Re-Routing: An Ethnography of Tourism and Modernities in Nepal

by

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I have often found myself thinking of this thesis experience as an individual process. I am writing about my topic, in my carrel, and reflecting on my experience. Finishing is an opening up. All of a sudden, my vulnerability as a writer and thinker are exposed. But I have also recently been thinking how this project hasn’t been an individual endeavor at all. Yes, I have felt isolated at times, but so too do I feel unbelievably lucky to be part of such a supportive community that values camaraderie, even in the traditionally competitive atmosphere of a university. So, to those whose ears have witnessed my process and whose mouths have spoken encouragement and guidance, I am sincerely grateful.

Thank you to my advisor, Professor Sarah Croucher, for your valuable insight and encouragement. I am eternally grateful for the anthropology department—Gillian for encouraging me to be creative, Betsy for your assistance first semester, and Anu for providing me with helpful sources. To Prof. U and Daniella, for your invaluable guidance. You were missed this year. Thank you to Anth 400 for giving me an anthropology community and for providing a space to share processes. To all those who shared their experiences with me in Nepal. To 53 Home and 175 Lincoln for being my Wesleyan family. To Nina (the kid) and Sarah for late nights and early breakfasts and to the founding of the tourism studies department. To Lyddie for being you. To all the thesis kids I’ve gotten to know in the library—it’s been ‘real.’ To my brother, Adam, for growing with me.

And to my parents, thank you for helping me become.
This project is about movement of people
   and ideas;
   of experiences,
   of changing attitudes.
   It is about traveling bodies and traveled minds.
   It is about Home, and imagination.
   It is about changing power and relationships
   and how I once wanted to get as far away as possible.

This project is about dirtiness and illness
   and crafting sublime stories.
   About complex desires
   And the paradoxes and contradictions we inhabit.

This project is about what it means to live today,
   in this present.
About the ways we are engaging with our many modernities.

This project is about spurring and being snagged.
About the infinite spirals that interaction induces,
   And the (dis)connections it produces.

This project is about self-discovery and dialogues.
   Dialogues between me and other people;
   between other people and people.
A Note on Names and Places

Didi: Older sister. How I addressed woman older than me. How people younger than me addressed me.

Daai: Older brother. How I addressed men older than me.

I addressed people people older than me as Didi or Daai, meaning older sister and older brother respectively. For the purpose of clarity, I have chosen to name the people in this project as identified by the name of their lodge or shop. Women are Sahunis while men are Sahujis.

Bahini: Younger sister. How I addressed women/girls younger than me. How people older than me addressed me.

Bhaai: Younger brother. How I addressed men/boys younger than me.

Sahuni: Female shop or lodge owner. This title is used both to address and talk about people.

Sahuji: male shop or lodge owner. This title is used both to address and talk about people.

Gau: meaning town or village. I use this term to refer to the town center of Langtang, distinct from the periphery where most of the lodges are. Lodge owners talk about non-lodge owners as “gauko manche” or townspeople while people in the gau refer to lodge owners as “lodgeko manche,” or lodge people.

Names of lodges and shops discussed in this thesis:

Peace-Full Guest House: The lodge I stayed in during my first visit to Langtang. It was built nine years ago, at which time the owners moved from the gau to the lodge.

Village View: The lodge where I stayed during my second visit to Langtang. Described by the other lodges as the ‘biggest’ and ‘wealthiest.’

Gompaa Gau: the small town a ten minute walk to the southwest of Langtang.

Tibet Family Lodge: In Gompaa Gau. Where I stayed for one night during my second visit.

Gompaa Gau Lodge: another small lodge in Gompaa Gau, owned by an older couple whose children live in Kathmandu.
Tibet Hotel: a small lodge in Langtang. Owned by a couple with two children, one of who is away at school. The Sahuji is often away doing porter work.

Eco-Guest House: owned by a couple with four children, all of whom are away at school. The Sahuji is the older brother of the Sahuni of Tibet Hotel.

Glacier Lodge: one of two small lodges in the gau. Owned by the Sahuni, whose husband and son live elsewhere. Her husband is the brother of the Sahuji of Peace-Full. Her lodge rarely received visitors.

Kerosene Depot: a small shop in the gau. The Sahuji also owns a small lodge in the gau that is rarely frequented.

Tea Shop and Grocery Shop: a small store in the gau that serves tea and sells toilet paper, soda, and beer.

Laama Hotel: a town a day’s trek from Langtang gau. This is where most trekkers spend the night before arriving in Langtang and where many lodge owners have a second business.
Introduction

“Travels and contacts are crucial cites for an unfinished modernity”

Clifford (1997) urges us to complicate the often-perceived singularity of Modernity. I argue that places and people are constantly being remade through interactions with selves and others. Modernity, more aptly considered as multiple modernities, is the series of processes in which we all are participating, but differently. This difference is textured and complex, historically and socially situated, and the means by which we have and continue to become.

Writing about life and lived experience often seems too lucid a way of illustrating robust reality. I, thus, do not provide a map of this reality, for to do so would fall short. Rather, I aim to illustrate the complexity of motivations and desires, to craft a three dimensional image in two-dimensional text. I am writing about dialogues and movements that are memories of living, experienced reality. Clifford encourages readers of Routes to “engage with [his text] in different ways, while allowing the pieces to interact in larger patterns of interference and complementarity” (1997: 12). I humbly invite my audience to do the same.

To bring myself into this thesis as more than a conveyor of information, I am both narrator and actor. To do this has required me to combine autoethnographic and more traditional genres of ethnography. Anthropologists are no longer as we used to be, and we now acknowledge that merely ‘collecting’ information about other people is not only problematic, but also disillusioned. It is impossible, for it is impossible to

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1 From Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (1997: 2).
write out the self from these narratives. All writing is part of constructed, subjective realities. I have found that I need to interrogate those subjectivities, and thus, this project contains autoethnographic components precisely because it could not be any other way. Indeed, by explicating the particularities of myself in an autoethnographic method, I can expound upon both the dialectics of myself and the dialectics in which I have participated. It is through this participation that I claim authority.

Autoethnography traverses disciplinary boundaries, and this project traverses spatial and social boundaries, tracing hybridizing cultures. Indeed, “thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time” (Clifford 1997: 11). Layers of dialogues and complex narratives are on the following pages.

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The kind of travel I’m talking about, at its roots, is voluntary displacement. This dislodgement is awkward and shaky, uncomfortable and jolting, but equally an opportunity to dynamically traverse fresh spaces and appreciate new places, coveting the unknown. This is as my experience in Nepal was. I went to Nepal because I wanted that newness and that freshness, that which was different from home, which I perceived as stale. But going away was not only about rejecting home. It was equally the means by which I crafted a new self: it was a way of fashioning my identity.

I spent the spring of my junior year enrolled in the Pitzer College in Nepal program, which focuses its American students in Nepali language and culture studies. We lived in a home stay for the majority of the program, traveled during it, and had a three week culminating assignment, during which we were to conduct a project with

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2 See Auto-Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social, edited by Deborah Reed-Danahay, for further discussion of autoethnography.
our newly acquired Nepali language skills. I had spent my one-week spring break trekking in the Annapurna mountain range and by way of my location at that time, of being in the Himalayas, I realized I wanted to go trekking again for my project, which was to become my thesis. I became interested in the dialogue between foreign trekkers and Nepalis who owned the mountain lodges at which trekkers stay. The interactions I had with Nepalis while trekking during spring break had been short and superficial. Brief conversations usually revolved around ordering food, getting a room unlocked for the night, and quick souvenir transactions. I wanted to hear and see what was going on in the ‘back stage;’ I was curious about the texture of the trekker-local dialogue that is often not vocalized in conversation. I wondered about the unspoken dynamics—the power between foreigners and Nepalis, the attitudes toward one another, and their unspoken engagements.

I spent three weeks in the town of Langtang, in Nepal’s Langtang National Park. Unlike many of the other towns along the route, which have been constructed for the purpose of catering to trekkers (and are more of a collection of lodges than a real town), Langtang has a long history. I was told that the founders of the town emigrated from Tibet over five hundred years ago. Many community members still identify as Tibetan and for most, it is their first language.

My three weeks in Langtang spanned two trips there, separated by a ten-day interval in Kathmandu, where I returned for the closing of my study abroad program. The last half-month of my five-month stay in Nepal was after my program had ended and I returned to Langtang with funds from the Wesleyan Anthropology department. My first trip was with another student from my study abroad program, Sophia, and
our Nepali guide, Kame. The second trip, I went with Erin, my American friend who had been on the same program, and her friend from home, Hayley, who flew out when our program finished.

During my first trip to Langtang, I stayed in Peace-Full Guest House, where Kame led Sophia and I. The second week of that visit, Sophia and Kame left to go elsewhere while I remained in Langtang. Upon my return during the second visit, I had to stay in a different lodge, Village View, for reasons discussed in Chapter 3.

My conversations with Langtang’s residents were mostly in Nepali language, although some discussions with English-speaking members of the Langtang community were in English. My Nepali language was conversational, albeit rough and because Nepali is also the second language of people in Langtang, it was easier for me to understand than the quick pace of Kathmandu’s residents. My conversations were informal, and I did not record any of the interactions.

I spent most of my days in Langtang wandering around looking for people with whom to talk. I came to know most of the owners of the lodges, of which there were about twelve. I approached lodge owners, initially, under the pretense of being a tourist and entering a lodge for tea. I always explained my project although my explications occasionally generated some confusion, which I discuss in Chapter 3. I would like to think that I became friends with many of the people in Langtang with whom I talked for this project. I promised many of them I would someday return, which I plan on doing at some point in the mysterious future. My conversations with other tourists were always in English and were quite sporadic, as it was the off-season
and the flow of tourists was merely a trickle. These interactions, too, were very conversational, often just a half-hour talk sitting with a cup of tea or a meal.

The conversations presented in quotes in this thesis are reconstructions from field notes and memories. They are not to read as verbatim quotes.

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The physicality, the beauty of unique places, and the chance to engage with new opportunities, those that I perceived to be absent from home—these are the means by which I was lured to Nepal. I went to the Himalayas because I wanted to recruit my legs and muscles, and not engines and aerodynamics, as my allies—allies of my mobility. The push of home, of my perceived monotony of middle class life got me out the door. I wanted temporary escape and to come back transformed, a new self. Chapter 1 is about the value and meaning of going ‘away,’ an image constructed for me in my American middle class identity, as ‘elsewhere,’ and different from the routines of everyday life. I discuss the ways in which travel can be a counter-modern act of symbolic class subversion that serves as critical commentary of home. But these experiences also re-embed travelers in the middle class. Travel experiences accrue, for the Western middle class traveler, social capital; the stories told of experiences away are the means by which the traveler becomes reinserted, better, back home.

Chapter 1 engages with the constructions of gazes. First, the Western gaze, theorized in Urry’s (1990) argument, which borrows the notion of the gaze from Foucault to illustrate the socially systematized way of seeing. I later argue that this
singular gaze is insufficient. Indeed, there is a mutual gaze in the tourist-trekker interaction, which I illustrate through ethnographic anecdotes.

In Chapter 2, I continue building upon alternative theoretical frames that dissuade us from subscribing solely to a unilateral gaze. I argue that tourists do not only see, but we experience travel in an embodied manner. This chapter is a discussion about bodily involvement, and the means by which sanitation practices and the policing of the body are deeply entrenched in the dialogue between foreigners and locals in Nepal. The physicality of my experience was reason for it—leaving behind a modernity where I sit at a computer, the screen’s buzz echoing in my ears, adulterating my body. But my visions of seeking vitality while trekking were interrupted by bodily snags along the way—becoming ill tainted the experience of the sublime. But these blemishes, these times when movement was stalled, were later transformed into stories of heroism, of having overcome adversity and emerging better for having done so. Illness serves also to confirm having been there, and authenticates the traveler with having experienced danger, and proximity to the ‘real’ Nepal.

Within Chapter 2, drawing on autoethnographic reflection and narratives of others, I argue that modernity is perceived of as a weakening process, a process against which trekkers react, our reactions manifesting in travels to Nepal to reclaim a lost vigor. Nepalis’ preconceived imaginations of foreigners, crafted through a history of contact, suggest that trekkers are weak. Indeed, we are read as physically lacking and easily prone to illness. Nepalis, too, are commenting on loss of physical abilities. In Langtang, people are performing fewer manual tasks as children are increasingly
going away to school and adults are sedentarily grounded in tourist lodges, working inside rather than outside in the fields. The commentary about changing physical capabilities, enmeshed in the dialogue concerning education is complex and illustrates a deep ambivalence toward the ways in which Nepalis are engaging with modernity.

Chapter 3 takes up the complexities of this ambivalence. I examine the ways in which people in Langtang are engaging with development and modernity and their sentiments toward perceived changes. I show the ways in which people are interacting with the idea of their children going away to school and not learning ‘traditional’ practices. I show how this is implicated in bikas, the Nepali word for development. Tourists are implicated in this process, both as representatives of modernity and by donating money to send children to school.

Concomitantly, I illustrate the parallel but different ambivalence of trekkers toward the modernity they perceive occurring in Nepal. While trekkers are donating money for Nepalis to go to school and are implicated in development projects, signs of development, such as roads, jeeps, and Nepalis trying to make money (and thus tainted by the tourism industry) spoil the sublime experiences of trekking. Nepal is perceived of as becoming more like ‘home,’ the place from which tourists have sought temporary refuge.

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When I returned to Wesleyan in the fall, I expected this thesis project to flow effortlessly, proof that what I was writing about was lived and the material of experience. I was nervous about the perpetual issue of representation and worried I
was susceptible to recreating that which I was critiquing. I also struggled finding voice, with how to translate memories into transmutable, shareable, anecdotes. I started writing down poetic verses, often flows of consciousness, phrases and unforced words popping into my head. I found this writing style helpful for finding my thoughts and I soon began inviting more of them. They are sporadically included in the following pages to illustrate social discussions that fit with the other text surrounding them and should be read as creative anthropological articulations not superfluous meanderings. What started out as a means of helping me figure things out has also led me to believe that anthropology can, indeed should, be written in alternative forms. The poems are presented in bolded italics.
Chapter 1:

Processing Histories, Class, and Imaginations

You are from America. Your mom and dad always told you that the world was your oyster so you go looking for pearls. You’re boarding a plane that will take you over the Atlantic Ocean and across Europe and then Asia where you will land in Kathmandu.

This is how I constructed my reality.

You hand the flight attendant your ticket. She smiles invitingly, her lips laced with too-brightly colored red lipstick, her airline-issued beret pinned perfectly tilted to the side above her tightly wound bun. The artificiality is tolerable because you’re about to escape all of this. You’re one of the first passengers on because your seat is at the back and because you like the idea of those long transcontinental flights. You can really lose yourself in them—never sure when it’s night or day or if it’s either at all because you get served two breakfasts in a row.

