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DEMOCRACY ON THE ROCKS: OUTLAWING LAW IN TOURISTIC DYSTOPIAS, FROM
VONNEGUT'S CARIBBEAN ISLANDS TO SELF'S HOLIDAY RESORTS

My work relates to dystopian imagination connected to the imagery of Caribbean islands and holiday resorts, as paradigms of wild yet user-friendly surroundings, where the Western traveller expects to be safe and sheltered, though deprived of the comforts of modernity. At first sight, the social and political organisation of this sort of dystopia appears to be of childish simplicity, based on rules that Western travellers—with their colonial attitude—feel sure they can understand or at least easily keep under control. In their narcissistic dream of utopia, travellers are unable to perceive the heterogeneous pressures traversing the expected utopian place—the Caribbean island—actually reacting against the oppressive clarity of the white-designed Utopian future, that is forever negated and deviated by the gradual surfacing of a deeply-rooted and self-generated notion of the State (Chambers 53). Within this horizon, Tzvetan Todorov's "tragic duality"—the endless swing between the ethics of mankind and the narrow nationalism of citizenship—produces a gap soon filled in by a third hybrid and creolized element, which is unstable and problematic but by no means easily dismissible.

To provide some evidence of what I mean, I have selected two texts, *Cat's Cradle* and *The Butt*, which, though apparently different, are both closely related to the issue of democracy in the way it is interpreted and implemented by the Other, a way that the Western gaze sometimes fails to understand.

Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) is a "tight focused satire of *Player Piano* reconciled with the epic humor and odyssey of *The Sirens of Titan*" (Tomedi 39). Chronologically, this novel comes first and it somehow establishes the basic ground for a discourse on democracy and the Other. It unfolds following the voice of the I-narrator—meaningfully called John or Jonah (Tomedi 38-53)—who, while trying to interview the "chief creators" of the atomic bomb, lands on the Caribbean island of San Lorenzo. John or Jonah will accidentally become the president of San Lorenzo and become familiar with a quizzical system of laws shortly before the whole earth is turned into an ice crystal (Pagetti 269-277; Klinkowitz 52-62; Farrell 86-89).

The second text is much more recent, but surprisingly similar in terms of the political vision upon which representation is grounded. *The Butt* (2008) describes "a colonial-guilt dystopia, shades of the Archbishop of Canterbury's sharia ventilations gone troppo," that apparently "hovers over a Waugh narrative oddly invaded by Greene colonials, including an Honorary Consul" (Bywater). Tom Brodzinski is holidaying with his family in a distant, unnamed country that appears to be articulated as a traditional heavenly utopia. After smoking his last cigarette, he flips the butt off the balcony of the holiday apartment he is renting with his family, hitting the head of the elderly Reggie Lincoln, a fellow countryman who has married a native woman. The

latter comes from one of the most rigorous, mystical tribes of the desert interior; their customary law has been incorporated into the civil statute and has become part of the island's legal system. Tom undergoes a trial. He is condemned, must leave his family behind, and go through the arid heart of this strange island continent to unveil an unusual if meaningful relationship between colonized and colonizers.

Though radically different, the two stories focus on the same theme: living—though transitorily—in another place means inhabiting an ambiguous territory where the traveller has to face a new and diverse “worlding the world”—to quote Martin Heidegger as evoked by Gayatri Spivak. The fictional investigation of this peculiar in-betweenness has become increasingly frequent in contemporary times, and my point is that precisely this new status of the Western subject in the contemporary political world opens a sort of third phase in postcolonial development.

