

# **Bioregional Imagination and the White Man's Burden: Local and Global Perspectives on Environmental Change in Ladakh, India**

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**Abstract:**

This thesis analyzes the ways in which differently situated peoples understand environmental changes that occur in particular geographic places. Rather than providing objective or subjective accounts of these changes, these differently situated perspectives provide narratives that reflect the socio-cultural and political contexts of the narrator. In this thesis, I focus on the local and global narratives of a trans-Himalayan region in India called Ladakh. Led by social activist, Helena Norberg-Hodge, western environmentalists have perpetuated an image of Ladakh as a peaceful, isolated and ecologically sustainable society for over three decades. Now, with the region facing rapid ecological, social and economic changes, Westerners mourn over the loss of traditional and authentic Ladakh. In what ways does this global narrative reflect or contrast with local narratives of environmental change? Furthermore, what are the practical implications of these global narratives? This thesis argues that ubiquitous western narratives of environmental change in Ladakh impose imagined histories and environmental solutions onto the region to the effect of discrediting local voices and political realities.

## Dedications



Young girls of Takmachik Village, taken July 15, 2010.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010, my mother and I boarded one of the last planes to leave from Leh town to New Delhi. At around midnight the next day, Ladakh's unusual rains triggered a cloud burst and landslide that caused major destruction to lower Leh town, the Tibetan colony of Choglomsar and the fields of my own home-stay village of Takmachik. This thesis is dedicated to the victims and survivors of the August 6<sup>th</sup> cloud burst. *Julley.*

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## Introduction:

Whether or not we recognize it, narratives provide a central means through which we express our understanding and explanation of regional environmental changes. “When we describe human activities within an ecosystem, we tell *stories* about them...we configure the events of the past into causal sequences...that order and simplify those events to give them new meaning” (Cronon 1992, 1349). Narratives describe the world that is *out there*, but they are also told from a point of view, whether through a specific interdisciplinary lens or a perspective situated at the local or global level. When we read an article in the newspaper or attend a scholarly lecture, information about an environmental event is conveyed to us through the narrative form. These narratives provide us with glimpses of regional histories, descriptions of the causal forces and suggestions for the story’s importance as an environmental issue.

Geographer Nicholas Entrikin describes narrative understanding as “a way of ‘seeing thing together’...[i]t’s relative centeredness is what allows it to incorporate elements of both objective and subjective reality without collapsing this basic polarity between the two views” (Entrikin 1991, 25). Given the varied disciplines and perspectives that underlie narratives of environmental change, these narratives are always plural, and each story suggests a different reason for why we should ultimately care that changes are taking place.

My research on narrative discourse of regional environmental change emerged as the result of my experience living and farming in the Himalayan region of Ladakh during the summer of 2010. Originally, I had come to the area to study the relationship between Ladakh’s Mahayana Buddhism, social structures and environmental attitudes. Upon arriving in the area, much of what I had known about Ladakh and its environmental history came from western sources: guidebooks, documentaries, blogs, and most significantly, an influential book called

*Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh.* While participating in a home-stay program called “Learning from Ladakh” in the remote villages of Takmachik and Likir, I became increasingly aware that these western narratives that I had used in grounding my understanding of the region were incomplete. Western narratives focus exclusively on how ecological and social problems have materialized as traditional societies became modern. However, there is a second narrative of Ladakh that comes from the voices of its local residents. This local narrative suggests that the historical context of Ladakh’s environmental changes is much more complex and conflicted than we have imagined from the Western perspective. In Ladakh, I found an apparent discrepancy between local and the global narratives of the region’s environmental changes.

Bounded by the Himalayas in northeast India, Ladakh is one of the highest inhabitable areas in the world. With its arid soils, harsh climate and steep elevations, Ladakh presents conditions presumably inhospitable to human life. However, for over a thousand years, communities of nomads and pastoralists have flourished on this limited land. Having adapted their social structures, culture and subsistence activities to the unique ecological conditions of the Himalayan passes, Ladakhi communities managed to exist in relative isolation for several centuries. However, in the past few decades, Ladakh has faced major social, ecological and economic changes, including mass urban migration, tourism and industrial blight.

Ladakh is fraught with varying narratives that describe its environmental changes. The variation does not suggest that there is one single narrative that represents the *true* story of Ladakh; rather, the narratives portray the changes with special attention to particular aspects that are important the crux of the story. Much of the Western narrative of Ladakh is predicated upon the myth of Shangri-La. In his classic utopian novel, *Lost Horizon*, James Hilton introduces the West to a peaceful and self-sufficient monastic community eclipsed from modern society by the

majestic Himalayas. Hilton named this Himalayan utopia Shangri La. While it is a wholly fictitious society, Shangri-La pervades much of the Western perception of Tibet and the trans-Himalayan region. Shangri-La exemplifies an ecological alternative to modern society, in which emotional and physical alienation, social conflict, ecological degradation and individualism are nonexistent. As one Tibet scholar writes,

Tibet was imagined by many as a dream or fairy-tale land outside of history...an internal sanctuary, indifferent to time and space, where spiritual values could be protected. Tibet seemed to offer wisdom, guidance, order and archaic continuity to an increasingly disillusioned West. (Bishop 2001, 208)

Known throughout the west as “Little Tibet,” Ladakh in the western perspective exudes these fantastical preconceptions. Like the majority of westerners who brave the long (and sometimes treacherous) route from Delhi to Ladakh, I also came to this region looking for what remains of the traditional and utopic Ladakh.

I became fascinated with this region after reading Helena Norberg-Hodge’s popular book *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. Written for a western audience, *Ancient Futures* relays a narrative of Ladakh that captures the Shangri-La myth of the Himalayas in order to inform readers of an alternative and more sustainable form of existence. *Ancient Futures* is a captivating and tragic story about traditional society and environmental change in Ladakh that has been influential in shaping Western perceptions of the region’s history as well as its current issues. According to this narrative, traditional Ladakh was once an isolated, Buddhist farming community whose deeply rooted knowledge and respect for the landscape allowed them to persist in a healthy coexistence with the natural world for thousands of years. Traditional Ladakh was peaceful, autonomous and ecologically knowledgeable. By contrast, modern Ladakh is the corrupt, socially unstable and ecologically ravaged society. Norberg-Hodge’s story of how

traditional societies transform into modern ones is meant to highlight the same underlying forces of modernization and globalization that have caused social and ecological problems in the West.

Norberg-Hodge's narrative reflects the general ideas and language of western bioregional discourse. Bioregionalism is a backward looking radical environmental movement that is popular among affluent and educated Westerners who are nostalgic for a "Golden Age" free of ecological and social problems. The movement argues for a re-inhabitation of "life-places," or more simply put, a return to communities based on coexistence and respect for the unique ecological landscapes that we depend on. Bioregional re-inhabitation is:

...becoming native to a place through becoming aware of the particular ecological relationships operate within and around it. It means understanding activities and evolving social behavior that will enrich the life of that place, restore its life-supporting systems and establish an ecologically and socially sustainable pattern of existence within it." (Berg 1978, 217-218).

Bioregionalists argue that the industrial economy has created homogenous cultures that are unreflective of the natural landscape. As a result, modern cultures societies destroy the authentic interconnection between humans and the Earth. Bioregionalism draws inspiration from indigenous or "traditional" societies, which they perceive as representing the "old ways," or life before the advent of modern, industrial cultures. In this essay, I refer to this idealization of indigenous cultures as "bioregional dwelling"—a belief that pre-modern societies are inherently ecologically benign and socially just as a result of being embedded in the biophysical world. Within this vision of bioregional dwelling, there is a general assumption that—despite the advantages of modernity—traditional societies were and are psychologically, socially and ecologically better off than modern societies.

At the beginning of my research in Ladakh, I found Norberg-Hodge's narrative incredibly appealing. However, as I spent more time interacting with the Ladakhis, I found



myself questioning the underlying agenda and assumptions that Norberg-Hodge communicated to her western audience. In the summer of 2010, I took part in “Learning from Ladakh,” a program that was established by Norberg-Hodge’s organization, The International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC). The program was developed with the intention of providing westerners with the opportunity to learn from traditional cultures. ISEC’s brochure advertises the program as a “rare opportunity [for participants] to immerse themselves in the ancient culture of Ladakh, while gaining a deep understanding of the changes wrought by globalization” (International Society for Ecology and Culture 2010). Before even stepping foot into the remote villages where we would do our four-week long home stay, Learning from Ladakh (LFL) participants were bombarded with narratives of bioregional dwelling. During orientation, LFL participants were required to watch Norberg-Hodges two films, “Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh” and “The Economics of Happiness,” in addition to reading a plethora of bioregionalist and anti-globalization essays by Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry and Vandana Shiva. By the time we were officially dropped off at the doorstep of our welcoming host families in Likir Village, the narrative of Helena had fully permeated our vision.

As I continued with my research in Ladakh, I began to hear more stories and opinions from the local population. From these conversations, I found that most Ladakhis do not think so romantically about their past. While Norberg-Hodge frequently reiterates the utopic quality of pre-modern Ladakhi society, Ladakhis note that in the past, life was not as ideal as the westerner would imagine. Nowadays, Ladakhis have light after dark, transportation services to other towns and extra supplies of food for the cold winter months. Norberg-Hodge often dismisses Ladakhi opinions as insignificant and un-reflexive; she suggests that Ladakhis are drawn to the alluring modern lifestyle because they do not see it from the outside. Experiencing the changes from the

inside, Ladakhis do not know what they have lost from modernization; they are unable to realize that they were much happier before.

Drawing inspiration from E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, Norberg began to utilize her insights from Ladakh and work directly in a movement towards counter-development. In the 1980s, she developed The Ladakh Project, which "focused on supporting Ladakh's indigenous culture by bringing information to balance the idealized images of the consumer culture flooding into the region through tourism and development" (International Society for Ecology and Culture, 2010). The Ladakh Project eventually expanded to form the International Society of Ecology and Culture, an international NGO that draws upon the story of Ladakh to address issues of modern development at the global scale. Within Ladakh, Norberg-Hodge spearheaded the formation of a locally based environmental NGO called Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG). As one of the most successful and well-known organizations in the region, LEDeG has enlisted the support of several key Ladakhi elites. LEDeG's environmental campaigns have even appealed to larger state officials.

However, these latter environmental initiatives remain tainted by a singular narrative of bioregional dwelling from the West. The underlying motivation of Norberg-Hodge's work in Ladakh suggests that, as Westerners have already experienced the misgivings of modern society, we should take it upon ourselves to prevent Ladakhis from going down this dark path. However, in forwarding these goals, we may forget that the story of environmental change in Ladakh has many authors. In dismissing local narratives in our efforts to help Ladakh, we are merely forcing our own agenda. As illustrated by the case of Ladakh, I argue that narratives of bioregional dwelling in western environmentalism impose imagined histories and environmental solutions

upon geographic places, to the effect of inadvertently discrediting local voices and political realities.