Your disorientation continues after you step off the plane forty hours and three layovers later. There are two customs lines, a long one for Nepalis and a short one for you. One line extends back out towards where you de-boarded. The other is short. You walk past the dozens of people waiting in the long other line, slightly embarrassed that it’s easier for you to enter a country than it is for its own citizens. You pay your thirty dollars for a two-month tourist visa, your passport is glanced over and you are waved through.

White face, dollar bills, welcome to Nepal.

This chapter is about the construction of imagined places, how these imaginations are historically grounded, and how experiential consumers are critical of middle class values and modernity but simultaneously reproduce class boundaries. I historically situate both my personal interest in travel and the notion of going elsewhere, as well as the presence of foreigners in Nepal, in order to construct a reflection on today. By grounding myself and my memories in the history of European and North American travel in the past few centuries, I use myself as a
conduit for understanding the contemporary construction of Others, the classed nature of traveling, and the ways in which it reproduces class privilege.

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Since I can remember, I’ve been curious about what’s beyond the bend. Beyond the bend, the bend beyond. This is what is out of sight but always on my mind; abstract, un-seeable but recognizable destinations. My curiosity was cultivated such that I wanted to get away, to go elsewhere. Going away has always been part of my experience of home. Images of a There, a place away from Here with lush landscapes, vibrantly colored water, and open fields confronted me throughout my childhood—in the stacks of coffee table travel magazines that sit in my family’s bathroom and the book shelves filled with Lonely Planet guides to places we’ve never been. My mom yearned to visit these places but her thirst to explore was never satiated. She and all of her high school girlfriends have lived their entire lives within fifty miles of their childhood homes. I was told that I had opportunities my parents never had. I learned about the merits of travel from parents who had never been abroad but still valued cross-cultural interaction for expanding, understanding, and gaining new perspective. The romantic appeal of travel was mythologized in its abstract portrayal.

When I was young, our family vacations were spent close to our home in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Every summer we drove to the northernmost tip of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, where we visited my mom’s wild woodsman brother, Uncle Doug, and our cousins. We spent our days collecting agate rocks, hunting for copper, fishing, picking berries, and off-roading in Doug’s pick up truck. Although we were
only a twelve-hour drive from home, those summers felt otherworldly. We made bonfires and slept outside under the stars. I developed a taste for the beauty of nature and rougher, outdoorsy lifestyles.

When I was little, I read books like *Caddie Woodlawn* and *Little House on the Prairie*, with girl-heroes who wore dresses but ran around outside and climbed trees and played with American Indians in deeply problematic representations of indigenous people, but whose presence to me as a young reader nevertheless resonated in the brave and rebellious portrayal of the characters’ encounters with Others. I romanticized this interaction across difference, constructing Others both at home and away. I subscribed to National Geographic and collected currencies and postcards from around the world, gifts from my mom that she bought from a boutique in Ann Arbor. Pictures of Scotland and Russian rubles sat in a plastic box in my dresser, next to a play tea set, boxed rock set, a pair of plastic trolls, and a rubber banded stack of American girl doll cards. These things were part of the repertoire of my childhood; they belonged to and evoked home but also suggested travel. I learned a cosmopolitan desire through experiencing home and routinely seeing representations of far away lands helped instill in me a desire to be in new places.

When I was growing up, my routines of summer revolved around practical skills made into recreation. I went to farm camp where I learned how to churn butter, sew, and feed farm animals; these were skills that my grandmother had learned but whose practicality had become obsolete in my own life. I was implicitly taught that self-reliance, free from dependence on technology, was valuable even though for me, this knowledge was extracurricular. These experiences were the means by which I, as
a child of a professional middle class family, developed desires for particular lifestyles. They are also representative of the ways that learning experiences and the production of knowledge increased my awareness of spatial and temporal differences, helping me to become ‘worldlier.’

Coming of age during the post-9/11 era, my imagination of America was one of ironic disillusionment. The United States had been an impenetrable fortress, but the ironies of this iconic status came crashing down with the towers, splat on the surface of an over-inflated ego. The government’s obtuse retaliation tactics left America with a tarnished reputation in the rest of the world. Threats of running away to Canada (the peaceful) echoed from liberal enclaves, as did hesitations of traveling abroad and being received as ambassadors of evil.

I recently asked my dad what image of America he and my mom constructed for my brother and me when we were growing up. I remember feeling that my parents had always conveyed an implicit critique of this country, a certain irony proscribed to a place that seemed to so easily contradict its own vision. My dad responded that he thought the image of America that he had passed on to us was that “it was a great place relative to other parts of the world, but flawed. I think we portrayed an anti-capitalism, anti-sexist, anti-racist perspective.” The United States’ self-presentation to the world was as an image to emulated, and this construction made its sudden vulnerability and flaws all the more ironic. When I was younger I imagined going away to find out the best way to live. In my mind, the remedies to America’s problems that my parents illustrated were elsewhere, and I was determined to find
them. My imagination of the world beyond the boundaries of home was crafted as somehow more ‘authentic,’ as places that imaged themselves differently than the hypocritical United States. The notion of escape was formulated both as a notion of leaving home and of going somewhere else. I wanted to leave home because of its hypocrisies, because of its monotony, because of the ways modernity felt too docile and easy. I wanted to go away because away was constructed as the place different from home, a distraction from reality. I wanted to distance myself from the perceived middle class identity, the one that acknowledges and embodies American’s contradictions.

As a child, I didn’t I realize that I would take my conditioning from home with me wherever I went. It felt as if the future escape would be a break from the present, which felt temporary; I had the sense that I was gearing up for a journey that would separate me from my past. As I grew older, the possibility of ‘real’ (think: abroad) travel began to materialize and I began to realize that an experience abroad that would not be a radical break from home, as I originally imaged that it would be. I began to think in terms of complicating my web of understanding; of how to intertwine experience away with the experience of home. In other words, I would never forget to pack myself.

Throughout my upbringing, the construction of Here and There was shaped through certain tastes and sensibilities. Travel has always been present in my life, in some form or another, despite my parents’ lack of actual travel experience. The taste for travel has developed within social formations such as class background, family, and education. Through my experiences with these social structures, I have learned
the value of travel and new experience. The trope of independence, developed throughout my family genealogy and the stories I heard about my family members, has encouraged me to go away to school and go abroad for a semester, to learn, to broaden my horizons, and to develop as an individual. Self-expression was valued in my family; my brother and I were taught to think for ourselves and engage ideas that would help us to expand our worlds.

There is power in these representations of other places; unequal power that needs to be contested. This is the power to represent, the authority to generate myths to audiences that often go unchallenged. The images from travel magazines and guides often embody colonial stereotypes that reinscribe the binary between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘First’ and ‘Third’ worlds. These imaginations have been crafted ‘here’ for centuries, a long lineage of exotically represented places, made as sites for adventurous Europeans and North Americans to explored. These constructions of elsewhere have long been represented ‘here,’ often prompting explorative drives to go to the source.³

³ Enloe (1989: 26, 27) discusses the politics of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century world fairs, which were large public exhibitions that juxtaposed the newest technologies against displays of ‘primitive’ peoples of distant, exotic lands. She writes that the ideology that supported the fairs was grounded in “the idea of progress, global progress. In their self-congratulatory way, fair creators graphically compared ‘uncivilized’ with ‘civilized’ cultures, the function of which was to juxtapose ‘us’ and ‘them,’ enhancing the notion of progress by comparing it to what was ‘backward.’” In other words, the ‘natives’ were crucial for the celebration of ‘here’ and ‘progress,’ modernity understood by way of what was not modern. The height of world fairs were in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, at the end of which, Enloe writes, “Americans would no longer have to be satisfied with fair exhibits…those would countries would have built tourist hotels, beach resorts, and casinos to lure American pleasure-seekers—all due to world-wide progress generated by a civilizing sort of American masculinity.” From manipulated diorama installations of Others, tourism lured people away in the hope of seeing the ‘real thing.’ But the images of elsewhere were crafted at home, pre-envisioning a
Visual stimulation has long been enticement for going away. The notion of the “tourist gaze,” as articulated by Urry (1990), suggests that the way in which other places and people are seen is experienced systematically, mediated by larger social forces. This gaze is guided to distinguishable sites, places, and people; the experience of seeing other people a process that is socially and historically dependent.

Urry borrows this notion from Foucault’s (1973) theory of the gaze of the medic, developed to interrogate medical practice and the power relations between medic and patient. The empiricism of this gaze was historically produced, spurred at the end of the eighteenth century, at which time, Foucault argues, knowledge came to be articulated, indeed reorganized, into disciplines. The organization of the medic’s authority was formulated around the quantification and rationalization of data collection. This gaze assumes asymmetric knowledge and power between observer and observed.

While the tourist gaze does not create disciplinary knowledge, empirically gathered like the medics’, it does qualitatively create a system of difference around which consumption is stimulated. Going elsewhere prompts us to look differently, eagerly searching for the out of the ordinary. Urry suggests that the tourists’ gaze is constructed in relationship to what is other, different, and unfamiliar. From difference derives experiential, expansionist, social, and aesthetic desires. Urry claims that tourism results from the division between the everyday and the extraordinary, which is sought elsewhere. These representations, manifested in photographs, guidebooks, constructed reality. In a parallel contemporary vein, we experience reality through preconceived images that are crafted at home.
and online blogs, become mythologized and internalized. These myths are social constructions by which dominant stories come to be legitimate. Urry suggests that, while the tourist gaze is not ordered in the same order as that of the medic, still “many professional experts…help to construct and develop our gaze as tourists” (1990: 1).

Guidebooks, whose reiterated images are naturalized and internalized by readers, are an example by which the gaze is directed, steering its followers in thought and practice. Lonely Planet guides, ironically mass consumed by the independent traveler (to whom they are advertised) are a common item in any trekker’s backpack. The constructed image of local populations that guidebooks promise readers encounters with are people whose identities have been fixed, their portrayals essentialized into naturalized ethnic groups. Lonely Planet commodifies ethnic groups as exotic objects of the gaze, uncontested and ripe for tourist consumption. The image constructed by the Nepal Lonely Planet seems to perpetuate this idea of people stuck in the past, ‘naturalness’ rendering their culture static and unchangeable. Lonely Planet provides its followers with the romantic image of the individual trekker encountering ‘natives,’ the experience of which is commodified in mass production.⁴

This is illustrated in the 2006 edition of Nepal Lonely Planet under the “Culture” section, which describes the Newars, a Nepali ethnic group: “Their origins are shrouded in mystery: most Newars have Mongoloid and Caucasian physical characteristics” (Mayhew et al 2006: 44). These descriptions reduce the Newars to

⁴ Trouillot (2003) contests this constructed binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ archaic colonial articulations that are reified in travel ideology. This topic is further discussed in Chapter 3.
physical characteristics and mysterious origins. In her discussions of backpacking culture, Elsrud (2004: 150) demonstrates how constructions of Nepal in *Lonely Planet* provide simplified views of local people to backpackers, serving to contrast the supposed independent traveler against the essentialized group identity of local people s/he meets. This further implicitly proposes the ‘natural,’ timeless locals as juxtaposed against the modern tourist.

Elsrud (2004: 174) engages with the notion of primitivism to discuss and draw attention to the implicit power dynamics “and dominance underlying much of tourist movements from ‘west’ to the ‘rest.’” This notion affirms the often unconscious pact amongst tourists “that only some people have the right to be ‘tourists’ while others remain ‘objects.” By way of power lent to those who name others, guidebooks promote representations of Nepalis that serve to advertise local populations as lacking agency, wound into externally crafted categories.

*Traveling through a naïve backbone in the mythoscape of Shangri-La, an imagined phantasmagoria.*

Through *Lonely Planet*, Nepal is constructed as a place of spiritual mysticism, where foreigners can go to be around people more ‘in tune,’ living more naturally as if they “are true, authentic and pure as opposed to the people of an inauthentic, fragmented and alienated western civilization” (Elsrud 2004: 193). “Western civilization,” is perceived as damaged, the in-authenticity of its modernity provoking people to escape, while Nepal is viewed as a place for mending and healing wounds, a place where the vitality that has been lost at home may be reclaimed. The cover of my copy of *Lonely Planet* is a photograph of a sadhu, an ascetic Hindu holy man who
has renounced material attachment. His right hand is slightly raised as if in the process of greeting, inviting the looker in. His face is caked with white, yellow, and red powder and a bundle of dread locks winds tightly on top of his head. A towel draped over one shoulder seems to suggest his wandering lifestyle, the ‘authentic’ type of living that tourists ostentatiously consume in Nepal. The back cover of the guidebook reads, “Shangri-La exists. Trek to the top of the world, or share a smile with a Buddhist monk; raft down a mountain gorge, or glimpse a living Hindu goddess—in Nepal adventure and culture go hand in hand,” adroitly suggesting that Nepal’s culture *is* an adventure, commodified as an experience to marvel at and implicitly juxtaposed to the in-authenticity of home. Traveling to Nepal, the cover suggests, is an opportunity to come “face to face with tradition,” that which is absent at home.

The consumption of adventure and cultural ‘exoticism,’ as the nature and culture of Nepal are categorized, captures a particular class ethos that emphasizes encountering and engaging with obstacles, self-improvement, and personal growth. In its quest for finding the unadulterated, the middle class encourages that which is unique.\(^5\) Travel can also serve to compensate for insufficient economic capital. Indeed, travel has long been used as proof of taste (Bourdieu 1984) but has become particularly prevalent in the contemporary context. In Ehrenreich’s (1989: 15) discussion of the American middle class, she writes that the professional middle class’s

“only ‘capital’ is knowledge and skill, or at least the credentials imputing skill and knowledge. And, unlike real capital, these cannot be hoarded against hard

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\(^5\) I am discussing particularly American middle class identity.
times, preserved beyond the lifetime of an individual, or, of course, bequeathed. The ‘capital’ belonging to the middle class is far more evanescent than wealth, and must be renewed in each individual through fresh effort and commitment. In this class, no one escapes the requirements of self-discipline and self-directed labor; they are visited, in each generation, upon the young as they were upon the parents.”

Travel experiences produce the cultural capital for the middle-class that Ehrenreich describes. She notes that every individual within the Professional Middle Class (here on after referred to as PMC) must accumulate this capital for her/himself. Because middle class formation necessitates reformation or the rebuilding of capital within each generation (Bourdieu 1984), Ehrenreich argues that the PMC is constantly looking for means of its reproduction. Within some travel discourses, this rebuilding becomes articulated in crafting a self through risk taking and consumption through which one earns symbolic capital that is suitable to the PMC lifestyle. As illustrated in Lonely Planet, Nepal, as a travel destination, is constructed as a place of risks—risk climbing the world’s highest mountains, risk encountering different cultures, and risk falling ill to exotic diseases. The adventures become a means by which one constructs a story about him/herself. A class specific cultural manuscript mediates the ways in which we consume certain practices and transport those experiences home to convert into beneficial individual capital.

