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Book Review

Naomi Klein's *Doppelganger*

In *Doppelganger: a trip into the mirror world*, Naomi Klein argues that capitalism is neither beneficial nor sustainable and calls for collective resistance and action. Klein illustrates capitalism's negative impacts by examining contemporary culture, personal branding, surveillance capitalism, far-right movements, the socialist left, Israel/Palestine, and identity politics. She uses the concept of a “mirror world” to characterize our increasingly polarized society, where complex ideas are manipulated into strict binaries and truth is convoluted by perverted “doppelgangers,” which manifest online *and* in the real world. *Doppelganger* is similar to Joy Buolamwini's *Unmasking AI: my mission to protect what is human in a world of machines* and Jia Tolentino's *Trick Mirror* because it analyzes today's information landscape and digital cultures through a feminist lens. Klein asks the reader, “What kind of system is most likely to light up the best parts of all of us - and sustain the fire beyond a protest, or a summer uprising, or a presidential campaign?” (Klein, 336) *Doppelganger*'s critique of capitalism is unique because Klein's writing is exceptionally personal, and this personal quality is her book's strength as well as its weakness. Klein brings her readers into the mirror world, but whereas she intends to bring us out of it by way of collective resistance, the book leaves this reader feeling isolated. Klein gives language to ideas and experiences that seem incomprehensible, effectively

rendering the mirror world's web visible, but her book is both a reflection on narcissism and, ultimately, a narcissistic project.

Doppelganger invites its readers to experience the uncanny nature of the mirror world through Klein's personal experiences and investigative reporting. (11) The book begins during COVID, when people online repeatedly confuse Klein with another author and public figure, Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* and a former feminist and left-wing political activist who slipped into the world of implausible conspiracy theories in the early 2000s. The public's confusion catalyzes Klein's investigation into far-right political movements and conspiracy theorists that Wolf supports online, and she calls what she experiences "the mirror world," a place where she "[senses] that reality is somehow warping." (6) The mirror world, she discovers, ultimately reflects the ways that capitalism perverts truth, perpetuates conspiracy theories, and exacerbates solipsism. (6)

In part one, "Double Life," Klein examines the ways that personal branding characterizes the mirror world. Klein refers to personal branding as "one of the most valued activities of contemporary capitalism." (47) Capitalism compels individuals and organizations to create distinct brands to market themselves to others, but those brands ultimately become grotesque caricatures of their "real" selves. We work to differentiate ourselves from others and market ourselves in singular, reductive ways, and Klein argues that the vacuums that these personal brands - these doppelgangers - engender ultimately contribute to our increasingly polarized, fractured, and chaotic society. The mirror world is not synonymous with the digital world. Rather, it is the people, places, and values that seek to benefit from capitalist systems and their shadows, which encompass all that is neglected and rendered invisible as a result.

To illustrate capitalism's doppelganger effect, Klein interrogates her self image as an author and public figure dedicated to social justice and activism. She recalls her audience's response to her book *No Logo*, which she wrote in an effort to "tell the truth about branding's false promises and seamy underside." (49) Klein worked hard to market herself as anti-branding, "[t]o be the only clean one in a dirty business." (50) Ironically, her book became a "signifier – an object or an accessory to be carried around and not read...to signal they were closeted revolutionaries, all to get ideas for future campaigns." (50) Her work and her brand became caricatures when people used them to market themselves as "anti-branding" and "anti-capitalist." Rather than celebrate Klein as someone with complex and evolving values, ideas, and beliefs, Klein's audience embraced her brand as a singular entity - one that was fixed and marketable.