This thesis analyzes the key assumptions and principles inherent within both the local and the global narratives of environmental change in Ladakh. I base my analysis upon geographer Robert Sack's theory of place to describe the process by which such prevalent narratives of environmental change are constructed. Using Sack's theory of place, I shall engage in a short discussion of knowledge and narrative understanding, which will lead me to argue that Ladakh's environmental narratives are *situated narratives of place*—stories that are dependent on the narrator's unique context and embodiment. After briefly outlining the basic theories and principles of bioregionalism, I will examine the dominant bioregional myths and assumptions contained within Helena Norberg-Hodge's situated narrative of environmental change in Ladakh. By juxtaposing Norberg-Hodge's narrative with a discussion of Ladakh's geopolitical history, I shall highlight the contexts upon which locally based perspectives and demands are formulated. I shall then illustrate the ways in which foreign nongovernmental organizations and aid agencies—by focusing solely upon the prevalent Western narrative of bioregional dwelling—have essentially reinstated a post-colonial White Man's Burden. I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of differently situated narratives and conclude with suggestions regarding how this epistemological analysis applies to environmental problems and solutions beyond the borders of Ladakh.

## **Grappling with Place: Bioregionalism and the Relational Framework**

Like all environmental narratives, the story of environmental change in Ladakh is a story about place. That is, it is a story about the ecological, social and economic changes that are situated in a particular geographic locale. In addition, it is a story that about Ladakh as a *place*, a repository of meaning and experiences—expressed and evaluated through the narrative form. Next to the words “nature” and “culture,” “place” is one of the most complicated terms within Western academic discourse. The definitions of “place” are wide and varied; furthermore, ideas regarding “place” are discussed within both scholarly as well as mainstream arenas. Before delving into a critical analysis of Ladakh’s local and global environmental narratives, I will first describe the concept of place as a meta-analytical tool in understanding the tensions and interactions between these narratives. Afterwards, I will explore the ways in which “place” is commonly used in the Western bioregional narratives. Understanding the role of place in the formation of environmental narratives will provide us with a context for examining the basic and prevalent assumptions within the Western bioregional narrative of environmental change in Ladakh.

### *Place in the Formation of Environmental Narratives*

Used as a conceptual framework that combines both the physical and epistemological dimensions of environmental change, place provides us with a way to evaluate the process of environmental narrative construction. In the next few paragraphs, I will outline a few select theories regarding place, knowledge and narrative understanding to outline the framework of

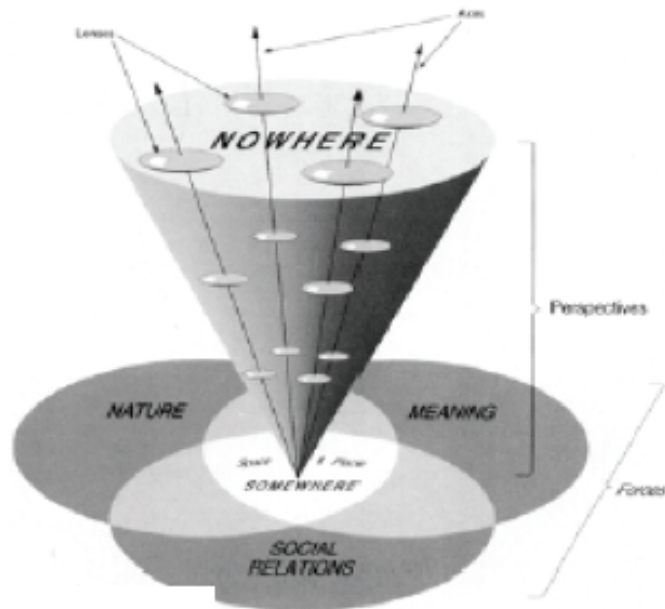
place and its application in examining environmental problems and solutions. My analysis is grounded upon geographer Robert Sack's interdisciplinary work in political and human geography. Robert Sack presents important analytical tools and insight to this ontological and epistemological discussion of environmental change.

Sack argues that place is the fundamental means through which we make sense of the world and through which we act. According to Sack, place, as a geographic locale, is the point at which the natural, cultural and social worlds meet and are—in part—produced. These forces combine to create the physical dimensions of the place that we experience, including its ecological characteristics, infrastructure and social systems. Additionally, place, as a way of understanding the world, is where our experiences emerge or become grounded in physical reality. Through place, we come to know the world and its ecological and social features. Sack writes, “[p]lace helps make feelings real. Experiences and ideas have immediacy but they are impermanent without places and its artifacts to anchor them” (Sack 1992, 4). As Yi-Fu Tuan argues, “transient feelings and thoughts gain permanence and objectivity through things and these landscapes or places become repositories of meaning” (Tuan 1980, 463).

Sack has examined place in terms of the processes and perspectives that it contains and constitutes. His relational framework forwards a meta-analytical approach to regional environmental change that enables us to evaluate both the epistemological as well as ontological dimensions that come together in forming the geographic place (Figure 1). In using the relational framework, we can postulate the ways in which economic, political and social forces create the observable material contexts and attributes of place—including its environmental changes. Additionally, we can examine how differently situated perspectives construct an understanding of the place. He argues that “this framework is relational because it is flexible enough to allow

the investigator to stand apart and consider a range of forces and perspectives without being

committed to any one of them, and at the same time it draws attention to how the world would be if commitments were made to one or another position” (Sack 1992, xxi).



An important aspect of Sack’s relational framework is its implication to debates about knowledge (wherein environmental knowledge is implicated). With the advent of science and technocracy,

modern knowledge is generally divided into the categories of objectivity and subjectivity. For example, scientists may make claims about the objective truth of a particular environmental event based on facts they gain through scientific theory and experimentation. An objective understanding of place is found through an abstract, all-encompassing “view from nowhere.” Sack borrows this conception of objectivity from philosopher Thomas Nagel, who labels “the view from nowhere” as the particular detached vantage point from which we conceive the world. Nagel writes, “[t]o acquire a more objective understanding of some aspect of life or the world, we step back from our initial view of it and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object.” (Nagel 1986, 4). Meanwhile, a subjective “view from somewhere” is related to a more personal, idiosyncratic and thus limited understanding of the world.

Within such a duality, subjective views from “somewhere” tend to be discredited due to their limitations; whereas, “the view from nowhere” is accepted as the ultimate knowledge. In a sense, we can understand Sack’s relational framework as an extension of Nagel’s work in metaphysics. In *The View from Nowhere*, Nagel struggles to reconcile objective and subjective viewpoints:

We rightly think that the pursuit of detachment from our initial standpoint is an indispensable method of advancing our understanding of the world and of ourselves, increasing our freedom in thought and action and becoming better. But since we are who we are, we can’t get outside of ourselves completely. Whatever we do, we remain subparts of the world with limited access to the real nature of the rest of it and ourselves. (Nagel 1986, 6)

Through his relational framework, Sack’s demonstrates that the duality between objective and subjective accounts of place is nonexistent. In the framework, Sack suggests that all perspectives of place are situated, “[p]lace is bounded and can be seen literally and imaginatively from within and from without. There are degrees of “outsidedness” (Sack 1992, 13).

Sack’s relational framework builds off of Nagel’s speculation of knowledge, wherein Nagel claims,

[t]he distinction between more subjective and more objective views is really a matter of degree, and it covers a wide spectrum. A view or form of thought is more objective than another if it relies less on the specifics of the individual’s makeup and position in the world, or on the character of the particular type of creature he is. (Nagel 1986, 5)

While the material properties of places (and environmental changes) do exist, a universal knowledge about this reality is never completely attainable. “The framework allows us to imagine what would happen if one or another perspective were used to examine space and place” (Sack 1992, 18). The meaning of a place depends on the particular perspective from which it is viewed:

The inside/outside attribute of place makes it one of the few categories of thought that demands the simultaneous involvement of more than one perspective...Being inside and

outside of place invokes more than one perspective; hence, place can provide a basis for examining conflicting points of view. (Sack 1992, 15)

Ultimately, place suggests a theory of relativism, whereby perspectives of place—whether from somewhere or nowhere—can never be disproved. All perspectives are merely interpretations of the same biophysical reality, except from differently positioned vantage points.

Karl Popper's "a bucket and a searchlight" model of knowledge suggests that people do not gain knowledge by obtaining facts by the "bucketful" (Popper 1972). Instead, differently situated perspectives—whether from somewhere or nowhere—"start from a particular point of view which serves to make certain facts more relevant than others" (Entrikin 1991, 85). As a result, "these points of view act as searchlights that illuminate parts of reality" meanwhile obscuring others (Entrikin 1991, 85). To borrow from Donna Haraway's feminist objectivity, perspectives of place as shown in Sack's relational framework are embodied or situated knowledges: knowledges and visions that are dependent on the particular context and embodiment of the knower. Haraway writes, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see" (Haraway 1988, 582-583).

Differently situated perspectives of environmental change impart what I describe as *situated narratives of place*. Nicholas Entrikin describes the narrative form as a way of seeing events together, "[n]arrative offers a means of mediating the particular-universal and subjective-objective axes. A means of describing the world in relation to the subject is through narrative" (Entrikin 1991, 6). Narratives are stories told from a point of view and thus, differently situated perspectives of the same physical event provide differently situated narratives. Furthermore, it is important to note the underlying normative dimensions of situated narratives. Narratives tell us



why we should care about a particular event. However, normative meanings often come at the expense of accuracy and holism:

It is a commonplace of modern literary theory that the very authority with which narrative presents its vision of reality is achieved by obscuring large portions of that reality. Narrative succeeds to the extent that it hides the discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences that would undermine the intended meaning of its story. Whatever it's overt purpose, it cannot avoid a covert exercise of power: it inevitably sanctions some voices while silencing others. (Cronon 1992, 1349)

Situated narratives of place are told from the perspectives of different stakeholders, each of whom have different objectives to gain in forwarding their story. As a result, a particular stakeholder's situated narrative may discredit or fail to recognize parts of reality—including contrary voices—in forwarding their goals and agendas.

The region of Ladakh has undoubtedly experienced large-scale environmental changes within the past four decades; however the situated narratives that describe these changes have varying focal points as well as normative messages. Each narrative of environmental change is oblivious to particular aspects of reality that are central to another situated perspective. I find that Ladakh's environmental narratives are shaped by two specific categories of stakeholders: the Ladakhi perspective and the Western bioregional perspective.

Looking at Ladakh through Sack's relational framework allows us to see how different social and structural forces have come together to produce its physical environmental changes. However, more importantly, the relational framework provides us with a meta-analysis of Ladakh's differently situated narratives. Specifically, Sack's theory of place allows us to visually imagine the process by which global and local stakeholders have constructed the narrative of environmental change in Ladakh. In the next few paragraphs, I will continue to work from Sack's theory of place through an examination of the basic principles and ideas of the western bioregional perspective.