Class values for me have meant choices with right answers. Nepal was a ‘right’ choice because I was expanding my horizons and being brave and challenging myself. Certainly, as I have already narrated, my class upbringing both encouraged and pushed (by looking for escape) me to travel and lured me into exotic landscapes; the particularities of my life prepared me for my decision. Going to Nepal fit suitably into multiple agendas. I wanted to have adventures, learn a language, meet new
people and a new culture, spend a relatively long period of time in a place so that I would ‘really get to know it.’ Simultaneously, going to Nepal, in my mind, was an act of rebellion, because I wasn’t going to Europe or Australia but rather to somewhere ‘uncomfortable.’ Uncomfortable in this sense meant giving up the luxuries of home—the hot showers, food, the cultural familiarity—I would reject home, and the ease that accompanies it. But the irony of going abroad to contest home, to contest class, and to contest my privileged upbringing, is that my travel experiences have successfully reproduced my class standing. My act of rebellion has been converted into valuable experiential knowledge, knowledge with which I can use as proof of PMC appropriate consumption and participation.

Coming home from Nepal prompted telling tales of my adventures to my friends and family, of my encounters with danger, of illness, and of my interaction with Nepalis. I talked about how close I had become with my host mom, and the epic bus rides that had left me feeling like my insides had been scrambled. These stories were a means of recounting my time away and a crafting my new identity. I came home thinking I had learned something unique and important and that I had, to some degree, changed. Travel is as much about bringing something home as it is about going away. My travel experiences have earned me symbolic distinction, indicative of becoming a new self, legitimated by my experiences.

*Bifurcations, multiplications. Remaking the self, golden new.*

Of course, different destinations provide different stories. The stories of travel to Nepal are tales of adventures, risk, and difference. Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of
“cultural capital” depicts travel as socially valued knowledge through which people make claims to status. Cultural capital in the form of travel is produced through cultural interaction. Cultural proximity can replace the type of capital on which Bourdieu suggested the middle class bases itself. Whereas ‘high culture’ used to be the means for cultural capital accrual (such as visiting refined art museums etc), today, other kinds of experiences such as travel can participate in the construction of a person’s social suaveness.

Economic wealth certainly influences who travels, and who travels to Nepal. But money is not the only determining factor. I argue that social conditions too contribute to who travels and to which destinations. Class positions and expectations direct us in our pursuits and the consumption of such experiences participates in class demarcation and perpetuation. Particular class’s capital is earned by consuming class dictated commodities; distinction (Bourdieu 1984) is the mold by which class is formed and re-created.

I spent a lot of time one-on-one with my mom when I returned home from Nepal. We’d walk around downtown Ann Arbor and occasionally run in to a colleague or friend of hers. “Rachel just back from Nepal,” my mom would tell her acquaintances. This fact usually elicited impressed faces and oohs and ahhhs. I would awkwardly shuffle my feet, distracting my eyes from the scene, embarrassed at my mom’s tactics of trying to impress her friends. But this was the means by which she fulfilled PMC desires and implicitly succeeded in her own middle class capital endeavors through me, her daughter. Through these interactions, she both amassed
her own, as well as my, social capital. Here, the means of capital accrual were
demonstrated to me by my mom, and thus signified the means by which the
accumulation of benefit, for both my mother and myself, is transmutable; it is a
learned mechanism for self-preservation.

The perceived risk inherent in travel to Nepal is embodied in PMC notions of
self-improvement, both by through symbolic capital and “a quest for continual
progress, self-actualization, willingness to face risk, [and] willingness to persevere
through emotional and physical hardship” (Fletcher 2008: 318). The process of goal-
achievement represents one’s commitment to continual progress and future
improvement. Trekking in the Himalayas requires, at least the appearance of, self-
reliance and independence and values enduring suffering as part of this self-reliance
(the importance of illness and suffering will be discussed further in chapter 2).

*Travel comes from travail,*
*which means “to work.”*

*To travel is to toil,*
*to traverse.*

*Travel is to reshape a self,*
*in ritual rites of transformation.*

While trekking would not technically be labeled as a risk sport, as
mountaineering is, travel to Nepal and trekking in particular is considered risky.
Brushes with danger, rather than climbing the face of a mountain, are embodied in
perilous bus rides, encounters with exotic illnesses, and being alone amidst local
populations. These experiences are the means by which the PMC escape a world that
demands of us disciplined routine labor, the place where risk has been sanitized from
our lives. My image of the middle-class has forever been a perceived life of docility
and discipline. By going elsewhere to experience risk, I rejected the order of home,
the mechanization of work and school, of sitting in front of a computer screen and temporarily found relief from the everyday. The physical practices of hiking, and becoming ill were a means of distancing myself from the imagined PMC identity by involving myself in ‘authentic’ experiences. While going ‘away’ is a real experience and I feel real urges to leave, travel also paradoxically reproduces class divisions through perceived intra-class rebellion. I have also participated in replicating the PMC by accumulating social capital, particular to my social class, which helps to craft me as a member of it. Partaking in such activities inadvertently and paradoxically both exposes and reproduces the values of the PMC. Taking risks conforms to the PMC by accruing its particular cultural capital but risk-taking also gives its participants pleasure by provisionally alleviating the discontent with the everyday.

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**Routine**

**Routine**

**Routine**

**So safe.**

There are several different ways of getting to the Langtang trek trailhead. You can take a taxi, you can book a seat on a tourist bus, or you can go the least expensive and most adventurous route and take the local bus. No matter your method of travel, the journey is long, hot, and extremely bumpy. But if you want to earn the most travel ‘cred,’ taking the local bus is the way to go.

A bus ride is a seemingly mundane, subdued activity. In the United States, it is generally a solitary venture—I often have my ipod playing and sit a safe distance away from other passengers. It is usually uneventful, its purpose merely for quick
transportation. But for tourists in Nepal, a bus ride is not merely to get from point A to point B. This bus ride experience is an adventure in and of itself; for those not accustomed to it, it is quite the ‘wild ride.’ They are crowded, the roads unpaved, and traffic laws are more like guidelines. *Lonely Planet* quotes the “significant danger of traveling by bus in Nepal,” promising that “you are 30 times more likely to die in a road accident in Nepal than in most developed countries” (Mayhew et al: 19). But by mastering the lay of the bus-land, a traveler commands the peripheries of an already dangerous terrain and thus demonstrates a certain worldly fluency.

What is a routine bus ride for locals was chaotic and out of the ordinary for us foreigners; the sights, the smells, the pure corporeal experience of feeling crushed and completely out of control in the space we struggled to inhabit. After slinging our backpacks onto the roof of the bus, where my American friend, Sophia, and I were assured of their safety, we squeezed ourselves into crevice-sized seats. I tilted my legs diagonally, my knees sticking awkwardly into the aisle. Weaving through Kathmandu, the bus occasionally swerved to the curb, barely coming to a full stop to pick up other passengers. As we left the city, and began to speed up, the driver blared the horn, as if to alert the open air of our imminent presence, the release of notes sounding like the introduction to a Bollywood film. After that, music blasted from the dashboard, making the bus journey feel like we were hurtling through a movie scene. The daylong trip, albeit exhausting and physically painful at times, was satisfying as we got off the bus and felt a sense of accomplishment. Indeed, I heard other trekkers as well sharing stories with one another of the woefully painful, long, turbulent, and rather frightening bus journey.
On the four bus trips I took to and from the Langtang trailhead, the few other tourists who were onboard often elected to sit on the roof, giving up their purchased tickets to sit with Nepalis on the top. The greatest test of courage was to do as the Nepalis do and climb up the wire-thin ladder to the roof while the bus was in motion. Their vacated seats were happily filled by Nepali passengers, leaving both parties content with the exchange. The bus journey was scary enough from the inside as we teetered over cliff edges, traversing mountains on precariously narrow roads. We got off the bus queasy but feeling happy to be alive. “Can you believe we made it?” A gleeful Israeli woman asked me as she climbed down from the roof. I’ve also found this portion of trekkers’ expedition written about on blogs, usually in a tone of disbelief not only that such an experience can exist, but also expressing the thrilling extremity of having ‘made it.’

By sitting on the roof, foreigners took an already risky situation and turned the prospect of peril into thrill. The performance of climbing up and down the ladder to and from the roof from the interior of the bus, while the bus was in motion, dramatically demonstrated and confirmed one’s fortitude.

*There’s danger and there’s danger.*
*I have none of one*
*So I go looking for the other.*

The PMC search for risk and danger also manifests in experiences of being lost, which work to illustrate one’s mettle and endurance. Just as going to Nepal was about escaping the trajectory of home, being off the trail, albeit inadvertently, once again demonstrates experience away from the norm, indicating distinction and uniqueness. Empowerment and achievement, exhibited by way of facing danger but
persevering to come out the other side, validate the individual performance of travelers.

I too spent a morning off the trail alone, unsure of where I was and afraid I would never find my way back. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” I muttered to myself as my backpack snagged on a bamboo shoot, almost pulling me to the ground. I yanked back against the plant, angry at it for obstructing my way. I felt tears welling up and wanted to sit down and cry. “Rachel,” I said out loud, “it’s going to be okay.” I told myself to keep going, that the path couldn’t be far away. Ten minutes later, I saw it below me and dashed down toward the trail, pulling up more plants and making a raucous through the jungle as I, in my relief, found my way. I was returning to Kathmandu after my first trip to Langtang and had agreed to meet Sophia and Kame, our guide, the next day at the bus stop. They had trekked to another town the previous week. This story, colored by the details of my frantic search for the path in a nearly endless field of marijuana (a symbol of exotic landscapes), was a staple of the narratives I shared about my time trekking when I returned home. This particular story illustrated my brush with danger and demonstrated my self-reliance. It is a narrative presenting a new self, a self that felt more mature having coped with adversity. Encountering geographical obstacles forced me to engage with my surroundings in a new way; to stretch my mental and physical efforts, to force myself to overcome fear and emerge better for it. This experience epitomized my feelings of distance from the normal, in a place where my senses were stimulated so differently from the quotidian life of home. Indeed, by way of feeling so far away from familiarity, both physically and experientially, I perceived myself to have escaped my
old routines. This accomplishment was an individual performance, and signifies the process of crafting myself, working to create, indeed produce, myself.

I took note of one particular post on the blog, “Life’s a journey, not a destination,” which documented the travels of a trekker in Langtang in 2007. The blogger wrote about being lost and taken in by a yak herding family. His story not only illustrated brushes with the environmental danger, but also signified ‘authentic’ interaction with locals and thus served to distinguish himself from other tourists. The blogger writes that he was taken in like “one of their own…the family never asked for money or anything in return (of course, we gave them money anyway). An experience, to say the least, and one of the many acts of Nepali friendliness that I will never forget.” (http://www.whereintheworldiscj.com/2007/03/langtang.html). By way of casting himself as the fortunate benefactor of hospitable hosts, the writer stakes claim to a unique relationship with a Nepali family that distinguishes him from other trekkers.

Elsrud (2001: 598) writes that, “the adventurous traveler seeks to get away from the rest, to discover the true ‘self.’” This moment of getting lost and being accepted not as a tourist but as a “member of their own” is noted as a moment of distinction, important to the particular PMC’s eternal quest for unadulterated authenticity consumption. This moment illustrates getting away from the rest of the tourist pack coupled with proximity to ‘untarnished’ (and thus ‘authentic’) locals, and demonstrates endurance in natural landscapes. As locals involved in tourism businesses are coming to be seen more as ‘greedy’ (to be discussed further in Chapter 3), interactions with locals not associated with other tourists become more ‘pure’ or
‘unspoiled’ and are the means by which trekkers may establish successful, ‘authentic’ associations.

If a traveler is a narrator, an event such as a bus ride or getting lost, serves as an ingredient in a thrilling adventure story, and part of a perceived out-of-class experience, away from the monotony of the computer screen. This strength of character is transported from the site of production (the adventure) to home where the adventurer’s newly shaped identity is presented to others. These stories often showcase dramatic encounters or experiences. Narrations as such construct the narrator as having negotiated adversity, having survived a physical hardship and/or having had encounters across difference and thus having changed. This change is part of crafting the self that aligns oneself with the ideals of perseverance and the benefits of taking risks.

Stories, the sharing of events or experiences, are part of the transition of time away to home. Tales of adventures are the means by which we, the new self, are reincorporated back into home life. In Turner’s (1973, 1974) discussions of rites of passage, he discusses the three stages through which one progresses—first is social and spatial separation from one’s conventional life, second is liminality, where one is in an “anti-structure…out of time and place” (quoted in Urry 1990: 10). The final stage is reintegration, during which one usually gains social prestige for having endured the rite of passage and thus transformed into a new, even more, social being. By transcending the familiar, an individual comes back to it with a new social prestige. My mother’s pride of her ‘traveled’ daughter was the means by which my rite of passage was recognized as such, my self presented a new way that signified the
survival of my ordeal and thus my greater maturity. Snags, such as getting lost or going on an extreme bus ride, are the material of ordeals, which are the mechanisms about which stories are crafted, stories that indicate reintegration back home.

The liminality of travel to Nepal is particularly potent to the PMC for the reasons I have discussed—experience with danger, risk, and authenticity serve as a break from the routines of home and one’s place within modern society. This liminality, as Elsurd (2004: 176) discusses, is temporally differentiated from home as well. The notion of time away symbolically manifests in travelers’ removal their watches, implicitly rejecting the technology of time and the proof of standardized habituations of home—the place where our days are systematically categorized around time, a hallmark of modernity. As Elsurd analyses, “this type of traveling is indeed often a contesting of power and clock-time oppression. To walk outside scheduled (clock and calendar) time is to shake off the oppressors…” An individual experiences “‘privileged ‘own time,’ which can be used to experience self-control and individual structuring.” For members of the PMC, taking time outside of the routine structures of everyday, which are organized around the clock, provides a respite from the office and thus contests that lifestyle. The ‘authenticity’ of these rites of passage aims to subvert the perceived artificiality of the middle class habits of home. But ironically, through this subversion one earns distinction as ‘authentic’ her/himself.

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Travel has long been associated with education and mobility, embedded in class discourses, its ‘gaze’ shifting to reflect the social context and class taste. Exploring the historical roots of contemporary travel is productive for understanding the
genealogy of how today’s travel world has been socially produced. The Grand Tour, a seventeenth and eighteenth century rite of passage for young European aristocratic men, was a collection of specific destinations throughout Europe whose itinerary exposed the traveler to high art, culture, and music. To expand their knowledge but also as a symbol of wealth and prestige, the Grand Tour generated a body of common knowledge and experience that was deemed socially necessary for bourgeois men (Chard 1999: 22-30). These tours were a means of class reproduction, a manner in which the bourgeois re-articulated itself by way of consuming places for the purpose of education.