In part two, "Mirror World," Klein examines how the mirror world serves right-wing political movements by misinforming people and rendering them vulnerable to conspiracy theories and xenophobia. Klein draws an important distinction between the "democratic socialist left" and the "far out," and she explains how the right grows its base by "catching" the people and issues that the left neglects or actively ostracizes. (102) Here, she uses Naomi Wolf (the woman who her audience confuses her with online) as a case study:

I had started writing about the Green New Deal in 2018. She did, too, shortly after, only with her special conspiracy twists. I began publishing about the dangers of geoengineering as a response to the climate crisis, with a particular focus on how high-altitude simulations of volcanoes that were intended to partially dim the sun risked interfering with rainfall in the Southern Hemisphere. She was busy speculating on social media about chemical cloudseeding and covert mass poisonings. I based my writing on dozens of peer-reviewed papers and managed to get access to two closed-door geoengineering conferences, where I interviewed several of the key scientists involved in lab-based research on sending particles into the upper atmosphere to control the sun's radiation. She started taking photographs of random clouds in upstate New York and London, prompting the environmental magazine *Grist* to declare, in 2018, that 'Wolf is a cloud truther. (26)

Klein uses Wolf as an example of someone who makes a diagonal shift towards far out conspiracy theories that support far right agendas. (102) While Klein does not sympathize with diagonalists (defectors of the left who make the diagonal move to the right by ascribing all power to conspiracy,) she argues that people like Wolf are evidence of the left's most salient strategic failures. While the left depletes itself by alienating its members, the right grows its movement through inclusive outreach. Klein expounds the ways that "left movements often behave in ways that are neither inclusive nor caring," "turning minor language infractions into major crimes, while adopting a discourse that is so complex and jargon-laden that people outside university settings often find it off-putting - or straight up absurd." (126-127) She points to the ways that the left misses opportunities to "build alliances with people who aren't already in our movements" by reducing "entire categories of people" into binaries of privileged or not." (159, 127) According to Klein, the mirror world provides conspiracy theories that support right wing agendas and serve as lifelines for the people who feel rejected by left movements. In this way, Klein demonstrates why left movements continue to shrink while the right gains strength.

Klein explains that in our political mirror world, left and right movements define themselves in contrast to the other, exacerbating polarization and xenophobia. Our binary political environment and the sentiments that it engenders ultimately serve far right movements, which strategically co-opt ideas and embrace conspiracy theories to grow their movements. In our mirror world, "the line between unsupported conspiracy claims and reliable investigative research is neither as firm nor as stable as many of us would like to believe." (223-224) She demonstrates this phenomenon by way of tech billionaires who profited during and because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Klein argues that the profiteering and opportunism that took place during the pandemic was so egregious and explicit that people on both sides of the political

spectrum began to wonder (and believe) that the virus itself was a conspiracy. (147) (Because these few powerful people were profiting so immensely from this disaster, they must have planned it!)

In part three, “Shadow Lands,” Klein explains that capitalism is the obvious and real conspiracy driving the zeitgeist. (227) She writes, “if we define ‘conspiracy’ as an agreement among members of a group to pull off some kind of nefarious plot in the shadows, then representatives of capital - in government and the corporate sectors - engage in conspiracies as a matter of course.” (235) Rather than accept that capitalism is the essential conspiracy, however, individuals like Naomi Wolf attribute these disasters to “satanic evil.” (231) Rather than understanding the ways that power and disaster capitalism operate, people turned to conspiracy theories. This phenomena invokes Samuel Woolley’s assertion in *Manufacturing Consensus* that false content spreads faster than evidence-based information on the internet. Perhaps it is too difficult to process the consistently negative impacts of capitalism that the public seeks false narratives. The distrust, fear, and anger that disaster capitalism and conspiracy theories engender online lead to increasing polarization. In today’s mirror world, there are “binaries where thinking once lived.” (12)

Klein argues that the doppelganger effect transcends individuals and politics and can characterize cultures and nations too. She uses Palestine as an example of the mirror world’s “Shadow Lands,” the places where capitalist structures relegate those who are excluded from the countries that embrace capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy . (327) She argues that Israel represents “the fascist clown state that is the everpresent twin of liberal Western democracies, perpetually threatening to engulf us in its fires of selective belonging and ferocious despising.” (12) Klein sheds light on the suffering of Palestinian people and calls for

resistance: “We must attempt, with great urgency, to imagine a world that does not require Shadow Lands, that is not predicated on sacrificial people and sacrificial ecologies and sacrificial continents. More than imagine it, we must begin, at once, to build it.” (327-328)