I would suggest that Phase 1 can be identified with the moment when an imperial power colonizes the Other, actually building in time “the repertoire of ‘epistemic violence’” (Spivak) that formed the emerging constellation of modernity in which the West, like every conqueror and empire, objectified the rest of the world and constituted itself as the subject of History” (Chambers 47). Phase 2 is marked by the Other reacting—striking and writing back—in order to recover his/her own identity and reestablish his/her state. Phase 3, begins when the colonizers face the Others on their own ground, and find themselves unable to cope with their laws and rules. In this phase, or at least at the beginning of it, we can still hear hegemonic voices portraying a colonial (or postcolonial) country, but it is quite clear that the ex-colonizers can no longer grasp and actually dominate the Other. Even while they go back to the imperial, hegemonic tradition, they are nonetheless obliged to acknowledge the natives' mystery, and end up portraying their culture as subaltern or simply as *other*. When closing the circle of their reasoning on the subaltern, the colonisers, seen through the native's gaze, become self-conscious—i.e. ONLY WHEN they are reflected in the native-objects. Later on, the conclusion of the reflecting and self-reflecting processes will produce the colonisers as subjects and the natives as their images (Chambers 58-59).

So, in blunt terms, just like Said's Orient, the Other outlined by Vonnegut and Self was also once “silent, available to Europe for the realization of projects that involved but were never directly responsible to the native inhabitants, and unable to resist the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it” (Said 94). Lately, this Other has become able to recombine patterns of power/powerlessness in order to switch the Western traveler from a dominant position to the role of a victim, unable to understand the native's “worlding of the world,” and his/her laws. The natives strike back, and they do so in unpredictable ways.

Quite meaningfully, both authors choose particular sorts of tourist resorts as their setting, apparently exploiting the notion of freedom and anarchy normally related to the idea of being on holiday. In both cases, the supposed heavenly utopia is soon reversed into a Hell of contradictory laws and rules, when the Western visitors fail to adapt to the new world they happen to be stuck in. Finally, both places may be referred to in terms of Avtar Brah's definition of *diaspora* as a *relational concept* referring to “configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another” (Brah 183). Of course, the native place is not presented as such, and does not apparently include the risk of the natives striking back or at least taking action against the Western visitors: quite the opposite. In *Cat's Cradle*, the “fictional island of San Lorenzo, a poor, desolate, anti-paradise” (Tomedi 42) where

John/Jonah is doomed to land and explore the political danger of science (Broer 63) attracts the tourist's attention through the usual advertising lies:

The news was in a special supplement to the *New York Sunday Times*. The supplement was a paid ad for a banana republic ... "the Republic of San Lorenzo" said the copy on the cover, "on the move! A healthy, happy, progressive, freedom-loving, beautiful nation makes itself extremely attractive to American investors and tourist alike." (Vonnegut 53-54)

The same goes for Self's exotic island:

He thought of the ads he'd seen at home: big billboards that had encouraged him to fly his family halfway around the world to this island continent. On these, smiling Anglo servitors, clad in spotless white, were laying out tableware on immaculate linen, while behind them a towering rock formation burned orange in the low-angled sun. "We've set the table and checked under it for flippers," the slogan read. "So where the hell are you?" (Self 35)

Quite obviously, this description and anticipation of the tourist resort leads us to a new concept of diaspora space, which "includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put.' The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native*" (Brah 209). Both novels include three kinds of identities: the natives, the Westerners, and the Westerners playing at being natives. The latter are the bearers of the point of view from which the story is narrated.

After getting to the Caribbean island more or less by accident—John/Jonah is offered a job as the president of the Republic of San Lorenzo. Despite the fact that he is drawn into the events of the plot and must face potentially dramatic or disquieting situations, Jonah will mostly prove to be astonishingly apathetic and deeply inadequate for the role he's been appointed to (Broer 59-61). In the same way, "the whole bizarre palimpsest of race and culture in this vast land bamboozled Tom" (Self 84), a tourist in a land whose legal working totally eludes him. His inability to understand the rigorous prohibition of smoking causes him endless troubles, eventually resulting in a permanent exile from his homeland: "For the three weeks of the Brodzinskis' vacation, Tom had found the prohibition on smoking, in this vast and sunbaked country, particularly intrusive" (Self 1). When facing the punishment implied in breaking the law, Tom is at a loss:

I-I didn't realize any of this stuff, you know. About, um, customary law. I thought it was, like, a developed country—it certainly sells itself that way so that it can rake in the tourist bucks. (Self 22)

The inability of the Westerners to understand the Other is rooted—or presented as rooted—in the complex history of the two colonies. Vonnegut tells the story of S. Lorenzo in chapters 48 and 49, as if it were drawn from a book, not by chance written by a white man called Julian Castle, "a vividly drawn minor character who underscores two of the novel's major themes: personal responsibility and the search for meaning in life" (Marvin 87). Castle's book openly belongs to that legacy of the texts that, according to Said, "can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time, such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence and weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it" (Said 94). Through Castle book, Jonah finds out that Bokonon, born in 1891, "was a Negro, born an

Episcopalian and a British subject, on the island of Tobago. He was christened Lionel Boyd Johnson” (Vonnegut 68). After attending the London school of economics and political science and fighting in World War I, he sets sail for home (Tobago), but he is stopped by a submarine taken prisoner, then captured by the British destroyer, *The Raven*, that came to rest in the Cape Verde islands. He leaves again with a rich boy—Rumford—and his schooner; they shipwreck in Bombay, and Johnson stays in India for two years, becoming a follower of Mohandas K. Gandhi. He is then arrested for leading groups that protested against the British rule by lying down on railroad tracks, and shipped back to Tobago, where he builds another schooner, called the *Lady’s Slipper II* and sails about the Caribbean. Summing up, and quite paradoxically, San Lorenzo was then founded by a Negro, Lionel Boyd Johnson, later called Bokonon, born in Tobago, educated in England, jailed in India, hired by an American and then shipwrecked, with the American on the Caribbean Island. And the whole story is narrated in a book, written—as I said—by Julian Castle, a colonizer.

In the same way, the birth of the colony, in Self’s novel, is told to Tom by the anthropologist and surgeon Erich Von Sasser as a tale of economic exploitation that is fully coherent with the author’s poetics (Hunter Hayes 3-52) and is put forward as an actual example of Spivak’s “epistemic power”:

The mining company had shot all the game—there was nothing for the people to eat. An entire generation—maybe two—had already been decimated. The guvvie encouraged this genocide, cynically offering so-called “development grants” for every native inducted into the certain death of the mine. There were no human-rights monitors in those days, Mr. B. None of the voyeuristic gear of an international community, which in our era sees fit to come and see such atrocity exhibitions. (Self 302)

Von Sasser seems to reflect on the White Man’s burden, while linking the colonial enterprise to the European imperial legacy:

No, this was the heart of darkness, all right. And my father found out that the indigenous people, most of all, had forgotten its anatomy. The tribal groups—if they’d ever existed, to begin with—had been broken up. Isolated mobs of old men and women, and young children, roamed the bled searching for water, feeding on each other’s corpses when they fell. (Self 302)

Openly enough, in both dystopias, the story of the natives is totally rewritten by the first colonizers of the land, non-natives themselves, but pretending to be so. Their “Invention” of the native culture is authorized by the supposed inability of the real natives to produce anything meaningful. In Von Sasser’s words:

These people had bugger-all. Nothing. No language but a debased Anglo-pidgin, no identity except as a concentration camp inmates or escapes. They had no songs, no dances, no myths, no cosmology—not even the most rudimentary creation myths, such as are found among remote islanders. There were no rituals of holy men and women, no leaders—or taboos. These benighted people had only *engwegge*—and death. (Self 306)

In this cultural wasteland, Von Sasser seems to provide the fictional illustration of what Said acknowledges as the main feature of Western Imperialism: “Behind the White Man’s mask of amiable leadership, there is always the express willingness to use force, to kill and be killed. What dignifies his mission is some sense of intellectual dedication; he is a white man, but not for mere profit, since his chosen star presumably

sits far above the earthly gain” (Said 226). This mission, as Vonnegut shows, is not necessarily successful:

Johnson and Mc Cabe had failed to raise the people from misery and muck. ... Everybody was bound to fail for San Lorenzo was as unproductive as an equal area in Sahara or the Polar Ice Cap. At the same time, it had as dense a population as could be found anywhere, India & China not excluded. There were four hundred and fifty inhabitants for each uninhabitable square mile (Vonnegut 86).