As Lofgren (1999: 20-21) discusses, the eighteenth century saw the rise of the Romantic attitude toward travel, which deviated from the Grand Tour mentality by focusing more on scenery, the sublime, and the private experience of natural beauty. Middle class people began traveling and its new ideology began to necessitate liberation from the everyday and mundane, representing a break from the ordinary. The sublimity and freedom of abroad, where certain limitless and expansive landscapes could be found, was contrasted to the everyday uniformity of life at home. This dichotomy juxtaposed what was perceived as the domestic and stifling environment of home against the blue skies and limitless seas, which were to be found elsewhere. The romantic ethic of self-expression became articulated in opposition to the older disciplinary ethic of self-restraint. There developed a desire to be externally expressed through projects and activities during which one was doing something rather than being a passive spectator. Eighteenth century nature appreciation revolved around cultivating taste for the picturesque, landscapes with
extraordinary traits. The tourists’ gaze, systematized by way of social forces, was guided to geographies that expressed nostalgia for rural life.

This passive landscape of the picturesque eventually became stale, and there arose the cult of the sublime, “a yearning for the wild and surprising” (Lofgren 1999: 27, 43, 45). To be awe struck and dwarfed by nature came into fashion. With the cult of the sublime, more provocative natural phenomena and landscapes came into fashion, such as storms, Niagara Falls, and towering snowcapped peaks, in reaction to what was redefined as the ‘soft’ romantic nature. Lofgren says that, “the panoramic view grew out of the staging of the sublime, in which the dramatic qualities of vastness became a central criterion.” This vastness served to “take your breath away,” but equally there was “a feeling of empowerment” that came from experiencing such grandiose vistas. Here, we see the historical genealogy of cultivating the notion of individual empowerment and mastery within travel ideology.

Embedded in this history and important for analyzing contemporary attitudes toward travel, is relationship with and toward technologies, and the dialectic and ambivalent attitude with them. In the early nineteenth century, trains, particularly in Europe, and steamboats in North America, became important to tourism and allowed for quick travel and the experience of rapid movement through space. With the invention of these new technologies came the means for cheaper travel for the masses. Elite travelers needed a means of distinguishing themselves from the lower class mass tourists. Mass tourism was considered ‘shallow,’ and eventually, the perceived passivity of fast travel created a new urge for a different movement, for the “rediscovery of walking” (Lofgren 1999: 48, 49). Whereas walking had previously
been regarded with condescension as a proletariat means of mobility, “walking took on a new aura. It became a sensual way of moving through the landscape, a way of uniting body and mind, of getting closer both to nature and to rural culture, a way of finding yourself.” Spending time walking in the countryside became a mode of self-reflection and attunement, a way to develop an inner sense of oneself while in nature rather than merely passing through it (as in riding in cars, trains, steamboats, etc). This is not to say that the bourgeoisie rejected new technologies, but rather, a respite from the rush of modernity came to be seen as increasingly necessary. Walking took on a new class aura, romanticized as it became a means of defining oneself as a traveler, distinct from mass tourists.

Many aspects of this European and North American travel genealogy guide contemporary tourism in Nepal, both its classed nature and the means by which the importance of corporeal physicality participates. To trek is to move through the landscape by your own physical strength. You go to the mountains to reclaim vitality, to experience the rawness of moving with your feet, to press through the pain of blisters and short breaths, to transcend physical limitation, and to reclaim bodily control while simultaneously losing ourselves to it. We submit ourselves to greater forces while reclaiming our own individual power. Trekking is to experience the sublime, a way of moving through the landscape, unaccompanied and unimpaired by the technologies of home.

The history of foreigners in Nepal is embedded within the larger lineage of European and American travel discourses. In her discussion of European and North American mountaineers and Sherpas (a Nepali ethnic group renowned for their
participation in many mountaineering expeditions) Ortner (1999) has discussed the 1920s and 30s echo of the eighteenth and early nineteenth counter modern romantic ethos in mountaineering expeditions, organized around the sublime experience and transcendence of the limits of the self. At that time, experiencing the Himalayas was about the glorification of nature and the participatory discourse surrounding such ventures was nostalgic; mountaineering was a means of participating in practices that had become obsolete in modern life. In order to transcend Western material values, technologies (such as oxygen tanks and radios) were judged as dishonorable, considered superfluous props that would taint the purity of mountain ascents. Ortner writes that mountaineering was “a set of practices directed toward disciplining the self to accomplish some very difficult task (such as climbing Mount Everest) so that one could rise above, transcend, previously assumed barriers and limitations. It could take various forms: moral, mystical, ascetic” (1999: 39, 42). The mountaineers involved Sherpas in this romantic imagination of orientalist constructions as ‘untouched,’ and ‘innocent’—they stood for “all that had not been corrupted by the modern world.” Through the elimination of excess technologies and amidst Sherpas living more ‘authentic’ lives, the foreign mountaineers expected to encounter the more ‘real’ self. Just as travel today encourages contact with locals and the land, the Sherpas and the mountains were the means by which mountaineers in the first half of the twentieth century experienced the authenticity they perceived to be lacking at home.

Relationships with technology, the ambivalence of which I have discussed by way of Lofgren’s (1999) arguments, manifests historically and contemporarily in travel
experiences to Nepal. As a foreign traveler in Nepal, critical engagements with technology are always somewhat ironic. Perhaps moving through the mountains is an implicit statement about ‘home’ and the mundane but technology, still, is the mean by which we arrive. This paradox is an expression of ambivalence toward modernity and is the dialectical nature that travelers embody—wanting to escape modernity, home, monotony, but simultaneously using the technologies that are implicated in our critiques to help fulfill urges of going.

My personal relationship with technology reflects this ambivalence. I’ve always been intimately involved with various technologies but have long contested them. Indeed, gadgets and gizmos have always surrounded me. In high school, I transitioned from one to another—taking a hot shower, toasting my breakfast, driving to school, sitting at a computer in an anonymous row; even the hall bell between classes felt artificial. Life felt too easy, made partly as such by technology, as if I didn’t have to suffer at all.

Ease, cookie cutter houses, the iconic white picket fence, making us feel separate but equal—these were my fears about my future. For me, the suburbs were about living in identical houses and wearing identical velour tracksuits. Maybe this has become an essentialized trope that has lost any descriptive merit, but this was my fear (perhaps borrowed from movies like Ferris Bueller’s Day Off where the protagonist resists this perceived confined life), the fear of suburban contagion, of the floodgates opening and squelching my creativity. I developed nostalgia for a past I had never experienced but whose images were omnipresent. I didn’t have to suffer for anything at all, life was all just there, waiting undeserved at my beck and call.
This turn away from home, perhaps we can call it counterculture, and looking for the anti-modern and anti-bourgeois can still be found in Himalayan explorations today, part of a lineage of European and North American travel experience and specifically well expressed in the Nepal context. Nepal in the 1960s and ‘70s was a haven for European and American hippies, who flooded the streets of Kathmandu looking for cheap living and legal marijuana. The mountaineering ethos of those decades echoed hippie ideology, Ortner (1999: 162, 37) says, once again returning to the romantic ideologies of the 1920s. Whereas the 1950s mountaineering had deviated towards a more militaristic, hi-tech, macho, styled enterprise, “the Hippie movement elicited opposition to the hypermasculine mountaineering of the previous decades.” Once again, there was a move away from technology in mountaineering, and modernity once again became a target for criticism and necessitated escape. Ortner’s argument resonates with my own experience of wanting to escape the two sides of modernity: “if modernity is vulgar and materialistic, crass and noisy, it is also soft, routinized, and boring. In this dull, modern world, the self loses its definition, its edge, its purpose, its honesty. Mountaineering on the other hand is difficult, dangerous, challenging; it makes the self sharper, tougher, more honest, more real.” The desire to escape modernity, to craft a different self away from it, persists today, albeit differently. Twenty-first century hippies continue their sojourns to Nepal seeking the same things as forty years ago. Yuppies, who started going to Nepal in the eighties and nineties, too, now are rushing in, looking for a more sanitized experience, something somewhat different.
Today, there are multiple types of tourism in Nepal and thus multiple discourses surrounding their presence. During my time in Nepal, it was easy to superficially identify tourists by their dress. I saw the yuppe types—young urban couples on break from their Wall Street jobs, decked out in the latest micro-fiber gear. I saw the hippie types—visitors dressed head to toe in brightly colored hemp clothing, carrying musical instruments, drinking from canvas covered canteens, and smoking marijuana at teahouse rests. I met neo-hippies and yuppies, old people and younger ones. Some of the older visitors were grizzled and toughened from their lives of wandering and some just yearned for their youth. Young people told stories about their parents coming to Nepal in the 1970s. I met a man who had been an investment banker but gave it all up and had been traveling in Asia for two years. I met a young woman from Canada who was a certified Reiki practitioner. I met an old man trekking alone, carrying only a briefcase, who talked about coming to Nepal in the 1970s on a bus from Amsterdam. Nepal today attracts the weirdos and the yuppies, people who are critical of home and those just wanting a short respite away from work; a collage of identities. This a contemporary contextualization of history compounded; a confluence of people whose desires to travel to Nepal are historically situated. The hippies and the yuppies share the trail, looking for different types of escapes, some for a fortnight, others for years.

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Power dynamics between ‘first world’ visitors and ‘third world’ hosts, such as those embodied between tourists and Nepalis, is analyzed as colonial and imperialist; in this line of argument, Other cultures are commodified for Western consumption,
for the sake of foreigners’ rites of passage; binaries re-inscribed so that differences serve to distance and distinguish Us from Them. The Western gaze of the tourist is said to have the potential to discipline, dominate, and normalize (Urry 1999). This power is associated with the elite, heterosexual, capitalist, white male.

But to presume that the gaze is singular and unilateral would be to erase the complexity and the agency of those involved in the encounters between tourists and locals. Moaz (2005) discusses the “mutual gaze” to make the tourist-local encounter more socially transparent by recognizing the agency of all individuals. Tourists, too, are subject to be gazed upon, interpellated through historically based perceptions. Thinking of the local gaze lends more holistic understanding so that the agency of individuals from different parties is recognized. I, as an American, was also the object of a gaze that assumed a particular history, under scrutiny and made to feel uncomfortable at times. I am going to share anecdotes, which, I hope, establishes and contextualizes this mutual gaze.

Taking pictures of children seemed a habit of trekkers in Nepal. Kids along trekking routes often unabashedly threw toothy grins at tourists snapping their photographs. One afternoon in Langtang, perched at a table outside of Peace-Full Guest House, where I had been staying, I saw a crowd of young boys running naked through the stream, shouting and flailing their arms. An older looking foreign couple walked by, stopped, and chuckled at the scene. The boys paused to pose for the man as he lifted his camera to his eye. As the man lowered the camera, I felt a twinge of unease at what, to me, felt like objectification and a means by which the trekker could claim authority over those he encountered. I sensed the unequal power relations
between the photographer and the photographed—between a foreigner and a local, between an adult and a child, between one who possesses technological apparatuses and one who does not. The foreign man took the photograph without permission and while the boy smiled, it is possible that he did so because he knew he was being interpellated for foreign consumption.

But another experience revealed to me that tourists were not the only ones to systematically consume locals. Indeed, I too was the object of a gaze. Along trekking routes, I often encountered children asking for things—“one pen please!” they would shout. When I asked why they needed pens, they would say it was for school, expecting this qualification to elicit the desired object. I had a more sustained interaction with a group of children, six boys and one girl, all around eight or ten years old, in Langtang when I walked by them playing and was invited to join their game. I agreed to play for a few minutes, curious if their games were anything like the ones I remembered from my own childhood. As I approached the group, one of the boys saw the star on the back of my hand, an aimless doodle from the night before. He asked that I draw one on his hand too so I pulled my blue gel pen from my bag and drew a matching star on his hand. The rest of the group crowded around and asked for blue stars too.

After playing several rounds of a game that had similar rules to Duck Duck Goose, I told my new friends I had to go. They formed a circle around me, blocking my departure, and insisted that I come swimming with them. I agreed to walk with them, as I was going in the same direction anyway. As we walked by Namaste Guest House, the group insisted on a photo shoot. I was transformed into a human jungle
gym as the kids scampered up my legs while others clung to my arms, pulling me down. One of the boys grabbed my camera from my bag and started snapping photographs.

As we neared a rain-made pond on the northeast periphery of the town, shirts, caps, and pants sprung to life as the boys flung off their clothes and enthusiastically sprinted towards the water. The piles of garments floated to the ground and lay in crumpled piles leading towards the pond like breadcrumbs. Only the boys ran into the water, churning up wake as they crashed into the center of the pool. The one girl stood at the water’s edge as I approached the scene, fully clothed and it appeared, with no intention of swimming. As I turned to leave, feeling uncomfortable and unsure of how to act, one of the boys grabbed his penis, thrust his shoulders back and his pelvis forward, and shouted to me (in English), “you want this!?”

I was unclear about the community’s taboos around nudity and worried that I had inadvertently committed a transgression. I was shocked at the boy’s display and wondered where he had learned that behavior. It felt like perhaps something was expected of me, something more than blue stars, but I was unsure of how to conform or even if I wanted to. Like the subject of a trekker’s photograph, I felt like the object of a gaze and was uncomfortable and unsure of its objective.

I’m telling this story because the subject and object of the gaze is unstable and cannot be generalized as singular. My discomfort at seeing a foreigner take pictures of a naked Nepali boy was matched by my discomfort of feeling like I too was being watched and interpellated as a generic tourist. Just as I had learned perceptions of others, so too was my identity as a tourist constructed in the minds of Nepalis before I
even went to the country. Reflecting back more on the first scene of the boy being photographed by the trekker, I now see another, different but not more correct, way of analyzing the scene. This experience, for the boy too is a means by which he may craft a standardized image of the tourist, a means by which he will draft perceptions of what, and who a foreigner is. A mutual gaze, but not equal power, was in the click of a camera.

Regardless, I think the perception of a singular, unilateral gaze needs to be contested. Indeed, visual consumption as the only means of experience, and this notion, too, must be questioned. In the next chapter, I will further complicate the notion of the gaze by discussing its insufficiency in analyzing and critiquing travel experiences. To subvert the masculine nature of the normalizing, disciplining, gaze, I will discuss the embodied nature of the trekking experience and how the body’s actions too, and not just our eyes, are implicated in the wider discussion about power in tourism.
Chapter 2:

Dynamic Bodies

How can I tell you?
That recreation was my re-creation.
That a place’s power
Gripped me with immutable creativity.

This chapter is about bodily involvement, both for providing a means of discussing individual experience beyond a walking set of eyes as well as to include an analysis of how bodies’ actions are part of the dialogue between trekkers and locals. I will critically engage with how the notion of the gaze is insufficient for assessing the subjectivity and plurality of trekking experiences. I will argue that physicality, too, participates in the creation of imaginations, part of the crafting of sublime stories. For contesting and moving beyond Cartesian dualisms, I will engage with embodiment of lived, dynamic experiences.