### *Bioregionalism: Basic Theories and Principles*

Bioregional discourse is fundamental to the work of most radical, grassroots environmental projects of the Global North, including the popular local food initiatives, transition movements and re-localization programs. In Ladakh, Western environmental narratives are tainted with quintessential assumptions and principles of bioregionalism. Furthermore, as I will explain in the later portion of this discussion, these western bioregional visions are largely motivated by postmodern yearnings for the traditional (“authentic”) ecological society. Consequently, Western narratives of Ladakh focus on particular un-reflexive preconceptions of the region’s environmental changes that reflect these romantic yearnings. Before I plunge into a more comprehensive analysis of Ladakh’s bioregional narratives, here let me first lead you through the basic principles and concepts of the bioregional perspective.

At the very basic level, bioregionalism is defined by its vision of healthy and sustainable local communities of *place*. Used interchangeably with the terms bioregion and “life-place,” the bioregional definition of “place” comes to mean the naturally bounded, unique ecological territories upon which human communities—including human cultures and social systems—are organized. As one author notes, “[t]he very process of defining a bioregion, far from being merely a natural science ecology exercise, is grounded in attempts to locate culture in nature through the praxis of living in place” (Carr 2004, 77). The bioregional vision attempts to integrate the biophysical and human worlds in unique geographic places in order to cultivate cultural diversity, self-sufficiency, local knowledge as well as responsibility and respect for the earth. “Living-in-place” is the goal of bioregionalism; it is an idea that is synonymous to “dwelling” or becoming “rooted” in a specific part of the biophysical landscape. “Living-in-place” is reconnecting to the earth emotionally, spiritually and physically. In other words, it is

developing an understanding and respect for a particular, delimited geographic place: developing a “sense of place.” Bioregional author, Robert Thayer writes,

“People who stay in place may come to know that place more deeply. People who know a place may come to care it more deeply. People who care about a place are more likely to take better care of it. And people who take care of places, one place at a time, are the key to the future of humanity and all living creatures.” (Thayer 2003, 5-6)

Bioregionalism emerges in opposition to globalization, which bioregionalists deem as a process of modernity that has divided people from the land. They claim that globalization—through its interrelated methods of corporate development and economic specialization—has destroyed cultural diversity and *place* through the centralization of decision-making power, consumerism and the homogenization of local landscapes. A prime symbol of globalization is the city, which McGinnis calls, “landscape [that] is buried and under concrete” (McGinnis 1999, 66). McGinnis argues that the city, as a “placeless” entity is the point at which “a tragedy of the senses unfolds—humanity is ‘unable to have direct contact with more satisfying meanings of living, tak[ing] life vicariously, as readers, spectators, passive observers’” (McGinnis 1999, 66; Mumford 1938, 258).

Globalization results in individualism, alienation and disconnection from the places in which we live. Additionally, the global economy encourages consumerism, which forces us to “think of ourselves as individual units, as supposedly autonomous individuals” (Carr 2004, 92). In the increasingly globalized modern society, “what we’re specifically missing are actual feelings of connectedness” (Carr 2004, 92). As a result of this disconnection, modern individuals living in globalized societies have lost all responsibility and respect for the biophysical world and other members of their community.

Underlying bioregional discourse is a fundamental message that I will refer to in this essay as “bioregional dwelling”: the belief that pre-modern societies lived in ecologically and

socially harmonious co-existence with the non-human, biophysical world. Bioregionalism is a backward looking movement that claims to base its vision upon indigenous (or “ancient”) cultures, such as that of Ladakh. McGinnis notes that “[b]ioregionalism is not a new idea but can be traced to the aboriginal, primal and native inhabitants of the landscape. Long before bioregionalism entered the mainstream lexicon, indigenous peoples practiced many of its tenets” (McGinnis 1999, 2). The basic assumption of bioregionalism is that indigenous cultures have remained unaffected by globalization and modernity, and thereby exemplify the way we *used* to live. Indigenous communities are traditional (rather than modern) communities, representing the authentic relationships between humans and nature.

Indigenous cultures are contrasted with globalized, modern cultures, which represent the inauthentic form of existence. As communities that remain isolated from the global economy, indigenous peoples provide us examples of what it was like to live in place. One author writes that “bioregionalism is the rediscovery and reinterpretation (to creatively deal with the ecologically-diminished reality in which we presently live) of the old ways by those who see that we cannot continue in present profane ways” (Henderson 1984, 3). Altogether, bioregionalism assumes a myth of green primitivism. Bioregionalists believe that indigenous communities, as traditional rather than modern cultures, were inherently embedded in place, and as such, they coexisted in a sustainable manner with the biophysical world. This suggests that the pre-modern societal characteristic of being “rooted in place” leads such cultures to develop knowledge and practices that protect and maintain the local landscape. “Since generations living in one place should promote the acquisition of place-based knowledge, bioregionalists attempt to understand and honor the knowledge of indigenous people” (McGinnis 1999, 161). While the movement was developed through conditions of modern society, bioregionalism operates upon a vision of returning to a primitive mode of existence.

A fundamental principle of bioregionalism is the re-inhabitation of the unique life-places that we have lost in the modern, globalized society; it involves becoming *native* to the land.

Describing the principle of re-inhabitation, McGinnis writes:

“In a modern context based on the separation of society from the natural world, bioregionalists stress the importance of re-inhabiting one’s place and earthly home...bioregionalists believe that we should return to the place “there is,” the landscape itself, the place we inhabit, the communal region we depend on” (McGinnis 1999, 3).

Re-inhabitation is an attempt to dwell in place, to rediscover our authentic connections to the biophysical world. In *Dwellers of the Land: The Bioregional Vision*, renowned bioregionalist author Kirkpatrick Sale lays out the basic principles of bioregionalism, three of which are:

- Division of the earth into nested scales of “natural regions”
- Development of localized self-sufficient economies
- Adoption of a decentralized structure of governance that promotes autonomy, subsidiarity, and diversity

(Sale 1985; McGinnis 1999, 29)

Fundamental to bioregionalism are decentralization and localization, both of which allow for place to be re-discovered in the modern landscape. Bioregionalist, Michael McGinnis argues that a “crucial bioregional value [is] the redistribution of decision-making power to semi-autonomous territories who can adopt ecological sustainable *and* socially-just policies” (McGinnis 1999, 35). This principle suggests that isolated, autonomous communities are inherently sustainable.

I find that notions of bioregional dwelling arise largely within the context of postmodernity, in which disappointment and confusion towards modern society provokes postmodern individuals to search for authenticity and meaning in the past. The modern world is full of contradictions, as “to be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are...” (Berman 1988, 15). This contradictory and bewildering world has “engendered numerous

nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost” which serve as the basis for bioregional thought (Berman 1988, 15). In the postmodern society, nostalgia—which includes homesickness or a longing for something of former times—“can help those who are motivated by the overcoming of all forms to identify some purpose and meaning to what they are doing” (Tester 1993, 67). The postmodern nostalgia of bioregionalism echoes that of Ferdinand Tönnies’s homesickness for *gemeinschaft*, the pre-modern and idyllic community that “modernity militantly deconstructed” (Tester 1993, 69). According to Tönnies, “[l]ife of the *Gemeinschaft* develops in permanent relation to land and homestead. It can be explained only in terms of its own existence, for its origin, and therefore, its reality are in the nature of things” (Tönnies 1955, 59). Bioregional dwelling reflects such nostalgia for *gemeinschaft*—the rooted community.

Bioregional values of re-inhabitation, reconnection and becoming “native” are, in fact, the result of nostalgia for a more rich and authentic form of existence within a bewildering and contradictory modern world. While bioregionalists utilize indigenous cultures as concrete examples of the more authentic and thus sustainable way of life, these idealizations are purely reifications of postmodern nostalgia. Nonetheless, these imagined visions and values of bioregional dwelling are the dominant theories that pervade the Western narrative of Ladakh. As a result, the Western narrative of environmental change in Ladakh is portrayed in a manner that serves merely to satisfy postmodern strife. In the following section, I will present the principal Western narrative of Ladakh’s environmental change, provided by western social activist, Helena Norberg-Hodge. Norberg-Hodge’s popular account of Ladakh as a crumbling utopian society communicates the ubiquitous assumptions and principles of the bioregional dwelling discourse.

## **Ladakh: The Crumbling Shangri-La of Bioregional Imagination**

Swedish social activist Helena Norberg-Hodge has been a key figure in shaping the western narrative of Ladakh. In 1991, Norberg-Hodge released her widely acclaimed book *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, which was made into a documentary shortly after. As the most popular story told about Ladakh, *Ancient Futures*—in both film and written form—has become the manual of Ladakhi history for the western world. Tibet scholar, Martijn van Beek notes that, as the story is “[q]uoted widely, used in colleges throughout the United States and Europe and recommended and excerpted in textbooks on (post-) development, the case of Ladakh, in Norberg-Hodge’s interpretations has indeed become prominent one” (van Beek 2000, 254). Norberg-Hodge’s narrative is most commonly found in bioregional or anti-globalization anthologies between the works of other important bioregional authors, such as Vandana Shiva and Wendell Berry. Meanwhile, travel guides and tourist brochures list the book as a highly recommended reading or else direct the tourist to the Women’s Alliance in Leh town, where the film is screened daily at three p.m. Thus, in encountering Ladakh—whether through text or tourism—the westerner always comes across Norberg-Hodge’s bioregional narrative. Most prominent western news sources, popular media and guidebooks from that describe the region will mention Norberg-Hodge or else convey the story of Ladakh within a similar framework.

Due to her fluency in colloquial Ladakhi and nearly four decades of close contact with the local residents, Norberg-Hodge claims to provide an exclusive, “insider’s view” of the environmental changes that have been inflicted upon the region (Norberg-Hodge 1996, 34). However, as with all environmental narratives, I argue that Helena’s account of Ladakh is a *situated narrative of place* that is influenced by her socio-cultural embodiment and context, in which case are radically different than those of the average Ladakhi. As I mentioned in the

previous section, Norberg-Hodge's story is not a false representation of Ladakh's environmental changes; rather, it is one that is situated in a particular perspective and position relative the physical realities of the geographic locale. Her narrative ties together particular pieces of this physical reality into a coherent story that provides conclusions for why we should ultimately care about Ladakh's environmental changes.

