppressed minorities. Beyond that, one needs to take into account Dolpo's multiple sites, including the borders with Tibet and the national park, the monastery, and blacksmith's forge where Thinle takes his grandson for a talisman, and the space of the Lamas, who, out of their arcane texts, calculate the date of departure for the caravan. Thus, when, in the middle of their journey Thinle points out a star to his grandson, Pasang, as the sole reliable guide across the mountains, what he might have been demonstrating was a form of indigenous cartography for which the sky, as it were, is the limit. Instead of exemplifying a star-gazing native, which seems to be the case in the film, Thinle, not unlike a Polynesian navigator for whom the islands are always on the move, seems to understand fully well that for the salt-traders the map of the mountains literally extends to the heavens. To show the multiplicity and boundlessness of this space is to portray Dolpo "on the move." To talk about documenting a vanishing culture without talking about how the Indian iodized salt is displacing Tibetan salt in Dolpo and the areas in the mid-mountains is just to perpetuate indifference. To talk about free Tibet, without taking into account and critiquing the hegemonic national politics of Nepal and China, is to unwittingly contribute to Dolpo's continuous subordination.

Thus *Himalaya* fails to even raise the question of Dolpo-pas' survival, let alone the issue of sovereignty. Rather, the guiding "force" in the movie is one of primitive submission to the will of god, as "god's will is served" is one of the refrains in the movie. Thinle is the chieftain because he is born to rule, or is chosen by god to rule. Karma hits the target with his arrow and the villagers believe that the archery is a sign of his being God's choice for a successor. Pasang transfers his father's locket

to Karma, or Karma claims Pema as his mistress, and Norbu interprets both events as “destined.” In fact, the whole movie, which is framed temporally within Norbu’s act of painting at the monastery, can be taken as an event that rolls on and completes itself with the power of some invisible force without any decisions being made on the part of the humans. Even Thinle’s so-called courageous “act” of leading the caravan after his son’s death looks like a confirmation of a stereotype about the Nepalese, or the “Gurkhas”: namely, that they are strong but stupid!¹⁶

As Valli’s ethnographic spectacle concludes with Norbu’s painting, “which paints by itself,” the audience is left with a very clear sense that the native is written both out of space and out of sovereignty. In fact, contrary to its stated intentions, the movie tries to keep the natives frozen or mummified so that they remain vulnerable to the incursions of history, politics and cultural imperialism of both domestic and foreign powers.

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¹⁶ Gurkha is a term used by the British Raj in India to refer to the Nepalese, who were often portrayed as barbarous, and were to be fought against to defend the more civilized kingdoms of India (For more about this dynamic, see the “History” chapter in Gayatri Spivak’s *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, especially pages 210-211). By producing the myth of the brutish Gurkhas, the British succeeded in controlling the principalities in North India, which indeed were close to Nepal and were sometimes invaded by the kings of Nepal. Gurkha now refers to those who voluntarily enlist in the British or Indian army, and the majority of them are from the ethnic minorities.

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