I am thinking about modernity as a weakening process. People, both traveling to and living in Nepal, perceive changes in our physical selves resulting from social changes. This notion is important for the ‘push’ of travelers in our anti-bourgeois, anti-modern pursuits; to use our bodies in ways that we perceive of having never been integrated into life at home. Trekking, for foreigners in Nepal, is the recreational convergence of sublime body and sublime landscape.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Sublime: (1): To elevate or exalt especially in dignity and honor or (2): to render finer (as in purity or excellence). B: to convert (something inferior) into something of higher worth (from Merriam-Webster Dictionary). This is how the Cult of the Sublime, which I discussed in Chapter 1, manifests in the present. I am suggesting
Comments about changing physical strength and health made by older members of the Langtang community, speaking specifically about younger generations, leads me to believe that the town sees its younger members weakening, as if becoming more like the foreigners they encounter passing through their home; those with whom they have a history of interaction that has served to pre-formulate an image of foreign trekkers as sickly and physically lacking. The interactions with changing physical prowess seen in foreigners passing through and increasingly themselves illustrates the ambivalence with which people living in Langtang are engaging with modernity. This ambivalence manifests in the complexities of desires; simultaneously desiring standardized education, material goods, and money, but also commenting on the weakness and incapacity of the younger generation to do the manual work of their parents.

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Numbers were the metronome of my Himalayan ascent. My mind pushed my body, which carried my mind—a mutual effort. I felt satisfaction while urging myself to exhaustion until reaching my destination. I continue to carry with me the feeling of ascension and the crafting of a new self, perhaps multiple selves, throughout this practice. My memories of that time away transcend visual expression. While I went to Nepal thinking of images, I did not merely scan the landscape but moved through it in more than a two-dimensional representation. Snags along my route stymied this creative process. When I think back on my trekking experiences in Nepal, the

that trekking is the process by which, as we ascend mountains (through the sublime landscape) so, too, are we crafting a sublime body, making it better, or of “higher worth.”
rhythmic cadence of sweat, shit, puke replaces the monotonous one, two, three of footsteps. My body remembers the physicality of illness and the shame that accompanied it. But I lived those moments through a bodily presence whose memories have since been drafted into stories that have been told and retold, a means through which those snags have been symbolically re-casted as a sublime story.

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We arrived in Langtang May 20, 2009, in the late afternoon. The sun had begun to wane but the shaded light enhanced the region’s beauty. The town was nestled in a valley with giant mountains looming on three sides, the flat land jutting into them like a peninsula. Green pastures led up to the town and quickly turned to rockier outcroppings beyond. While my American friend, Sophia, and I were exhausted, our guide, Kame, seemed unfazed. I had left Kathmandu worn out by urbanity and ready to stretch my legs on open paths and my lungs in unpolluted air. Kathmandu, like any city to which I’ve ever been, made me feel claustrophobic. It took us three days to reach Langtang from the city. The first day was an all-day bus ride to Shyphru Besi, where we picked up the trailhead. From Shyphru Besi, we had a steep two-day trek to Langtang. The physical exhaustion of hiking was a welcome feeling. For me, open spaces and the liberation of movement meant freedom and possibility and opportunity.

The poem of my practice doesn’t come easy because my memories weren’t created in words but in movement.

I began this thesis project reading through some of the theory on tourism with which any social scientist writing on the topic is familiar. Urry and MacCannel were
stacked on the shelves of my thesis carrel, titles like *The Tourist Gaze* and *The Tourist* sounding bluntly enticing. I went through their pages, making connections to my project—thinking about leisure time and power constructions. But there seemed to be something missing from pages of these texts and I didn’t find them completely fulfilling. Yes, I wanted to talk about the tourist gaze but while reading much of the literature, it seemed like an introduction of it to my project was not sufficient. I knew I wanted to write myself into the narrative and I knew that I hadn’t been only a walking set of eyes. My physical actions were an important part of the conversation. I wanted to talk about my practice, my movement, and how my actions were part of the larger dialogue between locals and foreigners in Nepal.

Urry’s argument surrounding the tourist gaze implicitly suggests the erasure of bodily presence. The structures within which tourists operate are assumed to mediate the systematization of one’s actions. The authorization, construction, and reinforcement of the gaze, Urry (1990) suggests, dictate where one goes. But I argue that the gaze is not the only means by which tourists both experience bodily reality and enact power relations. If we relegate tourists to a pair of eyes—powerful, glaring, penetrating—essentialized as these rationalized structures are, we erase the individual’s experience beyond the visual. To examine a more holistic picture, I will move beyond the Cartesian mind/body dualism and privilege of the gaze to analyze tourists’ experiences and the textured interaction between tourists and locals.

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7 In chapter 1, I discussed the importance of thinking about the “gaze” in tourism studies. I do not mean for this proceeding section to disregard this claim. Rather, I think the notion of the gaze as the *only* way of analyzing experience is insufficient and I want to problematize the fact that it is so often accredited as the means of assessing interaction across difference.
Veijola and Jokinen (1994: 149) have specifically studied the body in tourism. “So far,” they write, “the tourist has lacked a body because the analyses have tended to concentrate on the gaze…only the pure mind, free from bodily and social subjectivity is presented as having been at work when analyzing field experiences, which has taken the distance required by the so-called scientific objectivity, from the position in-general.” After reading this, I thought back to the moments when I stopped my mountain traversals to close my eyes. Maybe I did this because I had seen the kind of movies where mountaineers stand on a peak with arms raised, eyes closed, head leaned back unhinged in bliss. But I don’t think this is the only reason I felt compelled to do so. Perhaps, yes, I was emulating an image I carried with me, but also, I felt differently when I removed the visual. Immersed in beauty, my other senses sharpened when my sight was rendered non-functional.

Tourism represents a break from everyday routines that allow tourists to engage with new stimulating experiences; on this notion Veijola and Jokinen agree with Urry. But, they are critical of isolating the gaze from the rest of the body because this implies disconnect from our context, from being embedded in the world. They do not negate the role of the gaze but rather call for an expansion in tourism studies to include the role of the body as integral to understanding the tourist experience.

I admit to having experienced the lure of the gaze. As discussed in Chapter 1, I visually consumed photographs of a place; I heard stories and visualized mental images of what they must look like. But I did more than look; I wanted to leave behind the place where my body felt forgotten, where I sat at a computer all day as my eyes glazed over. The rich texture of our “poetics of practice” requires more than
a penetrating gaze for comprehension because even experiences consumed en mass are individualized; the visual alone is insufficient in assessing experience and assigning value to it (De Certeau 1984). Prompted by my social conditioning, which taught me the value of experiential learning, I went to witness more than the visual, to be a body in movement, dynamically crossing space.

For a holistic analysis of tourist experiences, the body’s actions can be sites for critiquing the ways in which bodily being participates in the dialogue in tourist/local interactions.

_Borders on our bodies_
_Different mouths we are told_

My body is a receptacle for boundaries. Body parts are named, made distinct from each other. The body may act as a model for any bounded system. Just as any other system, its boundaries can be threatened, its transgressions precarious (Douglas 1966: 115).^8^  

My parents taught me to not eat food off the ground because it’s dirty; it would be like eating garbage. My mom didn’t subscribe to the ‘five-second rule,’ so once food touched the floor it became inedible. That boundary was seared into my mind as if it were tattooed on my brain, inscribed in a way so that its reason was unquestionable. The presence of dirt, says Douglas (1966), indicates the presence of a system, which classifies, enforces, and prompts culturally specific ordering techniques. Transgressions of those boundaries, a rebellion against the system, is dangerous.  

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^8^ According to Mary Douglas, margins are dangerous, and societies are most vulnerable at their peripheries.

^9^ But we also do not condemn the disorder of dirt, says Douglas, because disorder presents the potential realization for patterning as infinite. This is the paradox of
I changed as I grew up, the incisions from childhood scarred and then began to fade, and questioning became an integral part of my growth process. I wanted to resist boundaries, the manifestation of an artificially constructed world. I didn’t want to waste food but I also began to like to see my mom get riled up as I learned how order could be broken. Breaking the rules felt so satisfying, like I was taking control of a situation in which I had always been told what to do. My boundary violation was a symbolic subversion of normative behavior. I learned to finesse the system, taking care that I felt like I had liberties by committing slight transgressions, but I never over-stepped the “real” boundary, the one whose transgression would provoke serious repercussions. This process developed my independence.

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Without an intimate history with certain bacteria in Nepal, I was taught to treat my mouth as a threshold to be closely guarded. My mouth was the entrance to the fortress of my body, whose protection was of the utmost importance. No eating dirty food, no eating with dirty hands, and certainly no five-second rule. From the dirt—we seek to order it, but because this process continues indefinitely, so also do we need disorder. We recognize that disorder “symbolizes both danger and power” (Douglas 1966: 94).

10 Anderson (1995: 648-650) writes of the notion that colonial bodies in the Philippines were constructed as a closed entity, medically whole, and juxtaposed against the “open body,” of locals, which was “‘not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects, with other reservoirs of pathology” as if transgressing the body’s own limits. Conversely, the American body was imagined as closed, whole, and capable of being isolated from the environment. Talk of colonialists’ body function was taboo, suppressed, as if they had transcended “the ‘natural’ body that modern industry demanded.” The sublime, idealized, enclosed body of the American required self-discipline and came to be models of ‘civility’ for the Filipinos.
moment I arrived in Nepal, my over-protected stomach required special care from the ravages of a new environment.\textsuperscript{11}

As a foreigner in Nepal, I was another self, one in which I represented my own worst enemy. I’ve always hated getting sick; mostly the symbolic aspect of illness. Getting sick means becoming weak, consumed by an invisible enemy and exposing my fragility. I resist acknowledging compromised health, even as it is erupting from my orifices. In eighth grade, a case of pneumonia went undiagnosed for three weeks because I convinced my mom that it was ‘just’ a cold. My denial of illness reflected my attempts to suppress my vulnerability. This story has become lore in our family, and indeed, part of my identity within it.

I grew up hearing stories about the strong and independent women on my mother’s side of the family. My mom speaks with admiration about her grandmother, Grandma B, who lived alone, grew much of what she ate, and sold flowers on the streets of Royal Oak, Michigan during a time when commerce was beginning to flourish. Nobody gave Grandma B “any crap,” my mom has said. She’s told me that her strength may have been “passed on” to me, my blood imbued with a social trait that links me to a lineage of independent and brave women, the embodiment of which is valued in my family.

\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{Imperial Leather}, Anne McClintock writes about the idea of contagion and the Victorian paranoia about boundary schemas both at home and in foreign (colonial) settings. Fear of contamination, both bodily and socially, “justified a politics of exclusion and gave social sanction to the middle class fixation with boundary sanitation…Body boundaries were felt to be dangerously permeable and demanding continual purification…” (McClintock 1995: 47). These fears rationalized the preservation of boundaries between classes, and institutionalized and legitimized elite fears of lower, ‘contagious’ classes.
I heard these stories of the idealized, independent women and from these narratives crafted an imagined way of living I aimed to achieve. I wanted to be rough and tough, and I wanted to be self-sufficient. I measured these attributes through adventurous spirit and physical sturdiness. I came to believe that a delicate immune system was representative of a delicate person, unable to cope with life’s roughness. My one and only sibling, Adam, is three years my senior and male, and I looked for any opportunity to prove my durability and mettle over him. Part of the manner in which I constructed my femininity was in opposition to, but clearly in relationship with, Adam’s masculinity. Compared to his delicate immune system, I was the germ resister, which I took to (foolishly) indicate physical superiority, how I saw the ideals of independence and strength manifesting in myself. Going to Nepal would participate in this construction—I would ‘brave’ a new environment—the cultural differences and the exotic diseases that the pre-departure inoculations implicitly promised.¹²

But my study abroad program taught us thirteen American students soon after we stepped off the plane into Kathmandu that health was not something to be taken lightly. It was a re-birth in the sense that we became babies again, taken under the wing of new parents telling us what to do and how to behave. The program staff taught us how to speak, eat, and act. In terms of health, they preached vigilance; we were supposed to maintain an alert awareness of where our food and water came from. This politics of dietary exclusion was introduced in our first lessons in Nepali language where we committed to memory a list of health rules. We were taught how

¹² Indeed, for many tourists in Nepal, seeking bravery and adventure is a lure.
to appropriately decline food that was not suitable for us. Indeed, most of the food and water available in Nepal was made off limits to our impotent stomachs. Our health rules were paralyzing in a way; at times, they rendered us immobile, limiting not only what we should eat but also where we should go. Places where the rules could not be followed, we were told not to visit. We repeated the rules until they were practiced enough that we could go to the samosa stand and list our guidelines to the vendor: “we can’t eat food that has been touched by flies, and everything has to be hot on the inside, and can you dunk them in the hot oil again please and then not touch them with your [dirty] hands?” With weakness as our excuse, we segregated ourselves.

Sanitation as a mechanism of authority and control has deep imperial roots. Like American colonizers in the Philippines as described by Warwick Anderson (1995), a tourist’s body in Nepal is a maladjusted one. As people out of place, foreigners particularly were sensitive to the exotic environment’s dangers, and used health codes to manage a subjective chaos. Nepal has a complicated history with foreigners, one that echoes colonial discourses, and influxes of foreigners into the country follow aspects of the historical colonial script.13 Health is a virtue that keeps many tourists isolated to particular enclaves, thereby participating in shaping Nepali society.

In the early twentieth century colonial Philippines, Filipino bodies and waste were depicted as dangerous to colonial Americans and thus “reinforced American fears of contact with native bodies and their products” (Anderson 1995: 646). The fear of dirt, disease, and human waste was used as an ordering technique to keep

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13 This history is discussed further in Chapter 3.
American bodies cloistered in a particular spatial context, away from local populations. “Science” became a means of social segregation.¹⁴ Sprung from the body, excrement epitomized filth, which the colonists associated with the local population’s people and practices. Fearing contamination and “out of place themselves, American colonial health officers used the body’s orifices and its products to mark racial and social boundaries in the Philippines. Waste practices offered a potent means of organizing a new, teeming, threatening environment. In this new orifical order, American bodily control legitimated and symbolized social and political control” (643). With the clearly bounded notions of cleanliness and filth, Americans defined themselves against Others.

As in the colonial Philippines, sanitation issues excuse, indeed encourage, foreigners as we segregate ourselves from Nepalis. Trekkers carry iodine and first-aid kits to “disinfect” their environment and us. With these technologies, we redraw boundaries that distance us from local populations.

Just as human excrement uncontained is “matter out of place” for many trekkers, so too are the plastic wrappers and beer bottles—a trope of what ‘trekker’ has come to mean—for residents of Langtang. One afternoon while staying in Langtang, I was sitting in the Tea Shop and Grocery Shop in the gau. The Sahuji was explaining that the lodge owners were gathering to organize how to manage trash. I looked out the window as he began talking about how much garbage languishes unattended in the town and saw a group of twenty or so people, many of whom I recognized as

¹⁴ The laboratory was important in colonial modernity projects. The increasing emphasis on microscopic germs and their movement through organisms led to reinforcement of fears of bodily contact (Anderson 1995: 644).
lodge owners, picking up refuse. They moved passed the window slowly, large baskets on their backs, bending down every few steps to gather a discarded item and toss it in the basket. The space was reclaimed, the unwanted manifestations of a foreign presence eliminated.