I find that Norberg-Hodge's narrative of environmental change in Ladakh forwards an argument about bioregional dwelling that is based upon western postmodern nostalgia for pre-modern, "traditional" societies. In her publications, Norberg-Hodge frequently suggests that the story of Ladakh's environmental changes can help us to better understand the underlying forces that have led to social and ecological problems in the West. In *Ancient Futures*, she writes:

...it may seem absurd that a 'primitive' culture on the Tibetan Plateau could have anything to teach or industrial society. Yet we need a baseline from which to better understand our complex culture...Ladakh can help to show the way, by giving us a deeper understanding of the interrelated forces that are shaping our society. (Norberg Hodge 1991, 5)

Through this method of perceiving Ladakh, Norberg-Hodge encourages westerners to evaluate the region's environmental changes in terms of the differences between Ladakh and the West. As a result, western bioregional narratives focus on specific binaries between the characteristics that are attributed to "us" (the westerners) and ones that depict "them" (the Ladakhis). The binaries that are formulated within Norberg-Hodge's narrative of environmental change in Ladakh are presented as follows:

<u>"Us"/West</u>	<u>"Them"/Ladakh</u>
modern	traditional
civilized/exploitative	Ecological primitive



in-authentic	authentic
chaos	Shangri-La
globalized/centralized	autonomous/isolated

These particular binaries are not mutually exclusive; rather, they tend to overlap within the western narrative of Ladakh to emphasize the distinction between the pre-modern and the modern social and ecological conditions.

In describing a narrative of bioregional dwelling, Norberg-Hodge projects essentialist assumptions of traditional and modern Ladakh that largely serves to satisfy the Westerner's postmodern ideals. Specifically, Norberg-Hodge's narrative of Ladakh fulfils the postmodernist's nostalgic belief that prior to industrialization and civilization, all humans once dwelled harmoniously with the earth.

This section analyzes the basic assumptions contained within the western bioregionalist narrative of Ladakh's environmental changes. I will first present the basic narrative that Helena Norberg-Hodge conveys to her western audiences in *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*. This western narrative will then be analyzed in terms of the binaries that it contains and communicates. In particular, I will focus upon the ways in which Norberg-Hodge uses the western myths of Shangri-La and ecological/green primitivism to frame her arguments and assumptions of bioregional dwelling in Ladakh. Ultimately, this section will show that Norberg-Hodge's narrative of Ladakh mainly focuses upon the particular aspects of the region's environmental changes that enable to her forward the postmodern agenda.

### *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*

Norberg-Hodge visited Ladakh at the dawn of its tourism venture in 1975 as one of the first westerners to enter the region in several decades. She claims that during this time, the region “was essentially unaffected by the West” and thus still representative of pre-modern and traditional Ladakh (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 1). Working as a linguist in the area for several years, Norberg-Hodge quickly became enamored with the Ladakhis’ seemingly joyous, simple and ecologically benign way of life. “In Ladakh,” Norberg-Hodge writes, “I have known a people who regard peace of mind and *joie de vivre* as their birthright. I have seen a community and a close relationship to the land can enrich human life beyond all comparison with material wealth or technological sophistication” (Norberg Hodge 1991, 182). Upon her return in the late 1970s, Norberg-Hodge found this utopic ecological society ravaged by the external forces of globalization and western-style development. Reflecting on these changes, she writes: “[t]he modern culture is producing environmental problems, that if unchecked, will lead to irreversible decline; and it is producing social problems that will inevitably lead to the breakdown of community...” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 137).

In *Ancient Futures*, Norberg-Hodge argues that, in the past, Ladakhis were intimately connected to their place on earth as a result of daily interaction and deeply ingrained Buddhist teachings on interdependency (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 287). As a result of their “rootedness” in the land, traditional Ladakh was both ecologically and socially sustainable. Norberg Hodge writes that “[h]ere in a barren Himalayan desert, the Ladakhis have co-evolved with their environment” for almost two thousand years; and thus, every aspect of pre-modern Ladakh reflected the limitations and particularities of the ecosystem (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 182). The villages were established in accordance to the availability of glacial water for irrigation: the size

of each village reflects the limitations of water and “over the centuries, stone-line channels have been built that bring the melt water from the high valleys above to the fields below” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 11). Irrigation is managed by an organized schedule, in which households are assigned particular days of the week to divert the waterways towards their fields.

Agriculture is primary to life in traditional Ladakh; it is a significant and festive activity that is dictated by the seasons and the soil. Traditional Ladakh relied on a diet of barley, walnuts, apricots, mustard, weeds and yak milk. In traditional Ladakh, everything was recycled and nothing was wasted. Old robes were continually patched up, food remnants were fed to the cows, worn-out shirts were used as dishtowels and even human waste was collected in the traditional Ladakhi latrine to be used as fertilizer (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 19-36). While Ladakh was overlooked both spiritually and politically by the Buddhist monastery, Ladakhi villages were largely decentralized and autonomous. In the traditional society, Ladakhis had strong communal relations based upon reciprocity and trust. Social conflict and aggression were rare, and “crime, unemployment and homelessness were essentially unknown” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 4).

According to Norberg-Hodge,

[t]he old culture reflected human needs while respecting natural limits. And it worked. It worked for nature and it worked for people. The various connecting relationships in the traditional system were mutually reinforcing, encouraging harmony and stability. (Norberg Hodge 1991, 136)

Major changes to the social structures and ecology of the region started to occur in 1974 when India opened up Ladakh to tourism. Tourism integrated Ladakh into the global economy and exposed the once isolated region to the alluring and corruptive western culture. As the years progressed, Ladakh began to develop into a gradually modern society; and as a result, the region began to appropriate the social and ecological problems associated with modernity. Children—educated in specialized and culturally irrelevant western curriculums—started to abandon their

fieldwork and flee to Leh town to work as guides and taxi drivers in the burgeoning tourist industry. Subsistence agriculture was replaced with cash crops while Ladakh has become increasingly reliant on imported foods and non-renewable energy systems. Traditional ways of life, rooted in the unique Ladakhi landscape, were being lost to global monoculture. Within this narrative, western economic development is regarded as the single destructive force that has caused Ladakh's current ecological, social and economic problems. This catastrophic chapter of Norberg-Hodges's narrative clearly depicts Ladakh as the crumbling Himalayan utopia of Shangri-La.

### *The Myth of Shangri-La*

James Hilton's classic utopian novel, *Lost Horizon*, has undoubtedly been responsible for molding the Western imagination of Himalayan communities. Published in 1933, *Lost Horizon* presents a fantastical portrait of Shangri-La—a small self-sustaining community encased within the Himalayas of Tibet. Supported by the wisdom of a lamasery and agricultural activities of the dominant peasant population, Shangri-La is a peaceful and unified society that has managed to protect itself from the social and ecological defects of modernity. Describing this idyllic land and community, Hilton writes:

The floor of the valley, hazily distant, welcomed the eye with greenness; sheltered from winds and surveyed rather dominated by the lamasery, it looked [like] a delightful favored place, though if it were inhabited its community must be completely isolated by the lofty and sheerly unscalable ranges on the further side. (Hilton 1933, 66-67)

The valley was nothing less than an enclosed paradise of amazing fertility...[the people] smiled and laughed.... they were good-humored and mildly inquisitive, courteous, carefree, busy at innumerable jobs but not in any apparent hurry over them. (Hilton 1933, 106-107)

Shangri-La is simple, yet wise and altogether void of conflict, intense social inequalities, poverty and ecological degradation. It is a society that evolved within the confines of the region's biophysical realities. In short, Shangri-La fits the western bioregionalist's vision of a sustainable society.

Visiting Ladakh for the first time, the westerner may find himself within a familiar setting. In Ladakh, he is enclosed within the snow-capped peaks of the majestic Himalayan range. As he treks across Ladakh's dusty terrain, he sees white monasteries raised high above against the jagged hillsides, while neat arrangements of mustard and barley fields spread across the fertile valley below. Walking down the dirt roads, he spots men and women busily at work in their vegetable gardens, children playing tag in the sunlit pastures and grandparents sitting beneath the shade, spinning prayer wheels as they softly chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*. The houses he discovers are simple mud brick and rectangular abodes, but they are large and elegant, certainly not the home of an impoverished peasant. Most likely, along the road, he will come across a warm and hospitable Ladakhi, dressed in the traditional homespun *goncha*<sup>1</sup> who zealously invites him inside for butter tea and *khambir*.<sup>2</sup> For the westerner, Ladakh could easily be the real geographic manifestation of Hilton's Shangri-La, the landlocked paradise of fertility, community and harmonic relationships (see Figures 2-4).

In Hilton's original idea, Shangri-La was not a pre-modern society but rather one that "preserved all that was good in modernity" (Gillespie 2006, 56). In fact, Shangri-La contained many modern comforts, including bathtubs, grand pianos and central heating. However, this aspect of Hilton's story has been largely forgotten, as "today, the image of Shangri-La is typically an antithesis of modern culture" in which the society is represented as pre-modern and

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<sup>1</sup> *Goncha*: a traditional Ladakhi robe, made of yak wool, and worn by both men and women.

<sup>2</sup> *Khambir*: a circular and dense bread made of wheat and flour. A staple food of Ladakhis that is generally eaten as a snack or with stews during mealtime.

traditional (Gillespie 2006, 56). While entirely fictional, the myth of Shangri-La provides a baseline upon which environmental changes in Ladakh are evaluated and western situated narratives of place are constructed. For example, *National Geographic* writer and photographer Thomas Abercrombie is one of many westerners who have promulgated this fiction in his 1978 article, “Ladakh: The Last Shangri-La.” In this article, he presents timeless photographs of Ladakh’s people, villages and monasteries, while describing the region as “peopled by hardy mountain stock, proud, spirited, steeped in ancient traditions, not yet encumbered by modern gadgetry such as matches, gunpowder; or (except for the mechanized prayer devices) the wheel” (Abercrombie 1978, 338; Gillespie 2006, 56).

More significantly, Helena Norberg Hodge’s narrative of Ladakh’s environmental changes captures the myth of Shangri-La to support the arguments and visions of bioregional dwelling. In *Ancient Futures*, Norberg-Hodge relays a declensionist narrative of Ladakh as the crumbling Shangri La: a once harmonious and ecological Buddhist society that is being rapidly transformed and corrupted by western-style economic development. By portraying pre-1974 Ladakh as a real embodiment of Shangri-La, Norberg-Hodge creates an antagonism between traditional and modern societies. Within this duality, “tradition” represents the non-western, ecological, peaceful and authentic Ladakh, whereas, modernity is connected to the westernized, exploitative, socially conflicted and inauthentic Ladakh. Norberg-Hodge’s narrative provokes western audiences to mourn over the loss of the traditional societies and reject modern ones. In all versions her narrative, Norberg-Hodge devotes nearly three-fourths of the story to the description of “traditional” Ladakh to show explicitly how negative ecological, social and psychological changes are linked to modern societies that are no longer rooted in the earth.