In part four, “Unselfing,” Klein advocates for building a world without shadow lands through collective action and care. First, she focuses on the left’s discourse. She calls on her readers to name the systems of oppression that necessitate shadow lands and to encourage others to do the same. (327) In order to debunk conspiracy theories and resist xenophobia, we must understand the way that power operates in today’s world and patiently speak truth to anyone struggling to understand the mirror world. Klein advocates for resistance through inclusive outreach and patience, and she invokes John A. Powell, law professor and leader of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley: “We can be hard and critical on structures, but soft on people.” (327) Next, Klein advocates for “unselfing” by resisting the “icy edges” of our identities. She writes, “it will not be enough to protect ‘our’ people; we will need to have the stamina of true solidarity, which defines ‘our people’ as ‘all people.’” (330) While acknowledging that negotiating our personal, complex and evolving identities is part of what it means to be human, she calls for strategic anti-fascist alliances that transcend identity. She says, “It’s about what we make together,” and advocates for care-based societies and universalism. (348)

Klein returns to anti-capitalism in order to chart a path out of the mirror world. She argues that while capitalism “lights up our most uncaring, competitive parts and is failing us on every front that matters,” there are historical examples of socialist, democratic systems that center social welfare and collective care that can serve as models for transforming the mirror world. (337) Klein uses Red Vienna’s democratic socialist systems as an example of “alternative

ways of resisting and living.” (337) Red Vienna is a term for Vienna between 1918 and 1934 when the Social Democratic Workers Party of Austria maintained political control. Klein illustrates Red Vienna as a “child-centered society built in the rubble of the First World War.” (338) Red Vienna is characterized by inclusion, social welfare, and education that centered on nature, art and creativity. According to Klein, Red Vienna welcomed refugees and “[provided] an alternative to the evils of nationalism that were sweeping the continent.” (338-339)

Klein successfully clarifies the mirror world and capitalism’s doppelganger effects by providing her reader with specific language and historical context. She weaves together personal experience, reportage, and analysis to make a strong case against capitalism and in favor of a care-based, democratic socialist society. *Doppelganger* is compelling, engrossing, entertaining, and at times humorous. Klein’s writing is sharp; she has a talent for distilling issues, clarifying facts and feelings, and articulating the impacts of capitalism. Yet, to use the author’s words, “doppelganger stories are never only about *them*; they are always also about *us*.” (188) The experience of reading *Doppelganger* is perversely enjoyable and relieving because she sheds light on our complex reality. Klein’s book mitigates her reader’s confusion, but it fails to activate its audience.

Klein states that the purpose of her book is to find a path out of the mirror world and “toward some kind of collective power and purpose.” (13) That is a lofty goal for a book. Is it possible for a book to move readers beyond theorizing, intellectualizing, and imagining and towards organizing and action? Klein admits that left movements continue to lose “tangible ground” *despite* having “[transformed] the way we talk about all kinds of issues-billionaires and oligarchic rule, climate breakdown, white supremacy, prison abolition, gender identity,

Palestinian rights, sexual violence.” (153) Is Klein’s book able to do more than provide us with a better understanding of our collective powerlessness and confusion?

Klein’s work is rigorously self-aware, but it stops short of “unselfing” itself. Rather, at times, the personal elements of her book edge on narcissism. Would it have been possible for Klein to demonstrate “unselfing” *herself*? Would the book have been as compelling if she had not centered stories about her own personal doppelganger, Naomi Wolf, and personal brand doubling? Ultimately, Klein only promises her reader that action and solidarity are easier done than said. Many of her readers do “feel and fear a decisive flip. Democratic to authoritarian. Secular to theocratic. Pluralist to fascist,” but was her analysis and proposed path forward enough to move us to outreach, inclusion and collective action, or were her insights only enough to better understand and articulate our personal fears, isolation, and paralysis? (12) She succeeds in bringing her audience into the mirror world, but she does not effectively bring us through and out of it. We have to do that now, together.

Works Cited

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