_The power of a weak body_  
_Enters into a conversation._  
_The power of voice overcoming._  
_part of the complex swirl of a “contact zone”_

Bodies and minds meeting: this is how I imagined my experience in Nepal. A “contact zone,” according to Mary Louise Pratt, is “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (1992: 6). While Pratt’s concern is with colonial discourses, a similar type of relationship is embodied along trekking routes between foreigners and locals. The inadvertent voice of the weak trekker became evident when I spent time in Langtang and learned that what disciplined my health also affected the economic health of the lodges. I saw and heard about the trekker’s weak body’s participation in the public policy decisions in Langtang. I returned to Langtang ten days after my initial two-week stay there and found that during the short interval between my visits, a new set of rules had been drafted by the owners of the lodges to govern the previously un-regulated lodges. The change came in response to an intense inter-lodge competition that had resulted from the quick proliferation of too many lodges. The owners of the wealthier lodges had decided that the lodges which lacked showers, clean kitchens, and established toilets were unfit for foreign consumption and should be closed. The wealthier lodges were the ones better established, bigger, and the owners often owned other lodges as well. When trekkers get sick, I was told,
they complain to the tourist agencies in Kathmandu, and all of Langtang’s businesses suffer. The colonial discourse of sanitation preservation and disinfection seemed to have been enlisted by the residents of Langtang. But this power is more complex than merely stating that the colonized have come to dictate themselves in the same way. Yes, certain lodge owners seemed to have seized some kind of power that had rendered them in charge of making and executing decisions. But these rules also manipulated tourists, and the owners of the lodges came to control the spatial context in which trekkers are operating.15

I had a conversation with the owner of the oldest lodge in Langtang, Village View, about Langtang’s lodges and their history with sanitation. The Sahuji was middle-aged, had done extensive traveling (including to the United States), and claimed fluency in five languages. He also boasted that he had been elected the town leader four times. He told me the story of how the idea of building a lodge came to him when, in the early 1970s, he met an American Peace-Corps member near the town of Langtang who suggested building a place for foreigners to stay. Until that time, trekkers stayed in locals’ homes, which the Sahuji said were smoky. At that time, trekkers were not segregated from the local population but rather, were briefly integrated into the community, a spark of contact, rather than staying outside of it as is done today. This is not to say that trekkers’ are no longer involved in this community but rather that the relationship has become more estranged. Today, most

15 This complex dialogue is discussed further in Chapter 3.
of the lodges are a fair distance from the town center, each their own little enclave waiting for trekkers to walk by. The town center is walked through, not stayed in.  

The Sahuji made it seem as if providing improved sanitary spaces was the prompt for constructing lodges in the first place. In a later conversation with him, he remarked that Langtang has become dirtier as more tourists are coming through. I heard this complaint from several other Langtang residents as well. Biscuit wrappers and shards of glass Coke bottles, remnants of trekker (and increasingly local as well) consumption, were compromising the health of grazing yaks. For people, too, I was told, piles of trash were detrimental to health.

With the advent of lodges in Langtang came the idea of toilets, but the majority of homes in Langtang don’t have a designated space for human waste. Whereas locals living in the gau squat behind a stonewall to relieve themselves, the tourists’ excrement is kept hidden, out of sight and mind. The social history of many of the places from where foreigners come tell us to disengage ourselves from our waste production; we are taught that our animal functions should be kept hidden.

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16 Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992: 65-80) discusses the inside/outside spatial boundaries of the domestic sphere and the bazaar, claiming that structurally, the bazaar (or outside) is designed to interact with strangers, who are considered “potentially dangerous.” The owners of both lodges in the gau lamented the fact that they no longer receive business because the lodges outside of the town center now receive all trekker transactions. While I do not think this was the intended purpose, spatially, the locations of the lodges do ‘protect’ the townspeople from interaction with foreigners. When interaction with foreigners is desired, this ‘protection’ is, rather, a barrier.

17 As Douglas (1966) discusses, the boundaries drawn to delineate taboos (such as those around human excrement) separate, and control, and indicates a social system. North American taboos on excrement and filth disengage us from our waste production; we shit, flush a lever, and the thing is out of sight and mind. Taboos implicitly tell us that excrement is private, shameful, and filthy. But stories of illness were part of a shared narrative that foreigners experience in Nepal, a shared narrative that rendered us ‘extraordinary’ and worthy of ‘distinction.’
The toilets, built for visitors, stay as travelers move on; the presence of foreigners is preserved underground in a septic tank. The irony of foreign waste is that it is never purged, never washed away or absorbed back into the earth. For trekkers, Langtang is a place to approach, to rest in, and to move through, but what remains is our waste, a formidable symbol of a persistent presence. The body influences our lives and the way we live them, order them, and order others. 18

On that first night in Langtang, when I asked what he thought of tourists, the Sahuji pointed to the pile of trash around the corner from his shop. “There’s more trash now than there used to be,” he said. The presence of trekkers generates trash, an unacceptable filth for people living in Langtang. For trekkers too, trash is a symbol of the ‘modernity’ from which we are trying to escape; it taints the sublime landscape. It seemed that the original conception of the lodges as clean spaces had failed; that the town had become dirtier rather than cleaner.

The manner in which locals in Langtang talked about community health seemed ironic in light of efforts to change/improve sanitary conditions. People in Langtang not only said that the town has become dirtier, but also that the overall health of community members has declined. I was consistently told that people of older generations lived longer than people today. I had seen statistics on expected life span in various atlases, which had the number hovering around sixty. 19 But the way people in Langtang talked about age seemed to contradict these numbers. The Sahuji

18 I do not intend to romanticize an absence of toilets. Certainly, a host of problems may arise from lacking them. But, I also am compelled to say that toilets are not innocent, and their presence too may be made problematic.

19 According to the World Development Indicators, the average life expectancy at birth of a person born in Nepal in 2007 was 64. The 1960 statistic is 39 years old, steadily increasing until the most recent statistic.
of Peace-Full told me a story of an old woman who, when the Sahuji was a small boy, turned one-hundred and fifteen and grew a new set of teeth. But nowadays, he said, people eat different foods than they used to and don’t have access to the medicines older generations consumed. He said that much of the food eaten in Langtang today is imported from Kathmandu and is filled with chemicals. Whereas there didn’t used to be any sugar in Langtang, now people are drinking sugary tea rather than Tibetan butter tea and snack on packaged biscuits, which are carried up to Langtang for trekker consumption. Langtang locals not only increasingly consume these imported commodities but also suffer the environmental consequences of the wrappings. The designation of the National Park in the 1980s inspired government-regulated restrictions that accompanied the park’s inception. People were banned from collecting plants and excessive firewood from the jungle. Because of these regulations, people are no longer allowed to collect herbal remedies and medicines from the forest. Medicine collection limitations and diet shifts were blamed for shortened life spans. This was the tone with which people talked about changes.

While I can have no way of knowing the ‘objective’ truth about the changing generational life spans, I do take note of the way in which people talked about these changes, particularly since the way people were talking about general health trends is the inverse of what the World Development Indicators illustrates. People were actively engaging with notions of generational change and acutely aware of changes over several generations. The history of their great-grandparents was important in talking about the present condition and in gauging the quality of life that people are presently experiencing.
I heard nostalgic sentiments, of the ‘good old days,’ but this was usually paired with an attitude that life is easier these days, easier in the sense of being free from the obligation to produce everything (wo)manually. Purchased food and clothes are appreciated for their convenience but criticized for participating in the community’s resentfulness toward changing health and life spans.

*Dirt, oozing pollution.*

*Tiny particles imbued with such great meaning, different here and there.*

*Human waste folds into the earth, while the permanence of plastic laughs in the face of time.*

Grunginess, for me, is that feeling of realness, a state of absorbing and being absorbed, of feeling vibrantly alive. It is in this state that my physical and mental efforts seep out of my flesh, languishing briefly before wafting up into the air and synchronizing with my steps.

During my second trek to Langtang, I was with two American friends, Erin and Hayley. The study abroad program was over and we were our own travel-mediators. We felt liberated with no guide but ourselves, nobody else in sight, content exactly where we were. As we descended from Langtang, headed back to Kathmandu for the last time before going home, Hayley and I started laughing at Erin’s flamboyant efforts to stay balanced as we made our way down inclines. We stopped at a boulder, leaning against its cool surface for support as our mirth rendered us immobile. Hayley pulled out her camera and insisted that Erin go first so that she could record her orchestra conductor-like flailing arms. I felt loopy from endorphins and the company of my friends and the joy of being outside. Fluid poured from our bodies— sweat from labor and the hot day, tears from laughing—streaming from our
muscles and souls. The sweat caked on our faces and we scrapped off the salt with our fingernails. We may as well have been scrapping off flecks of gold. To us this dirt was beautiful, a sign of hard work and accomplishment, and something to be valued. Filth was our adventure, our sweat organic and creative.

This creativity sprung from the process of transforming what had been defiled into something that we celebrated. There is a history of anti-bourgeois, anti-modern sentiments in foreigners traveling to Nepal, as I discussed in Chapter 1. These values were embodied in the hippie movement in the 1970s that witnessed busloads of Euro-North American ‘free spirits’ seeking alternative ways of living in the ‘East.’ They were seeking authenticity through the “rejection of the dominant cultural values of both ‘modernity’ (bureaucracy, technology, hyperrationality) and the middle class (money, comfort, security, propriety)” and viewed “the dominant culture [as] in some way stifling…” (Ortner 1999: 282). This feeling of ‘grunginess,’ of ‘feeling alive,’ participated in the agenda of critiquing social class, of rejecting bourgeois notions of rigid, standardized, and (to us) ‘artificial’ boundaries. In grunginess, we sought escape from home through the ‘authentic’ experience of what it means to be a fleshy human, animal and all.20

This is a particular type of filth, the kind that comes from inside, making its way from our pores out into the world. This is the dirt of animals, and it is romantically celebrated because its boundary transgression feels like ‘authentic’ interaction with the earth; we feel as though we are rejecting our social class status.

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20 But, as I discussed in Chapter 1, this particular taste is developed via social conditioning in middle class lifestyles, and could be considered an alternative type of middle class cultural practice.
Just as travelers in the nineteenth century sought romantic, ‘authentic’ engagement with nature, so too did I relish in my experiences with the ‘natural’ in myself, which was a means by which I experienced that which is perceived to be absent from home. This dirt is repulsive because we know the boundary (it was crafted from a young age. It’s that habituated image of mom scrubbing behind your ears), yet it is compelling because we feel the thrill of interacting with it.

The kind of filth that doesn’t come from within our individual selves has different restrictions, and the socially constructed system created to prevent bacterial invasions was less often resolutely broken.

*Our bodies’ actions have consequences as if they are an entity of their own.*
*Weaving their own narratives through her actions, my words.*

Movement was stymied upon falling ill. These moments were snags along the path, making movement improbable, or at least tainting the sublime experience.

The first two months in Nepal I didn’t get sick, not even a cold. I began to believe that perhaps I was invincible, immune to the plethora of maladies to which I had been told at home my body was vulnerable. I listened to my fellow students who came to school with stories of throwing up out their windows or running to the toilet in the middle of the night. I felt ambivalent about sharing an experience such as those narrated by my compatriots. I was glad of the fortune of good health. But at the same time, I, too, wanted to have crazy stories to share. To cement having been there, I wanted to bring home tales that proved I had encountered danger.

Sickness finally came at the least convenient times possible. The first was at the beginning of my spring break trek through the Annapurna range of the Himalayas.
The days before, I swam across a lake and swallowed several gulps of water as I pushed myself to the other side, racing my friend to the finish. Those accidental gulps haunted me the next day as I sprinted to the toilet during our lunch break. My friend Sophia offered to stop early and catch up with the group later but I insisted that I could continue. Our guide took my backpack and I trudged my way through a rainy and hazardously steep day of anguish.

My second sick day came a couple of months later when I was on the bus going back to Kathmandu from Langtang. An hour or so into the journey, I felt nauseous stomach rumbles. Luckily, there was a political strike blocking our route so we stopped early for the lunch break. What would have been an inconvenience any other day was my saving grace. I made it to a toilet in time and felt the relief of purging my misery. I didn’t want my guide, Kame, to know about my situation. I didn’t want my stomach’s inability to cope with turmoil to represent my inability to cope with other situations and I didn’t want Kame to worry that my sickness would be perceived as his inability to “look after” me. The feeling of feebleness, of loosing control over my body and its functions, left me feeling ashamed. My feeling of weakness only later would become a story of fortitude, but in the moment, it left me feeling unable to move, rendering me unfit to do what I had come to do. The body of the trekker is supposed to absorb the sublime: hoping for the sculpted mountaineer’s body, swathed in high tech fibers, with a pack hoisted onto our backs, we were supposed to epitomize the young, cool, healthy person. Being sick polluted this experience.
Sickness debilitates, it is an invader
while I am supposed to be expanding my horizons.
We make it to the top and think it’s over.
But we had to go back down; go home.
And we’re supposed to have grown,
Learned something monumental
because we “accomplished” something
What are the fruits of my labor?
Memories are a currency like money?

Initially, getting sick while trekking felt like it disrupted the narrative of going to the Himalayas to claim vitality. I had gone to breathe fresh air and feel rejuvenated, and being sick seemed to interfere with these pursuits. Trekking was supposed to be about flexing muscles and pushing myself to the limit. Excretion from illness contrasted with sweat, evidence of rigorous labor. When I became sick, I had to give my backpack to my guide to carry and it felt like I had failed in some sense. Being sick tainted the experience of the sublime, defiling my physical vitality.

In hindsight, I have re-evaluated being sick in Nepal, the chaotic confusion of being sick has been re-ordered, indeed ordered so that it now makes sense. Becoming ill now offers an experience that enhances the sense of overcoming an obstacle and is representative of the heroic trope of trumping adversity. These days of illness and subsequent recovery followed a coherent trajectory—problem, solution, “victorious hero” (Stacey 1997: 7). This project becomes a narrative of transformation. As the physical affliction is transformed from an ailment to a recovery, so, too, the person is transformed, made better by gaining wisdom. The past is edited so that it is re-imagined in a sublime story.