Norberg-Hodge's Shangri-La narrative in *Ancient Futures* proposes that pre-modern traditional societies developed as a reflection of their particular surroundings and as a result, traditional Ladakh supported ecological, social and psychological wellbeing. The story of Ladakh provides "inspiring proof that a more ecologically-based culture can be remarkably rich" (Gilman & Norberg-Hodge 1987). While modernization may endow Ladakh with an increase in supplementary material comfort, taken as a whole, traditional Ladakh was perfect. Reflecting on her 1975 encounter with Ladakhi, Norberg-Hodge writes,

In Ladakh, I have known a society in which there is neither waste nor pollution, a society in which crime is virtually nonexistent, communities are healthy and strong and a teenage boy is never embarrassed to be gentle and affectionate with his mother or grandmother. As that society begins to break down under the pressures of modernization, the lessons are of relevance far beyond Ladakh itself. " (Norberg-Hodge 4)

The traditional pastoral lifestyle provided Ladakhis with a stress-free life and joyous existence. Subsistence activities in the traditional society were determined by the natural rhythms of the Earth rather than economic productivity; and thus, Ladakhis worked at a "gentle pace and had surprising amount of leisure" (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 35). Given that work meant agriculture and household chores, the traditional Ladakhi society was not separated into the domestic and public spheres; in fact, men, women and children labored side-by-side, and "work and festivity [were] one" (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 20). As a result, Ladakhis lived highly communal lifestyles, constantly in the company of other members of their family and village community.

Norberg-Hodge's descriptions of social life in traditional Ladakh projects a sense of nostalgia for Ferdinand Tönnies' *gemeinschaft*—the "pre-modern, locality-based, folk community" of close-knit, face-to-face personal relations, mutual responsibility and obligations (Entrikin 1991, 60). Norberg-Hodge frequently maintains that Ladakhi social structures were traditionally based on coexistence and interdependence and that such "close-knit community

provides a profound sense of security” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 46). In traditional Ladakh, individuals could rely on each other for emotional as well as material support. Human labor was never paid; rather, it was provided as the result of intimate and reciprocal relationships between individuals within the community. Traditionally, communities would come together to build houses, help one another gather crops during the harvest and share the responsibility of taking the animals to pasture (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 94). In traditional Ladakh, “the good of the individual is not in conflict with that of the whole community; one person’s gain is not another person’s loss...Ladakhis are aware that helping others is in their own interest” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 51). Meanwhile, in modern Ladakh, this strong social capital is lost as reciprocal labor is replaced by a paid workforce from Kashmir.

In addition to the material benefits of the traditional social structures, these tight-knit bonds provided individuals with a sense of belonging and security. The traditional polyandrous and extended family structure of Ladakh not only maintained the size of family landholdings, but it also strengthened intergenerational bonds. Many traditional Ladakhi households hold up to four generations of family members under a single roof. “As part of a close knit community,” Norberg-Hodge notes, “people feel secure enough to be themselves” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 125). In the past, a Ladakh’s individual identity was developed through their relationships within the community rather than through material possessions. Given the tight bonds of the traditional community, Norberg-Hodge suggests that traditional Ladakhis felt comfortable and confident with themselves. She writes,

I have never met people who seem so healthy emotionally, so secure, as the Ladakhis. The reasons are, of course, complex and spring from a whole way of life and worldview. But I am sure that the most important factor is the sense that you are a part of something much larger than yourself, that you are inextricably connected to others and to your surroundings. (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 85)



Due to the strength of the traditional Ladakhi community structure, quarrels, aggression and violence were nonexistent. Norberg-Hodge describes this as a “concern not to offend or upset one another [that] is deeply rooted in Ladakhi society” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 46). In the past, the Muslim and Buddhist populations coexisted in harmonious relations.

In contrast to Tönnies’ *gemeinschaft* is *gesellschaft*—the modern society that is representative of Western capitalist nations. *Gesellschaft* is defined by weak social ties, self-interested actions and centralized decision-making processes. In modern Ladakh, individuals are no longer connected to their land or to other members of their community. Norberg-Hodge notes that in an increasingly individualistic modern society of Ladakh, “as [Ladakhis] lose the sense of security and identity that springs from deep, long-lasting connections to other people, Ladakhis are starting to develop doubts about who they are” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 119). Modern Ladakh faces social and psychological issues that are characteristic of the West, including alienation, disempowerment, loss of community, insecurity and lack of meaningful relationships. However, as they are experiencing the transition into modernity from the inside, Ladakhis are unable to see these underlying negative consequences. Viewed from an external perspective, “the balance with the natural world and the essential harmony in terms of relationships is something we can consciously appreciate better than the Ladakhis can, because we know that it’s like to lose it” (Gilman & Norberg-Hodge 1987).

#### *The Myth of Green Primitivism:*

“An important factor in the environmental balance in Ladakh was undoubtedly the fact that people belonged to their place on earth. They were bonded to that place through intimate daily contact, through knowledge about their immediate environment with its changing seasons, needs and limitations. For them the environment was not some alien, problematic sphere of human concern; it was where they were. They were aware of the living context in which they found themselves” (Norberg-Hodge 2001, 336)

Before Ladakh began to modernize, the traditional and place-based way of life not only supported strong communities and healthy individuals, but it also maintained the natural balance of the local ecosystem. In addition to myth of Shangri-La, the Western bioregional narratives of Ladakh assume green primitivism, the idea that “primitive societies, shorn of the artifice of civilization, are in harmony with their environment through the wisdom of their folkways (Ellen 1986, 8). Green primitivism in Ladakh is equivalent to the ubiquitous claims in North America regarding the “ecological Indian.” The idea of green primitivism exists only within a linear conception of development, in which “traditional” societies such as Ladakh live in harmony and balance with nature because they are still a part of nature (Ellen 1986, 9). At the other end of this spectrum is the highly developed, civilized, modern society that is no longer attached to the biophysical world. The modern society is thus inherently destructive and corrupt. Reflecting upon Norberg-Hodge’s claims of green primitivism in Ladakh, Tsering writes,

By essentializing contemporary Ladakh as “ancient,” which is only a slight play of semantics from those who view such cultures as “primitive,” and by debating whether certain lifestyles should be brought into the cutting edge of modernity or left behind it, one affirms evolutionary and linear time and compares societies as if on a scale of developmental evolution. (Tsering 2008, 300)

Western bioregional dwelling assumes that pre-modern Ladakh emerged in isolation from the particular ecological characteristics of the geographic locale; and thus, the traditional culture was embedded in the natural environment. Given the interdependency between the traditional society and its biophysical surroundings, the Ladakhis possessed superior knowledge of the local ecosystems that allowed them to preserve the natural order. Norberg-Hodge believes that by looking at the ancient culture of Ladakh, the Western world can learn about how to live more sustainably with the earth.

As represented by Norberg-Hodge, the Western nostalgic conviction of pre-modern Ladakh suggests that the traditional Buddhist worldview in combination with the Ladakhis' sense of place bestowed upon the community an innate respect for the biophysical world as well as consciousness of ecological limits. Norberg-Hodge emphasizes this assumption in the following:

[t]he Ladakhi system was the result of a continuing dialogue between human beings and their surroundings, in which, over a two-thousand-year period of trial and error, the culture kept changing-co-evolving with its natural environment. The traditional Buddhist worldview emphasized change, but change within a framework of compassion and a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of all phenomena (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 136)

Pre-modern Ladakh's ecological knowledge of the local landscape as well as respect for the interconnectedness of all life induces the traditional Ladakhi community to form particular social structures and economic activities that maintain the biophysical world. For example, the polyandrous family structure was developed as a way to sustain land use pressure from overpopulation. Additionally, traditional Ladakhis internalized a true understanding of *frugality* in its true etymological meaning: "fruitfulness," or getting more out of little (Norberg-Hodge 1991 23). Through an internalized adherence to frugality, traditional Ladakhis recycled everything and wasted nothing.

Within the myth of green primitivism is the assumption that these ecological characteristics developed innately as a result of the traditional community's isolation from the outside, modern world. Norberg-Hodge suggests that,

"the old world order, at least as represented by the traditional Tibetan culture of Ladakh, was patently far more rooted in the "real world" and therefore far more environmentally sustainable, than its Western counterpart" (Norberg-Hodge 2001, 331)

To the postmodernist, green primitivism represents the authentic relationship between humans and the natural world before the advent of civilization and modernity. The green primitivism

argument assumes that ecological and social strife develops only from the imposition of external forces. If Ladakh were left untouched by the western economic model, the traditional community would continue to exist as it had for thousands of years.

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As I have articulated within this latter section, the western narrative of bioregional dwelling is predicated upon particular binary oppositions between the West and Ladakh that is meant to demonstrate the things we have lost by becoming a modern society. As a result, these Western narratives essentialize the characteristics of traditional and modern Ladakh in order to serve the interest of the westerner's postmodern nostalgic ideals. By utilizing a-historical western assumptions regarding pre-modern and modern Ladakh, essentialism leads situated narratives of bioregional dwelling to relate stories of environmental change that are more imagined than they are real.

In response to green primitive assumptions, Ellen proposes that there is no reason for us to assume that pre-modern, indigenous societies have maintained their ecological landscape as the result of some intimate knowledge and respect for the earth (Ellen 1986). Ellen and anthropologist, E.N. Anderson agree that, "[w]hile religion and belief may stress harmonious relations with nature, this does not prevent wholesale ecosystem damage due to pure economic necessity, in explicit, self-admitted violation of their norms and knowledge of final effect" (Ellen 1986, 11; Anderson 1969, 273-274). Green primitive assumptions romanticize traditional and "ancient" cultures such as Ladakh; however, "far from such societies being universally 'in harmony' with nature, they are often cruelly the victims of it" (Ellen 1986, 10). Population control and frugality did not emerge out of some innate understanding and connection to the

earth; rather, such practices were developed because pre-modern peoples were *unable* to support their children or produce a surplus of goods and supplies. Green primitivism highlights the particular characteristics of pre-modern societies that support postmodern nostalgia, while ignoring other important realities.

In the same way, the myth of Shangri-La is an a-historical and essentialist account of traditional Ladakhi society that merely serves to relieve postmodern strife. Tibetan scholar Jamyang Norbu notes that “[t]he Shangri-La fantasy has primarily to do with the psychological needs of certain people in the West” rather than the actual history and realities of these Himalayan cultures (Norbu 2001, 374). Reflecting on Western narratives of Tibetan cultures, Norbu writes:

It is in this dreamlike, ‘Shangri-la’ quality of Tibet, most observed in the medieval flavor of its society and culture and in its strange, esoteric religion, that Westerners find most attractive...this is the feature of Tibet that is most focused on, to the exclusion of other aspects of Tibetan life or culture, no matter how important they may be to the Tibetans themselves” (Norbu 2001, 375).

The environmental changes that have occurred in Ladakh are inextricably tied to incidents of social conflict within Ladakhi history, and these events continue to resonate within the local environmental narratives. However, these historical facts are largely overlooked and discredited in the western narrative of Ladakh, as they do not support the argument of bioregional dwelling.