In a grotesquely overcrowded space, and in the face of such failure of the colonial enterprise, the White Man keeps his power, grounded in his being—in Said’s words—both “an idea and a reality” (Said 226). However unsuccessful the civilizing enterprise may be, the ontological profile of the White Man stays untouched, and it involves a definite attitude towards both the white and the non-white worlds. This attitude collates a whole set of linguistic and cultural habits, social and political regulations, feelings and beliefs that globally define a global power in front of which non whites, and even whites themselves, are expected to bend:

I don’t mean it literally, but the trouble with Anglo civilization is that it’s a left-brain business, all to do with order, systematization, push-button-bloody-A. Papa understood this, as well as knowing enough anatomy—and anthropology—to see the solution ... The corpus callosum—that’s the bloody enemy, Tom, it’s a tough little bugger. ... Information-bloody-superhighway of the human brain, that’s what it is, yeah. Same as the internet, the corpus callosum fuses together two hemispheres, the right and the left. Movement, speech, sensation, visual recognition – they dominate, yeah, they’re the Anglos of the brain. (Self 338)

The colonial metaphor applied here to the structure of the brain seems to hide the gesture of the conqueror focusing on a specific purpose—rationalizing the functioning of both the brain and the colony—regardless of whether the rationalizing operation is harmonious or disharmonious with the site it is applied to. So the native—or the Westerner playing as native—strikes back, “othering” the Western traveler, who is obliged to follow a law whose ratio is totally obscure to him. To a certain extent this othering is to be intended as the fictional, Caribbean backlash of that “epistemic violence” that formed the emerging constellation of modernity in which the West, like every conqueror and empire, objectified the rest of the world and constituted itself as the subject of History (Chambers 47).

The Butt, in particular, perfectly outlines the profile of a western traveler—a tourist—“who comes here in ignorance of both our civil and our customary laws” because he is an alien species, and “all alien species are destructive” (Self 128). Ignorance makes it possible, in a different fictional horizon, for the protagonist of *Cat’s Cradle* to comply with Frank Hoenikker’s wish to appoint him as president of San Lorenzo. This is to be done, of course, without any elections, because “there never has been. We’ll just announce who the new President is” (Marvin 86). He further marries Mona Aamons Monzano, “more a symbol than a character” (Marvin 86), because “it’s predicted in the book of Bokonon that she’ll marry the next president of San Lorenzo” (Vonnegut 128).

In the light of such dystopias, we may agree with Chambers when he states that:

In the ruins of previous anthropology, sociology, history and philosophy, in the interstices of these torn and wounded epistemes where the rules of disciplinary genres are blurred and betrayed, the object disappears to be replaced by intimations of a potential space in which all subjects emerge modified from encounters that are irreducible to a unique point of view. An authority slips from my hand into the hands

of others, they, too, become the authors, the subjects, not simply the effects or objects of my ethnography. (Chambers 51)

The fate of the White Man, in Vonnegut's and Self's version of colonialism, is marked by a meaningless and irrefutable subjugation. Bokonon, in full coherence with Vonnegut's appraisal of the universe as absurd (Davis 10), drives the survivors on San Lorenzo to commit suicide, on the grounds that "God was surely trying to kill them, possibly because he was through with them, and [that] they should have the good manners to die" (Vonnegut 170). Tom finally undergoes Von Sasser's surgical therapy and ends his life in a hypnotic trance, where he is adrift and "faintly amused by the way things had turned out. After all he was only doing what he had always done: passively conforming to an invented belief system" (Self 351). And Vonnegut, through the words of Bokonon, concludes his personal version of utopia by saying "The hand that stocks the drugstores rules the world" (Vonnegut 177).

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