Like climbing a mountain, recovering from a bacterial invasion was a transcendence of physical limitations. This is a common narration, as Stacey (1997)
discusses\textsuperscript{21}—overcoming illness or adversity, and being transformed into a valorized figure. Each stage of the narration is rewritten but the story’s finale is recognizably positive. There is resolution in recovery stories because the body’s invader is ostracized; the body is triumphed over. In other words, the chaos of illness is controlled when the filth of disease is eradicated and the self is restored. Those stories help to rectify the scarred body and the story’s linear pattern offers to the listener/reader satisfaction in its familiarity. We go from victim to hero as our story crosses space to home and our sickness crosses its trajectory to recovery. The sickness becomes re-imagined and the recovery makes for a palatable story. Once taken home, a moment of weakness—an illness or another obstacle—becomes a symbol of strength.

When I described to my brother the days I spent sick, the reactions I was able to elicit through vivid portrayals of my experiences satisfyingly proved that I had survived an ordeal that required both resolve and resilience. Through these accounts, I was able to enlist my listener as a witness: I evoked strong reactions to a very potent topic, thus allowing Adam to sample the experience through the story but his distance from it and my proximity to it was corroborated when he said “I could never do that.” The experience was mine, an anecdote confirming my identity as a traveler. The story is a necessary component of the account of triumph. The experience of the traveling body is, as Elsrud (2001: 611, 609) says, “a powerful instrument in narrative practices.” Travelers talk about their illnesses, “as the price you pay if you want to

\textsuperscript{21} While Stacey’s (1997) arguments surround the topic of cancer narratives, I have found her discussions of the stories crafted around illness applicable, albeit amply different from being ill in Nepal.
experience the real local culture.” If you’re sick, it means you’re probably not staying at a five-star hotel. Moments of illness interrupt movement, but they allow for authentic claims at home because they represent “authentic” interaction with a place that affords the traveler socially valued experience or knowledge.

The process by which a negative experience may be transformed into something positive is what Bourdieu (1986: 122) refers to as “social alchemy,” “which, without changing anything of the physical nature of the product, radically modifies its social quality.” The symbolic value attached to a given object, image, or experience “transforms the crude material into something more than it physically is” (Elsrud 2004: 186). Stories of illness that initially seem to taint the sublime experience, serve, in fact, to enhance it through storytelling.

The experiences I expressed by telling stories of bodily incidents were part of the endurance test for which I earned symbolic capital. Bourdieu (1986: 244) talks about cultural capital in “the embodied state,” where distinction is earned through experiences that manifest in the body. The body is “cultivated,” i.e., culture is incorporated and assimilated as part of the process of becoming. Along with other forms of cultural capital, non-economic forms of capital are linked to biological singularity. As I discussed in Chapter 1, it is not generationally inherited but rather must be earned through individual distinction. The accumulation of cultural capital necessitates individual free time, which is linked to permissible time away from the family, and often requires economic capital. When experience requires economic capital (as trekking in Nepal does), external wealth is converted into the physical being. The individual participates in self-improvement activities via and for physical
distinction. Not only does a trekker need to be fit to begin with, but so too does s/he endure bodily turbulence that signifies surviving tribulation. Trekking is recreation that has become my re-creation, part of the crafting of another self in which I am worldlier and more capable of dealing with the vicissitudes of life.

Travel, and the accompanying accumulation of authentic experiences, earns distinction through particular consumption patterns. Like formal education, traveling, and the experience and worldviews that are acquired from it, are components of a socially valued knowledge that may later be translated into cultural capital. Trekking is a particular type of adventure consumption that earns a particular status through a proximity to dirt and danger, which is defined in opposition to the “set of luxury activities and goods which characterize the old bourgeoisie” (Bourdieu 1984: 283). I celebrate the feeling of grunginess because, for me and my generational and social class peers, it represents rebellion against the perceived in-authenticity of the middle class and, implicitly our parents.

While my stories of physical accomplishment were later tales of heroism back at home, in Nepal, my body was read as weak.

_I wanted to understand the “hard life”_
_To use my body when most of what I have been taught is to use my mind because at home, sports are supplementary. History lied to us that strength of mind and strength of body are mutually exclusive. Now, we’re supposed to be “well-rounded” so I look for physical vitality._

The archetypal American would certainly consider trekking a deeply corporeal activity, distinct from most everyday pursuits. But to the residents I met in Langtang, even after the brute physicality of getting up steep inclines, I was perceived as
physically deficient. Trekkers often hire porters to carry their bags, struggle while their guides patiently wait for their slow pace, and easily cave to illness. All of these attributes act as evidence that foreigners are weak.

On one of my last days in Langtang, the Sahuni of Peace-Full asked if I would like to accompany her to her sister’s house to clear a bed for planting cabbage. As I had never been to the town where her sister lived and had nothing else to do, I readily agreed. The two of us walked up toward Singdum in silence, she always a pace or two ahead of me. We passed by the rows of fields, tiny buckwheat and potatoes plants just beginning to sprout. We paused to catch our breath and leaned over a stone wall to look into the budding cluster of plants. “Whose field is this?” I asked Didi. “A townsperson’s,” she replied, as if her response need not have been qualified with a name.

By the time we reached her sister’s house forty-five minutes later, Didi said to me, “you must be tired.” The walk hadn’t felt exhausting in the least. In fact, I was feeling invigorated and thought it strange that after I had gotten to Langtang in the first place, Didi could think that a forty-five minute hike, with minimal altitude increase, was wearing.

We went into the house and Didi threw pine branches into the kitchen fire to heat some water. She worked swiftly, as if she had performed these movements a thousand times. Like most homes I had seen in the area, the house was one big room, with a small kitchen fire in the opposite corner of the beds. The wall across the room from the fire was filled with windows through which sunlight slanted in. Didi made some tea and I sat on the floor after I was told to “relax.” Didi also heated up some soup
and handed me a full steaming bowl. When I asked if she was going to have some, she replied that she didn’t need it. After our break, the two of us went outside to do some work. Five minutes into clearing the bed, Didi told me that if I was tired, I could relax or go wander and take pictures. I told her I wasn’t tired yet and said I liked working. I swung the hoe up and down into the earth, breaking its surface in patterned hacks. We unearthed rocks, disturbing them from their sedentary slumber and threw them off to the side. They rolled toward the fence before coming to rest snuggled against the wooden posts. I moved toward one corner of the yard as Didi spread out into the other. She asked if I would take a photograph of her working and after doing so I reciprocated the request. As she snapped my picture, she said, “you can go home now and tell your family you did some work.”

At several points, Didi interrupted our work rhythm to remind me that I could rest if I needed. It seemed, from her perspective, that my body was unfit for agricultural work.

But I was eager to ‘help’ and insisted on staying and helping. I had some previous farming experience (albeit different from agricultural work in Langtang) and appreciated the satisfaction of manual work. This fact coupled with my young age made me feel suited for manual work. Indeed, I like moving my body in a way that is productive and not contrived (read: class subversion). As Didi and I finished, I was feeling good. We gathered our things in preparation to head back to Langtang and Didi said, “You did a lot. You’re going to hurt tomorrow.”

*I felt my own isolation
and the loneliness of others in the same place.
Money has a strange power,
And we give up what can’t be bought.*

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Until that day, I hadn’t seen Didi do very much physically intensive labor. Other than one afternoon hoeing her own garden, she seemed to mostly stay in or near her lodge, cooking for the two of us and laying out in the sun on a mattress. A twelve-year-old boy who came from another town, was hired help. He did most of the grunt work around the lodge, collecting and carrying firewood, doing laundry and dishes, gathering food from the jungle, and sweeping the kitchen. Didi had told me that before she and her husband built and moved into Peace-Full, they lived in the gau and her days were more consumed by fieldwork. “Life was harder then,” she said. “But I spent all day working with my neighbors.” Didi’s physical work was a large contributor to her sense of community. This was a common narrative of the women lodge owners, all of whom had come from the gau with their husbands to start a lodge business and in the process, had given up most, if not all, of their agricultural endeavors. Most of these women spoke about the intense loneliness that has resulted from becoming isolated in the lodges as they wait for trekkers coming through. Especially during the off-season, as it was when I was there, there are few trekkers passing by and the women’s days were mostly spent alone. Unlike the town center where the homes are all close and facing each other, the lodges are haphazardly spread out from each other. Neighbors are physically distant and many of the lodge owners have become estranged because of the inter-lodge competition. The place of physical communal work is being replaced by individualized labor.

That day in the cabbage bed was the second time she had asked me to accompany her to do fieldwork. When I thought back to the experiences of working with Didi, I wonder why she had asked me. Both times it was just the two of us although it did not
feel as though she was looking for assistance with her work. Her insistence that I take breaks told me that I was not there for my physical strength. So why was it that she kept asking me to join her? During my stay in Langtang, she and I had spent a good amount of time together. Her invitation to accompany her to the fields, I believe, was not for my (wo)manpower but rather, for the company. On those two days, Didi made community with me; my presence and conversation were valued as a replacement for the company that had been lost when many of the women of the town went inside for lodge work. The individualized and competitive work in the lodges has left many women craving companionship.

Physically, I don’t think I proved myself that day in the cabbage bed. Even though Didi said that I “did a lot,” she qualified this statement with “you’re going to hurt.” I believe the test I passed was a trial of commitment to her. By staying with her, rather than going to take pictures, I affirmed a social bond, and distinguished myself from other “picture-taking” foreigners. It was my presence that was valued, not my work abilities.

_I was out of place and uncomfortable, but when discomfort is practiced, and becomes part of a history, clumsiness can be an attribute that for a moment, brings us together._

On that day in the cabbage bed, my physical ineptitude was implicitly commented on but its manifestations (as being unfit for work) were moot because I was there as a social, rather than physical, self. But on another day, my physical self, in all of my clumsiness was valued outright as entertainment. On that day, I sat outside of Hotel Tibet with the Sahuni and her young daughter. Two other women walked by, one
carrying a large bundle of grasses on her back, supported by the thick namlo strap against her forehead, her tensed neck pulling against the taut strap. The two women stopped, and the one carrying the load released her burden, allowing her strained muscles a respite. I lost understanding of what was going on as they all started chatting together in Tibetan. A man walked by and joined in the conversation. I could tell they started talking about me when they began glancing in my direction. “Dance!” they demanded, encouraging me to stand. “No!” I laughed, looking down in embarrassment. But they urged me on, and because I had gotten somewhat used to being the “fool” (during other similar situations where I was forced to dance in front of a group of laughing Nepalis), finally stood up and started waving my arms around, looking clumsy despite my efforts at grace. My audience burst out in laughter and I joined them, knowing I looked ridiculous. In performance mode, I walked over to the heavy bundle of grasses, pulled it up onto my back and struggled to pull the strap onto my forehead. Finally secure, I took a few steps around the yard before eventually buckling under the heavy weight. At home, I would have ‘toughed’ it out and not let on that it was difficult for me. “It’s not that heavy,” I would have said. But in Langtang, I more quickly conformed to assumptions that I was weak.

After several minutes of communal laughter, our “game” was over, and the owner of the grasses swung her bundle onto her back and continued on, making what I had attempted look effortless. My labored and eventually failed movements confirmed what I, and the four people watching me, already knew. This narrative of locals’ superior strength compared to trekkers was reinforced again and again; when trekkers encounter porters and townspeople carrying heavy loads through the mountains, their
history with heavy physical labor is made apparent. When I was involved in their work, it became “play” because we all knew my participation was limited and that I was acting, not seriously working. Even though many of the women lodge owners had ceased these physical pursuits, their history in it afforded them strength over me.

My twenty-one year old body, even compared to people in their mid-forties, was feeble.

*Imperial strength, a fool’s errand.*

*Seeking fortitude today doesn’t replace a past where it was undeservedly claimed.*

Whereas my body was read as humorously feeble, tourists interpret local bodies as extremely strong. In a conversation with two men from Holland who were trekking through Langtang, their remarks quickly turned to the physical strength of the local population, particularly porters. Locals’ bodies were perceived as extremely strong, resilient, and even “superhuman.” The porters’ heavy loads evoked a sense of awe, and the Dutch men expressed disbelief that people can carry twice his/her body weight up a mountain in thin air.

Issues of physical strength were complicated further when I heard older members of Langtang’s community talk about their own population’s changing physical strength. Because much of Langtang’s youth are away at school, the younger generations are not as physically capable as those of the past. At school, children are learning a different kind of knowledge, a knowledge toward which people in Langtang have a deep ambivalence. A school education is highly valued, but there is also nostalgia for a generation that is not learning the traditions of their parents. In Gompaa Gau, the small town just to the southwest of Langtang, a man in his mid-
sixties complained that there aren’t enough people to look after the yaks. Because most of the children whose job it was to tend to the herds are away at school, people are forced to cut back on their herd sizes. But he equally emphasized the importance of a school education and learning Nepali and English. He has two grown sons, one of whom lives and works in Kathmandu. The other is abroad in Qatar earning money. He acknowledged that their lives were crafted to be that way because they received formal schooling. The Sahuji of Village View reminisced about changing marriage practices, which he said have started including more Nepali rituals than Tibetan; he bemoaned environmental degradation, but also spoke of “development” hopes for the future: internet, a road from Kathmandu so that people can enjoy weekend holidays in Langtang, and maybe an airstrip. As a process of becoming physically weaker, many of the people I met in Langtang expressed mixed sentiments toward the process and perceived outcomes of the ways in which social life is changing. I will continue the discussion of this ambivalence toward ‘modernity’ in the next chapter.

Two selves in one:
Where the body is, I am weak
Where the body isn’t, I am strong
Now I am many in one.

I am remembering my body while in a place where I often forget it. This writing has been a mental exercise of physical experience. I’m using my mind to think about my body, whose experience informs my thoughts. My presentation of these events is words on a white page, presented as a clean, neat PDF file. This is how messiness translates to the ordered academic world. Ordering through writing, sanitized on a computer screen. I hope this discussion has evoked a more robust, visceral illumination of social changes, even presented as words on a page.
I saw the Sahuni of Namaste Guest House lounging on the grass one afternoon as I walked by, her face tilted up toward the sun. She interrupted the rays pouring down on her and turned toward me when I greeted her from the path. “Come and sit with me,” she called. I walked up the stone steps to where she was lying, just outside the building’s silhouette. Sprawling on the grass next to her I closed my eyes, surrendering myself to the blinding sunbeams. She mentioned that I hadn’t come to see her in a couple of days. I apologized and asked how she was doing. “I’m ok,” she responded, “but my feet hurt.”

We first met during one of my earlier days in Langtang along the same path as Sophia and I were beginning our exploration of the town. The Sahuni had waved us down and asked, more insisted, that we come see some of her hand-made socks. New in town and trying to make connections, Sophia and I eagerly followed her to her lodge to look at the items. That first day felt like a strictly business interaction, she pushing her wares and we promising to come back the next day because we didn’t have any money with us at the time. The next day she encouraged me to come back again, for food or other purchases.