Additionally, western bioregional narratives of Ladakh tend to assume that, until recent years, Ladakh was geographically as well as economically and politically separated from rest of the world. As Ellen notes, “it is most unlikely that any human population has ever been completely isolated, and many of these societies which we routinely call primitive, tribal, tradition or whatever, have been part of wider—often global—systems of exchange for millennia” (Ellen 1986, 9). Before the opening of Ladakh to tourism in 1974, the region was not

so easily accessible to the dominant western population. However, Ladakh was by no means an isolated, static or innately ecological society. Norberg-Hodge frequently maintains that when she arrived to the region in 1975, the Ladakh that she found was still essentially unaffected by the West. In the eyes of Norberg-Hodge, as well as her western audiences, the truly authentic traditional Ladakh existed prior to 1975. In 1986, she argued that “[u]ntil a few years ago, Ladakh was one of the very few places that had not been affected by the Western monoculture that had spread across the entire world” (Norberg-Hodge 1986). Additionally, Norberg-Hodge claimed that “when [she] arrived there in 1975, life in the villages was as it had been for eight hundred years” (Norberg-Hodge 1986). In this traditional, pre-1975 image of Ladakh, “people have much control over their lives” rather than being at the “mercy of faraway, inflexible bureaucracies” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 51). However, a closer look at the Ladakhi’s local narrative suggests that environmental change has not been merely an exogenous, imposed process.

### **Ladakh’s Environmental Changes: Historical and Political Perspectives**

While the West may mourn for the ecological and social stability of traditional Ladakh, the narrative of environmental change provided by Ladakh’s local population does not romanticize the conditions of the past. These narratives provide us with the reminder that the underlying significance of environmental narratives is contextually created. As the objectivity of situated narratives of place is relative to the narrator, we should continually be conscious of these varying perspectives to prevent the reification of our own abstract ideals. In response to Helena Norberg-Hodge’s *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, one Ladakhi Buddhist scholar suggests that the westerner’s image of Ladakh as a “self-sustaining, interdependent, society in

which the people have equanimity, contentedness, tolerance, humanism, balance and frugality” speaks so highly of the past that it may provide Ladakhi readers with inflated egos (van Beek 2000, 254).

There is no doubt that the development of Ladakh since the 1970s has drastically—and even negatively—altered the previous ecological and social conditions of Ladakh society. However, as Ladakh anthropologist and historian, Martijn van Beek warns, instead of focusing on what *we* think Ladakh has lost from their development into a modern society, we should first ask, “do people in Ladakh regard these [changes] as negative? And do they attribute them to development *per se*?” (Van Beek 2000, 253).

In comparing pre-modern Ladakh to modern Ladakh, “there are few Ladakhis who share Norberg-Hodge’s rosy view of traditional Ladakh” (Van Beek 2000, 254). Headman of Dah village, Tanzing Chospal echoes the voices of the majority of Ladakhi citizens who claim that Ladakhi society is much better now, noting that “in the past, there was darkness, we had to do what we had to do because nature was nature. Now that there is development, one has to accept the benefits it brings. Chospal does not glamorize the past” (Vohra 1996). Elsewhere, renowned Buddhist scholars Nawang Tsering and Tashi Rabgyas, as well as Ladakhi Christian pastor Reverend Elijah Gergan present positive attitudes towards the improvements brought about by the development of modern Ladakh, including the roads, bridges, education, electricity supplies, radio, vegetable gardening, health care, business and technology (Tsering, 1994, Gergan 1993, Rabgyas 1994). All of these benefits have improved rather than reduced the quality of life for the Ladakhi citizen. Tsering writes that “if one asks the older generation to comment on whether they were happier and better off in the 1940s or the 1990s, they would unhesitatingly say that as

far as the comfort of their lives is concerned, there is no comparison—in that respect, they are better off now” (Tsering 1994).

Norberg-Hodge has frequently criticized the Ladakhis idealization of modern society as naïve and un-reflexive. Given that Ladakhis are experiencing the changes from within, they are unable to comprehend the negative social and ecological consequences of the modern culture. She writes,

people do not and cannot have an overview of what is happening to them as they stand in the middle of the development process. Modernization is not perceived as a threat to the culture. The individual changes that come along usually look like unconditional improvements; there is not way of anticipating their negative long-term consequences...(Norberg-Hodge 1991, 139)

However, I suggest that in order to better comprehend the voices of the local Ladakhi citizens, we should not treat Ladakhi citizens as naïve and helpless pawns of the global development project; rather, we must better understand the contextual influences that lead to such narrative understandings. Instead of dismissing such accounts for being unreflective and confused, it is beneficial to explore *why* it may be that Ladakhis provide such different attitudes and accounts of the developmental changes. I find that Ladakhi narratives of environmental change can be best understood with a mind to Ladakh’s geopolitical and historical realities. Viewed in this light, we can see why Ladakhis do not narrate the story of environmental change through a focus on binary oppositions between tradition and modernity.

A view towards the historical and geopolitical realities of Ladakhi society reveals that there is no reason to assume that Ladakhi villages developed “entirely autonomously of the political, religious and cultural influences that have swept across [the region] over the centuries” (Pirie 2007, 11). Far from the isolated pastoral communities of western bioregional imagination, historian Fernanda Pirie suggests,



Ladakhi villages have always had to engage with external holders of power: the kings, aristocrats, religious leaders, and, now the agents of state control. Such relations have involved both resistance and reliance, marked by the payment (and avoidance) of taxes and compliance, and, now enjoyment of the benefits of schools, roads and consumer goods. (Pirie 2006, 84)

Ladakh's geopolitical history illuminates that the Ladakh's way of life is not something internally shaped by the strength of the traditional community; rather, it has also been externally shaped and contested for thousands of years. Ladakhi situated narratives towards environmental change reflect Ladakh's extended struggle for autonomy with authoritative powers within the larger system. In this section, I will point out the major geopolitical institutions of Ladakh to show that Ladakh's views regarding environmental changes are characterized by a persistent demand for more and better development as well as autonomy, rather than localization and a return to the traditional life.

The earliest historical records of Ladakh come from a Chinese pilgrim *Fa-Hsian* who visited the region in AD 400. During this time and up until 1841, Ladakhi villages were centrally governed by a number of kings and clergy members (Cunningham 1998, 315). Fernanda Pirie notes that "the villager's historical narratives describe the era of the Ladakhi kingdom as the time of 'the king's peace. Prior to which was a troubled era of violence and fighting between neighboring villages'" (Pirie 2006, 82). However, the old kingdom of Ladakh was still far from the harmonious and idyllic society of the Western bioregional imagination. The days of the king provided temporary security from invasion; however, the "king's power was exercised through the extensive imposition of taxes and periodic mobilization of the population for war" (Pirie 2006, 82). The most infamous of these impositions was the system of *begar*, which forced Ladakhi villagers to provide periodic transport labor to the king. During the time of the "king's peace," the social structures of Ladakh were semi-hierarchical rather than egalitarian: the king elevated three percent of the Ladakhi population into the aristocratic class, and provided them

with supplemental lands and social power. Additionally, in the Ladakhi kingdom, villagers throughout the land engaged in continual warfare, social conflicts and long distance trading activities (Pirie 2007, 11). The end of this era was marked by a number of destructive invasions by the neighboring Sokpo tribe, which set the scene for Ladakh's more significant invasion by the Dogras of Kashmir.

The Dogra invasion of Ladakh in 1834 began a period of intense internal change and anti-colonial struggles that, according to many Ladakhis, marked the point at which ““traditional” Ladakh and its ways of life began to decline” while negative environmental changes began to occur (van Beek 2000, 263). The Dogras were a Muslim community from the Kashmir Valley, who assumed leadership of the new British state, Jammu & Kashmir. Assimilating Ladakh into this new princely state, the Dogras overtook the political regime of the Ladakhi royal family, and rather than changing its fundamental elements, they reinforced the existing one to “extract maximum economic benefit” (Pirie 2007, 29). During the next century, the Dogras implemented a series “administrative reforms, land settlements and development initiatives” (Pirie 2007, 2). As part of these projects, the Dogra rulers imposed additional taxes upon the Ladakhi villages, “which came on top of villagers’ existing obligations to local landlords, including Buddhist monasteries “ (van Beek 2000, 255). Additionally, they continued the system of *begar* labor duties to the central government (Pirie 2007, 29). The Dogra era of Ladakhi history marks the end of any relative autonomy over land use and development that Ladakh once had in the old kingdom. Ladakhi Buddhist scholar Tashi Rabgyas mentions that during the Dogra rule, “with respect to secular government, the Ladakhis had been made powerless, poor and without direction, with respect to religion, the bases of offerings and power of monasteries...” (Rabgyas 1984, 488).

After India's independence from the British government in 1947, Ladakh was officially declared a district within the state of Jammu & Kashmir, which is ruled by the larger national government in New Delhi. With the partition of India following its independence, Ladakh became a region of strategic importance to the Indian military due to its geographic isolation and relative proximity to the conflict zone of Kashmir and Western Pakistan. As a result, the state of India began to "consolidate its position in the upper Indus Valley" through the establishment of a large military base as well as several development projects (Michaud 1996, 291). In 1974, the Indian government finally opened up Ladakh to the free movement of domestic and foreign tourists, prompting the government to invest in new infrastructural developments to accommodate the rising tourism industry.

Post-independent India released Ladakh from the heavy tax burdens, labor obligations and debts imposed by rulers in former eras (Van Beek 2000, 255). Among older generations of Ladakhi villagers, there is a general consensus that pre-independence India was "characterized by widespread poverty and indebtedness" (Van Beek 2000, 254). Despite the negative social and ecological impacts that have encroached upon the region due to modern developments, Ladakhis feel that their release from the former era has been an overall improvement in their quality of life. Reflecting on the changes that have occurred in the region, Ladakhi scholar Nawang Tsering asks, nowadays, "don't people feel themselves masters of their own patches of land and don't they find their harvests sweeter as nobody now dares to lay a hand on them?" (Tsering 1994). Ladakhi tax collector, A.N. Sapru wrote in 1941 that "it would be difficult to imagine a country more ground down by the burden of debts than Ladakh...the rate of interest is the highest...the rate of interest is 25, and the more astute the creditor is the more interest he contrive to compound" (Sapru 1941; Van Beek 2000, 254).

Modern society has certainly brought about positive changes to the livelihoods of the Ladakhi villagers in the form of increased economic security and new material comforts. However, these changes have also increased Ladakh's dependency on the outside world for imported goods. Agriculture has shifted to cash cropping, which supplies essential commodities to the military base and tourist population. In addition, village communities are disintegrating as younger generations of Ladakhis continue to migrate into the city for economic opportunities. In response to the negative ecological and social impacts that have occurred within the region, Ladakhis have focused on the effect of their geopolitical constraints (i.e. loss of autonomy and decision making power) rather than the loss of their traditional, ecologically grounded society. As posters in the main bazaar of Leh town proclaimed in 1989, there is "one cause for Ladakh's problems: the Kashmir Government; One solution: Union Territory status" (van Beek 2000, 261). Van Beek writes, "[t]he blame for present problems is place on the Kashmir Government, not development, and...salutations are sought in terms of planning, administration and decision-making powers" (van Beek 2000, 261).

Since the Dogra period, Ladakh, as a region and a population, has been politically and economically marginalized within the state of Jammu & Kashmir. Existing as only a minority population within this larger state, Ladakhis are continually denied decision-making power in the development projects that take place in their own lands. Ladakhis have responded to the negative environmental changes by complaining about the slow pace and lack of development as well as their economic, political and cultural marginalization in the state and nation. "We were totally ignored by J&K" one native Ladakhi relays, "ignored as far as development benefits are concerned, ignored as far as education is concerned. The proportion of the Central Government budget that is meant for us, never reached us. We got no benefits at all" (Vohra 1996, 113). As

shown in the chart below, since the first five-year development plan implemented in J&K state, Ladakh has received less than 3% of the total allocations.

Total Funds	Allocation to Ladakh	Percentage
1951-55: 115 million	0	0%
1955-61: 312 million	8.5 million	2.7%
1961-65: 640 million	~15 million	2.3%

(Van Beek 2000, 537)

The Indian government has long insisted that the Ladakhi people are incapable of addressing regional issues without provisional help. Visiting the region in 1949, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru noted, “In Ladakh, you are backward, and unless you learn and train yourselves you cannot run the affairs of your own country” (van Beek 1999, 2). Given Ladakh’s increasing dependence on imported good as well as lack of industry (aside from tourism), the State of Jammu & Kashmir often regards Ladakh as a burden on national and state budgets (van Beek 1999, 4). Within the state assembly of J&K’s capital in Srinagar, Ladakhis hold official positions but are highly underrepresented. In an assembly of one hundred and fifty representatives, Ladakhis hold only three seats. These Ladakhi state officials continually complain of neglect and “step-motherly treatment” from the state agencies in Srinagar (van Beek 1999). In response to the environmental changes that have occurred in the region Western bioregionalists have advocated for Ladakh’s decentralization and autonomy in order for the region to reclaim its traditional, ecologically based culture. Meanwhile, Ladakhis have fought for autonomy in order to improve development projects and increase state involvement in the region (Van Beek 2000, 251).

Since 1947, the primary political goal of Ladakh has been emancipation from the neglectful grasp of the Kashmiri government. Ladakhis believe that this liberation will allow the

people of Ladakh to address the needs of the region with greater accommodation to the unique conditions of the geographic landscape. To address the region's problematic changes, Ladakhis have persistently argued for Union Territory (UT) status within the Indian nation. UT status is a nationally recognized administrative order that would provide Ladakh with direct rule and benefits from the central government in New Delhi rather than indirectly through the state of Jammu & Kashmir. In 1989, Ladakh's growing frustration towards the J&K government resulted in a violent public agitation in Leh town alongside of a three-year social boycott of Kashmiri Muslim traders, both of which were led by a local civil society organization called the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). In a resolution written by the LBA in 1989, the group justified their actions by arguing that "Ladakh has always been treated as a colony and Ladakhis third-rate citizens of JandK State.... neglected in every sphere of life Socially Politically and economically" (Van Beek 2000, 260).

After three years of agitation, the national government finally attended to Ladakh's demands by developing a regional autonomous development council. Established in 1995, the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Council was Ladakh's first victorious step towards regional autonomy. The Autonomous Hill Council was provided power over land use and allocation; the formulation and review of development programs; the formulation of the district budget as well as guidelines for grassroots programs; the promotion of regional culture; tourism development; forest, agriculture and water planning; and ecological preservation (van Beek 1999, 4). While the official provisions of the autonomous hill council appear substantial, Ladakhis have yet to see any real accomplishments. After only five years in power, "the Council has lost almost all local support, has managed to achieve little or no change in development policies and appears to be in disarray ideologically, politically and administratively" (Behera 2005). Martijn Van Beek

suggests that the ineffectiveness of the autonomous hill council is merely a reflection of Ladakh's marginal power on the regional scale. He notes, "Ladakh's marginality in economic, political and cultural terms has on the one hand served as justification for the establishment of the council, but also signifies its lack of effective power." (van Beek 1999,4).

Among the local population, there is a general disagreement regarding the westerner's romanticized and essentialist image of traditional Ladakh. However, Ladakhis have accepted these reified ideals in order to argue for increased governmental benefits and also to sustain their growing tourism industry. In India, particular groups of minorities have the right to demand for the status of "scheduled tribes" (ST) to receive additional and specialized benefits from the government. ST status provides these minority peoples with reserved spots in universities and federal positions as well as special government funds and "upliftment projects" (Karlsson 2001, 10; Van Beek 1997, 28). The general qualification for ST status in India generally requires "backwardness", "relative isolation" and cultural distinctiveness" (Karlsson 2001, 10). While potentially beneficial to poor communities, the ST program is also imperialistic, as it assumes a linear model of development in which tribal peoples represent the more primitive, lower stages of development. Using the westerners' essentialist images of traditional Ladakh to validate their unique and backward identity, Ladakh successfully gained scheduled tribe status in 1989. As illustrated by their political actions, Ladakhis have utilized a western imagination of Ladakh to encourage development rather than to return to the ecologically based, traditional society.

The environmental narrative provided by the local perspective of Ladakhi citizens illuminates the role of Ladakh's complex geopolitical realities in shaping the region's environmental changes. The history of Ladakh's geopolitical conflicts shows that rather than existing in harmonious isolation from the modern society, traditional Ladakh is characterized by

longstanding political marginalization and exclusion as well as persistent economic difficulties.

The peaceful, joyous and ecological utopia that existed within the western bioregional narrative was not an inherent quality of pre-modern Ladakh; rather it was merely a figment of the western imagination.

### **Tradition: The White Man's Burden**

*Take up the White Man's burden--  
In patience to abide,  
To veil the threat of terror  
And check the show of pride;  
By open speech and simple,  
An hundred times made plain  
To seek another's profit,  
And work another's gain.*

*Take up the White Man's burden--  
The savage wars of peace--  
Fill full the mouth of Famine  
And bid the sickness cease;  
And when your goal is nearest  
The end for others sought,  
Watch sloth and heathen Folly  
Bring all your hopes to naught*

(“The White Man’s Burden” by Rudyard Kipling 1899)

The White Man’s Burden is a concept that developed out of the European colonization of Africa in the 1800s. In the colonial era, the White Man’s Burden encouraged cultural imperialism by conveying the western duty to uplift non-western peoples from their primitive and impoverished ways of life. Thus, the White Man’s Burden justified Western intervention of non-western nations through claims of moral duty and social justice. Of course, the irony of the White Man’s Burden is that this moral obligation was never really about “helping” primitive communities. The colonization of non-western peripheral nations was meant for the extraction of



particular goods and resources that would benefit the western nations and thereby strengthen their global hegemonic power.

The tradition of the White Man's Burden continues in our postcolonial global society, through non-governmental organizations and foreign aid agencies whose humanitarian work only re-imposes traditional hierarchies between the global north and the global south. The counter-development and sustainable development projects that have spread throughout the region of Ladakh since 1974 exemplify the ways in which western NGOs and aid agencies have utilized the rhetoric of the White Man's Burden to forward their own postmodern agenda. While the western narrative of environmental change in Ladakh may exist only as a *situated narrative of place*, its perspectives and arguments have become reified as the result of western environmental organizations and postmodern tourism.

Since the opening of Ladakh to free movement in 1974, Ladakh has welcomed several foreign non-governmental organizations to the region, the largest of which include the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), the Leh Nutrition Project, the Snow Leopard Conservancy and the Tibet Heritage Fund. In describing the motivations behind their work, each of these organizations utilizes the familiar narrative of bioregional dwelling, as "[m]any if not all of these organizations were and are inspired by the efforts and ideas introduced by Helena Norberg-Hodge" (van Beek 2000, 263). While claiming to help Ladakh resolve their ecological and social issues, each of these initiatives is motivated by the ideals and visions of preserving traditional, ecological Ladakh for western postmodern consumption. Thus, by utilizing the prototypical and un-reflexive narrative of bioregional dwelling as the basis of their humanitarian work, western NGOs and aid agencies inadvertently impose environmental solutions upon Ladakh without proper accommodation of the region's geopolitical realities or local needs.

The past three decades of free movement in Ladakh has drawn the attention of numerous postmodern foreigners, including tourists, university researchers, philanthropists and anthropologists, all of whom have “together helped make [Ladakh] a world observation site” (Gouery 2010). As Norberg-Hodge frequently recapitulates towards the end of her environmental narrative, because the Ladakhi people view these changes from an insider’s vantage point, they are unable to predict or become aware of the negative social and ecological side effects of modern culture. She suggests that since Ladakhis are unable to reflect critically upon such changes, they would (understandably) regard the modern society as far superior than their traditional one. Looking at the West only from the outside,

...all [the Ladakhis] can see is the material side of the modern world—the side in which Western culture excels. They cannot so readily see the social or psychological dimensions—the stress, the loneliness, the fear of growing old. Nor can they see environmental decay, inflation or unemployment” (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 97).

However, are Westerners not also idealizing the material sides of the Ladakhi society—the side in which Ladakh culture has presumably excelled? Are we also unable to readily see the complexities and realities of traditional Ladakhi life? Regardless of the contradictions inherent within both local and global narratives, Norberg-Hodge encouraged the West to take on the White Man’s Burden. “The larger point,” says Norberg-Hodge, “[is] that as an educated person with a broad experience of the world, you [have] a duty to help others find a better way, to learn from the mistakes all around you, mistakes that your culture was inflicting upon theirs” (Conover 2010, 109). This resurrection of the White Man’s Burden inflicts a duty upon the western world to bring Ladakhis the truth about modern culture, and to prevent Ladakh from going down a similar destructive path.

The environmental solutions proposed by western nongovernmental organizations primarily involve counter-development (sometimes called localization), and the preservation of

Ladakhi culture and tradition. The most prominent of these foreign initiatives in Ladakh is the Ladakh Ecological Development Group (LEDeG), an organization that is inspired and supported by the visions and arguments of Helena Norberg. LEDeG is essentially the Ladakh-based branch of Norberg-Hodge's larger counter-development organization, the International Society for Ecology and Culture. LEDeG promotes "appropriate technologies"—small-scale, locally operated projects—which include traditional water mills, mini micro-hydel units, solar energy, greenhouses and solar ovens. The organization also provides environmental health education to villagers, supports traditional organic agriculture and has created a locally operated market in Leh town for traditional Ladakhi handicrafts. With the help of Helena Norberg-Hodge, LEDeG has gained access to powerful political figures in the state and national government in support of their environmental and (counter-) developmental initiatives (Norberg-Hodge 1991, 168). Thus, the potential power and impact of the organization is substantial, at least on paper and in the media.

Many other foreign NGOs, including the Snow Leopard Conservancy and the Ladakh Renewable Energy Initiative, have taken on similar counter-development projects. Meanwhile, other prominent NGOs have worked to preserve or revive the traditions of pre-modern Ladakh. For example, the Leh Nutrition Project, an organization that focuses on providing environmental health information and health care to Ladakhi villagers, has strongly advocated for the revitalization of Tibetan *amchi* medicine. Additionally, the Tibet Heritage Fund has worked to conserve Ladakh's ancient monasteries, buildings and monuments. However, as Martijn Van Beek has pointed out, these "alternative strategies of LEDeG and other NGOs such as the LNP are frequently welcomed [by Ladakh] not because they are alternative, as in the case of micro-hydro or solar greenhouses, but because they are seen as harbingers of development" (Van Beek

1995). Ladakhis tend to accept these foreign environmental initiatives as a ways of bringing in new modern technologies or attracting more tourists to the region.

While these organizations—especially LEDeG—have promised significant improvements in the ecological and social conditions, as well the overall quality of life of Ladakhi citizens, their efforts have been largely unsuccessful. As a result, NGOs have lost the support of the local populations that they promise to help. Many Ladakhis complain that the greenhouses are merely “breeding grounds for insects” and that the solar panels have provided insufficient amounts of energy for the Ladakh villages (Vohra 1996, 124). Ladakhi hotel owner and former tour guide, David Zipata notes that “[n]othing solid has been achieved by [these NGOs]; in any case, nothing much can be shown for all its efforts “ (Vohra 1996, 124). These foreign environmental NGOs are also “heavily dependent on outside funding, draw heavily on Western ideas and practices and are remarkably hierarchical and bureaucratic” (van Beek 2000, 263). Norberg-Hodge realized early on that the way to “penetrate Ladakhi society” with her bioregional visions was through the region’s religious and political authority, as represented by the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). With Norberg-Hodge’s encouragement, LBA president and local politician, Thupson Tsewang quickly became the Ladakhi leader of LEDeG (Vohra 1996, 90). The organization has since developed into an exclusionary social group that consists primarily of intellectual Buddhist elites (Michaud 1996, 294). Given the failures, problems and lack of local support for these Western environmental initiatives, what then motivates Norberg-Hodge and other westerners to continue “helping” Ladakh? What are they preserving “tradition” for?

The answer to these latter questions can be postulated through a critical analysis of Ladakh’s growing tourism industry. Given the lack of other industries in the harsh ecological

landscape of Ladakh, tourism is the region's primary economic activity. As a result, many young Ladakhis, exiled Tibetans and Kashmir traders routinely migrate to the main city to sell handicrafts, open guesthouses, drive taxis and lead tours. Foreign tourists typically visit Ladakh for the following purposes: a) the monastic culture, b) the traditional Buddhist culture, c) trekking, d) mountaineering (Jina 1994, 56). I find that underlying these primary tourist activities, the mysticism and bioregional narratives that have permeated the western portrayal of Ladakh attract a largely postmodern class of western tourists. Buddhist scholar, Tashi Rabgyas notes:

[o]ne of the characteristics of the present generation of western tourists...is that they come without colonialist attitudes and pretensions...[they] are quite open-minded...The attitude of enquiry makes their visit very interesting...their questions help us to learn and think more seriously about various aspects of our own culture. (Rabgyas 2004, 37)

The postmodern tourist reflects upon the narrative of bioregional dwelling throughout the entirety of his or her tourism experience. The tourist's main concern during this experience is "to evaluate whether Ladakh, or a particular Ladakhi, is traditional or modern" (Gillespie 2006, 107). Meanwhile, "the gaze of Ladakhis does not seek out the authentic pre-modern, and very few admire nature in the same way that tourists do" (Gillespie 2006, 80). The postmodern tourist seeks out the "traditional" Ladakh merely to satisfy a nostalgic yearning for the region's authentic society—as it is represented by the western myths of Shangri-La and green primitivism. As Ladakh historian James Crook argues, "the tourist—however poorly informed, visits Ladakh for its authenticity. If that is lost the nature of tourism itself will change" (Crook 1980, 160).

As a result, western environmental NGOs have worked strenuously to counter-develop and preserve Ladakh's remaining traditions for the purpose of satisfying the western tourist's postmodern strife, rather than to address the actual needs of the local Ladakhi villagers. The

westerner's romantic images of "traditional" Ladakh have become objectified through invented and re-invented customs, infrastructure and activities. Ironically, many of these so-called "traditions" are now de-contextualized and disconnected from the actual lives of current Ladakhi citizens. However, given Ladakh's growing economic dependence on tourism, Ladakhi citizens seek to maintain these de-contextualized narratives of "traditional" Ladakh to sell for profit. Ladakhis continue to build traditional compost toilets, maintain small vegetable gardens and wear the traditional *gonchas* to appease the yearnings of the postmodern tourists. Thus, in the modern reconstruction of the White Man's Burden, the irony remains the same. In proposing to "help" Ladakh, westerners rely on a situated narrative of bioregional dwelling that serves merely to relieve their own postmodern nostalgia. By discrediting the voices of and political realities of the Ladakhis, western environmental solutions have been largely unsuccessful. Additionally, the reification of the western bioregional narratives in environmental solutions has re-established hierarchical relations between the west and Ladakh. However, this post-colonial hierarchy is more parental than imperialistic in nature.

Criticizing Norberg-Hodge suggestion that it is the westerner's duty to inform Ladakhis the truth about modern society, Ted Conover writes,

"wasn't that like telling kids they shouldn't eat too much sugar because of the likelihood (which they could only appreciate only from having experience and education) of tooth decay? You could do it if you were a parent. But tragically, we were not their parents." (Conover 2010, 108)

Western environmental initiatives tend to portray Ladakhis as children who need protection from corruptive modern culture, "lest it should contaminate and create uncontrollable appetites" (Gillespie 2006, 163). In the post-colonial version of the White Man's Burden, westerners are often cautious of depicting their societies as superior to non-Western ones. However, they often inadvertently reproduce this attitude of superiority through paternalism (Gillespie 2006, 164).

Clearly, the western perspective of Ladakh provides some important insights into the changes that have encroached upon the region within recent years. Nonetheless, by focusing solely upon their own environmental narrative to describe these changes, westerners tend to impose solutions upon Ladakh that are ineffective and unreflective of local demands.

## **Conclusion:**

In this thesis, I have argued that there is no universal and correct way to interpret the physical manifestations of environmental change. All narratives of environmental change are *situated narratives of place* whose particular contexts and embodiments include “hidden agendas that influence what the narrative includes or excludes” (Cronon 1992, 1352). However, by placing more emphasis on the epistemological dimensions of environmental problems and solutions, we may be able to transcend the limitations of our situated contexts and embodiments. As a result of this analysis, we may be able to provide more reflexivity to our ubiquitous environmental narratives. While significant social and ecological changes have undoubtedly taken place in Ladakh within the past few decades, environmental narratives provided by the Western bioregionalist and the Ladakhi inhabitant offer significantly different accounts of the same event. However, there are obvious advantages within the conclusions and details provided by both the local and global narratives of environmental change.

As illustrated by the western narrative of bioregional dwelling, a situated “view from nowhere” provides important insights regarding the negative impacts of environmental change. While postmodern, the western “view from nowhere” has privileged access to the physical and natural sciences. As a result, the information and arguments provided by these western narratives are important in preventing potentially disastrous ecological and human health impacts brought

about by the environmental changes. Helena Norberg-Hodge's LEDeG and other foreign environmental organizations in Ladakh have been instrumental in educating Ladakhis about environmental health hazards, including improper waste disposal and the toxic chemicals, such as asbestos. However, given the underlying postmodern agenda of the western perspective, the narrative of bioregional dwelling also tends to place too much emphasis on discussions about authenticity (or "traditional" vs. "modern" Ladakh) without proper accommodation to the region's geopolitical and historical context. In doing so, narratives of bioregional dwelling tend to ignore or cast off the voices and genuine needs of local Ladakhi citizens. In a review of *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh*, one Tibetan scholar at the University of British Columbia, argues that "[I]t is odd that Norberg-Hodge is set on protecting the Ladakhi subsistence way of life from the global economy while ignoring the more immediate and pervasive Indian political economy" (Tsering 2008, 299).

Meanwhile, the narrative provided by the Ladakhi perspective also has its advantages and disadvantages. Ladakhis have more exclusive knowledge about region's geopolitical realities with Jammu & Kashmir and India, as well as the actual needs of the Ladakhi citizens. However, as Norberg-Hodge has accurately pointed out, the Ladakhis—experiencing the changes from within—may be not be able to see or grasp some of the negative consequences of modern society. While modernization has undoubtedly brought increased freedom and wellbeing to Ladakh, negative environmental changes do exist, and if we do not adequately address these issues, the future of Ladakh may be bleak and unfavorable.

This analysis of Ladakh's *situated narratives of place* illustrates the limitations as well as on-the-ground implications of environmental narratives. My discussion of narrative understanding and my arguments regarding the ubiquitous western narrative of bioregional



dwelling has significance beyond the case of environmental change in Ladakh. As I have discussed within this essay, narratives are the primary tools through which we make sense of and communicate environmental change, and while they come from a range of differently situated perspectives, some narratives tend to dominate the mainstream portrayal of these changes. The narrative of bioregional dwelling has become increasingly prevalent in western grassroots environmentalism as a framework that explains events of environmental crisis and change. Local food projects, ecovillages and transition movements exemplify this large group of emerging grassroots environmental initiatives whose underlying motivations largely reflect postmodern nostalgia and bioregional imagination. These environmental initiatives idealize traditional ways of life—including traditional agriculture and social structures—while encouraging increased decentralization, self-sufficiency and localism in order to address environmental problems. At the same time, these initiatives approach environmental problems and solutions from only one vantage point, while ignoring other pertinent perspectives. The narrative of bioregional dwelling—as with all other narratives—only exists as a *situated narrative of place*; as a result, it does not provide all-encompassing, objective understanding of environmental change.

Is it ever possible to gain an objective understanding of a region's environmental changes? I find that the answer is: probably not. As illustrated by the differing situated narratives of Ladakh's environmental changes, there are particular aspects of physical reality that are omitted by some perspectives while seen clearly by others. As differently situated and embodied humans, we may never be able to fully transcend our limited perspectives of the world to gain truly objective knowledge. However, by becoming more conscious of the plurality of environmental narratives and critical of our situated perspectives, we may be able to better contextualize environmental changes, and avoid falling into the trap of the White Man's Burden.

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### Figures and Images:



Figure 2. Thiksey gonpa





Figure 3. A grandmother and her grandson in Takmachik Village.



Figure 4. A young girl *chu tang ches* (irrigates) her family's vegetable garden in Likir Village.