After our greeting on this day, she went inside to prepare tea after our greeting: we had an established history—we had sat together on many occasions, drinking tea and chatting. She usually asked when I was planning on returning to Nepal, and half-joked that I should marry her thirteen-year-old son. I would ask her
questions about her lodge and how she had come to build it, about town politics, and her feelings towards tourists in Langtang. Often she seemed lonely and had told me before how isolated she felt; her repeated comments about her lack of friends made me feel as if I were her only companion. Twelve years before, she and her husband had built their lodge in Langtang but she said that business had been slow in the past few years. So many lodges had been built in the past decade that the competition had spread customers thin as trekkers increasingly go to lodges with better facilities.

On a separate occasion, I had asked her how life today compares with how Langtang was when she was growing up. “Life is easier today because we can buy our clothes and food,” she said. “But in the heart, life is hard these days.” I was surprised to hear her say that she wished that she could move back to the gau. “I have friends there,” she said, as if she couldn’t see them while owning and living in a lodge. It struck me that at a time when I had heard so many other people equating not owning a lodge with being poor, that she wished she didn’t have, what she perceived of as, the burden of owning a business.

On that subsequent day, I was wearing my pair of black Chacos, durable multi-purpose sandals, bought specifically for my travels in Nepal. The Sahuni was wearing what looked like knock-off Reeboks, slightly tattered but plenty of life still left in them. She looked down at my shoes and asked if we could exchange. She had said her feet hurt, as if wearing my shoes would makes things better. “I’m bored with mine,” she added. I excused myself by saying that my shoes were a gift from my mom, hoping this was reasonable enough to assuage expectations.
I’m opening this chapter with this anecdote because I want to illustrate sentiments that may appear contradictory. The Sahuni of Namaste was wishing for the ‘good old days,’ nostalgic in a way that seemed to render the present somehow unsatisfactory. But simultaneously she desired symbols of ‘modernity,’ shoes and a son married to a foreigner—opportunities for social advancement.

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This chapter is about the mobility of people, objects, and ideas and the matrix of relations between them. It is about the dynamic nature of cross-cultural contact and how neither tourists nor locals are passive recipients of greater forces being acted upon us. All social communities are shaped through dialogues within national and transnational connections. This chapter is about the process of becoming. I discuss the dialectic nature of interrelations and how these relationships craft and represent ambivalence toward modernities. I will argue that ‘modernization’ is not simply ideas and goods radiating from the ‘West’ to the ‘Rest,’ but rather that ideas gather complexity through movement and the means by which people engage with the changing social landscape. Ideas are not absorbed in a pure form, seamlessly integrated into a new context, but rather are intertwined with pre-existing notions, interacting and modifying.

I will argue that the relationship between trekkers and locals is neither inherently collaborative nor antagonistic but rather that, as a result of these interactions, new interests and identities are being formed. Rather than viewing tourists and locals as two diametrically opposed and essentialized groups of people, I am discussing the dialogue between people whose identities are grounded in these
groups but whose individual subjectivities, too, participate in the process of becoming.

People in Langtang are actively critiquing changes in their town and engaging with new economies, class stratification, and participation in Nepal as a nation. The texture and idiosyncrasies of this engagement illustrate a deep ambivalence toward the present and future of the community. For example, older members of Langtang are pushing their children toward education (and trekkers toward giving money for their children’s education) yet simultaneously bemoan the fact that their children are not as physically strong as they were in their youth and do not know the traditions of their grandparents. I discussed this in Chapter 2. This ambivalence toward change is certainly not unique to Langtang or to Nepal. By integrating stories of my own ambivalence toward that which we consider ‘modern,’ I will illustrate that ambivalence toward change transgresses national and class boundaries, and indeed that people everywhere have mixed feelings toward the trajectory of their multiple worlds.

*Going away*
*Wishing it were the way that it isn’t.*

This is not to say that circulating ideas, goods, and people are unproblematic. The movement of goods and people in the tourist-local interaction is often through unequal circumstances. Tourists have money and mobility and choices. This is also not to say that modernity is the story of cultural homogenization. Interaction with change and appropriation of particular strands of global flows is deeply context dependent. I like Anna Tsing’s (2005: 3, 6) use of what she calls “friction” to describe that “cultures are continually co-produced” as “the awkward, unequal,
unstable, and creative qualities of interconnections across difference.” This notion orients us toward an understanding that people are individual agents but also that we operate in situations where power and influence are disproportionate. As Tsing says, “the effects of encounters across difference can be compromising or empowering.” The image of friction is particularly apposite in travel encounters because interaction inflects movement; encounters sway, indeed work to produce, our direction.

This chapter is about contradiction, and the conundrums that are faced in travel experiences and everyday lives. Ambivalence is a means of reacting to and engaging with the world. Throughout this project, I have been integrating anecdotes from my past. The stories took place thousands of miles away from Langtang, and before Nepal was even a part of my geographical understanding. Still, they are part of the conversation I had as a foreigner in Langtang. My reasons for including them are multifold. My own stories are a way of rooting my specific spatial and temporal interactions from Langtang in a history with which I am extremely familiar—my own. My other intention is to dissuade readers from getting the impression that only ‘out there’ are people ambivalent to changes, toward modernization, or whatever we choose to call it. I hope that my personal and ethnographic anecdotes portray the ambivalences of many, including myself.

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Reasons to travel are many, and I have discussed some of them in previous chapters. I have argued that while the notion of the gaze is relevant for understanding power constructions within tourist and local interactions, the motivation for traveling is not to scan the landscape but to be in it and to move through it. This motivation, I
argue, is often spurred by home, not just to get away from it, but also to interact with it in new ways. Experiences narrated through stories synergize places, bringing one to another. The social norms of home allow for story telling, while places traveled to provide the material for crafting a good tale.

In this chapter I will also discuss that, like local people in Langtang, tourists too feel ambivalence toward modernity, toward experiences that were not part of a preconceived imagination of a place. There is a shared yet different ambivalence in European and North American and Nepali experiences with these processes of continuous social reformulation.

*Modernity sounds like Tug o’ War.
But maybe it’s not,
because nobody knows the rules.*

Ning Wang (2000: 15) has discussed the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ of modernity in the tourist process today. He suggests that tourism today is “a cultural celebration of modernity” as new technology enables us greater mobility, and disposable income and time are normalized in our routines. But the author also suggests that modern tourism is “a cultural critique and negation of modernity, exhibited as an escape and a desire to get away from it all.” Tourism, thus, may be considered a push away from and a resistance of the alienation of modernity. We go places to depart from money and the corruption that is associated with modern capitalism; we go to find beauty away from it.22 While the image of the West often is as a place of greed and excess, we seek that which is ‘good’ and ‘pure’ in this world, a place still whole when we feel rooted in fragmented communities. These desires echo Victorian tourists’ romantic

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22 The ‘we’ I’m talking about here is the European and American ‘we.’
pursuits that “manifested in an enthusiastic search for picturesque and sublime landscapes unspoiled by technological advances” (ibid: 73).

There are also social ‘pulls’ of modernity—we are lured to far away lands as ‘out there’ becomes increasingly commodified, and travel deemed a socially productive necessity. Vacation time has become seamlessly integrated into our yearly rituals so that we think we must go away. The advertising sector manipulates and packages places, adventure, and escape into approachable, even necessary, endeavors. Here lies the paradox of modern tourism. We seek to get away from the materiality and alienation of home but experience away in a commodified form that participates in the same systems we attempt to escape. The place for escape is perceived, increasingly, as becoming like that which we are escaping from. In other words, tourism comes into being and flourishes with the help of capitalism and the commodification of experience.

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I argue that tourism is both participating in a problematic social system, emblematic of colonial interactions but also that Langtang community members are actively engaging with changes and shaping the ways in which modernization is processing, not inserted or assimilated, into life.

The ways in which tourism in Nepal today are involved in education and development discourses is rooted in Nepal’s social history. Because tourists are implicated in development ‘projects,’ we must understand “development as a historically produced discourse” and examine “why so many countries started seeing themselves as underdeveloped in the early post World War II period” (Escobar 1995:
The past relationship of Nepal to foreigners, both the construction of Nepal in the imagination of Shangri-La and Nepal’s colonial entrenchment via proximity to and intimate relationships with India, are important for a contemporary understanding of the nature of foreigners in the country. The continual presence of foreigners in Nepal is part of the production, indeed the reproduction, of Nepal’s self-image as ‘underdeveloped.’

Nepal’s war with colonial British between 1814 and 1816 involved contestation over states bordering colonial India and Nepal. The Sugauli Treaty of 1816 ended the war and called for the concession of land (one-third of the entire Nepali territories) to the British as well as the establishment of a British representative in Kathmandu. While the treaty allowed the British recruitment power of Gurkha soldiers for military service, it also cemented Nepal’s autonomy as an independent state. Through contact with the British, Nepal became entangled in the colonial situation despite never being directly colonized. All the same, Nepal became a resource, particularly in providing soldiers to aid in the suppression of Indian uprisings and for the British army during the first and second world wars.

Between 1816 and 1951, Nepal’s borders were closed to foreigners. Starting in 1846, Nepal was ruled by a succession of hereditary prime ministers from the Rana family. The Ranas sought prestigious recognition from the British, which necessitated submission to their dominance in the region. They maintained a cordial relationship with their colonial neighbors but also preserved a strict policy of isolation, barricading themselves from foreign influence. The Rana autocracy made concerted

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23 This history is summarized from Whelpton’s (2005) *A History of Nepal.*
efforts to fortify Nepal from foreign influence by restricting outside access. Visions of democracy and modernization, which had been systematically suppressed during Rana rule, spurred anti-Rana sentiments. These ideological notions, coupled with the success of the Indian Independence movement of 1947, converged in Nepal in 1951, when the Ranas were overthrown.

The post-Rana period saw the rise of bikas, or “development.” Whereas Nepal had been systematically impoverished and its development stymied by its oligarchy rulers, bikas was an opening up, its borders made accessible to an influx of foreign aid and people. The new government welcomed international aid and encouraged development projects such as building schools and roads and hospital construction.24 “For Nepal,” writes Stacy Pigg (1992: 497), “development—rather than the residues and scars of imperialism—is the overt link between it and the West. Bikas is the term through which Nepalis understand their relationship to other parts of the world.” Nepal’s development process is unique because of its socio-historical roots, grounded in colonial discourses because of proximity and relations with British colonizers but still different from that of a colonized nation.

Like Pigg, I use the term bikas to illustrate development specific to Nepal and used by Nepalis, not to be confused with the definitions of institutions like the World Bank, whose standardized definitions are insufficient as the only means of understanding development. Rather, I employ bikas to illustrate development

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24 For a detailed discussion of post World War II developments of international aid, see Arturo Escobar’s *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World.*
particular to Nepal’s socio-historical context and the ways the concept is used by Nepalis.

Nanda Shrestha (1997: 49) has discussed the mechanisms by which bikas participates in the pre-existing Nepali class milieu. In discussing his own experiences as a lower class Nepali child and witnessing the development of the ideological manifestations and perpetuations of bikas, Shrestha writes, education became a distinguishing feature of class status, often reiterating previous divisions. He writes about the children of the wealthy going away to school and coming back speaking in English, distinguishing themselves from the others. This mechanism of class stratification was inherited, regenerated as the elite passed on the means of controlling development projects, projects that would replicate European social life. Education also distinguishes and reiterates generational lines and differences.

The generational consequences of standardizing education influenced children to, as Shrestha (1997: 46) writes, “reject everything [our parents] had taught us as being defective.” “Education had to be modern emphasizing science, technology, and English, the language of bikas.” Shrestha’s experiences with school as a child, he writes, gave him and his peers the impressions that their parents and their manual labor were barriers to bikas, reviving the colonial notion that manual labor was ‘backward.’ Bikas came to mean rejecting the past and rejecting traditional beliefs rather than building upon them.\(^{25}\) As education became critical for accumulation of human capital, knowledge from past generations lost its grip on everyday life. Indeed,

\(^{25}\) In chapter 2, I problematized attitudes toward education by discussing local critiques of changing physical capabilities.
as Escobar (1995: 13) says, “development has relied exclusively on one knowledge system, namely, the modern Western one.”

Today, more children in Nepal are going to school than ever before.26 The importance of earning an education is viewed with an ever-increasing urgency. In Langtang, interaction with trekkers is a means of satisfying this exigency.

The social ideology of bikas echoed in Langtang, in the quest for education and material goods, in the desire for money, and the want for social status improvement. Tourists signify influxes of these things, and relations with foreigners are a means of accessing them. For these reasons, tourists are implicated in the processes of bikas, both as ambassadors and harbingers of it.

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One afternoon, I was sitting in the kitchen of Tibet Hotel with the Sahuni. Her brother, who had moved away from Langtang some years before to build a lodge elsewhere, was visiting. He asked what it was that I was doing in Langtang. I reiterated my project, saying as I had to everybody with whom I had had conversations that I was talking with people in Langtang for a school project. “I’m a student of anthropology,” I told him after he asked what it was I was studying. He turned to his sister and began conversing with her in Tibetan. She seemed confused, but the meaning of their exchange was lost to me. I eventually came to understand that her confusion stemmed from a misinterpretation of my presence in Langtang.

26 World Development Indicators show a consistent increase in number of pupils in primary school between 1970 (389,825 students) until 2008 (4,418,713 students). The data for students in secondary education begins in 1999 during which there were 1,236,996 students and increases until 2008 during which there were 2,290,113 students.
Whereas I thought I had made it clear that I was working on a project for my school, she thought my “school project” meant construction of a school in Langtang.

*My presence is embedded in a lineage of expansion, of consuming places.*

*Only taking because mostly giving is just another form of taking.*

I was told that a group of foreigner volunteers built Langtang’s school fifteen years ago. After class five, students must go elsewhere, usually Kathmandu, to continue their studies. This, of course, costs money and as education has become socially imperative in Langtang, outside sources are looked to for supplementary payment methods. Tourists, as illustrated in the anecdote above, are seen as harbingers of *bikas*, education, and money. Trekkers are interpreted as a source of money not just in the lodge business but also as a direct resource for a child’s schooling. On several occasions throughout my time in Langtang, I was solicited to be a child’s school ‘sponsor,’ to pay for a child to go to Kathmandu to study.

Education is *bikas,* (‘developed’) and is the means by which people become *bikasi* and thus tourist dollars donated with the intention of sending Nepali children to school are implicated in development discourses. The development encounter, as Pigg (1992) explicates, is an intersection that creates situations in which people come to see each other in certain ways. Foreigners are interpellated as wealthy, but the preconceived image of a generic tourist is more complicated than as exclusively an affluent provider.

I didn’t spend any time in the Langtang school, although I did talk with some of its teachers. They were all from Kathmandu and had been assigned teaching posts in Langtang. They said that school is taught in Nepali and English, and not in Tibetan.
In Pigg’s (1992: 499, 502) discussion of Nepali Schoolbooks, she writes that school texts offer a window into an “ideology of modernization: the representation of society through an implicit scale of social progress.” She goes on to say that “schools are a primary institution of bikas. Education is both a symbol of bikasi status and the route through which people can hope to move from farming in the village to an office job in a bikasi place.” Schools are sites for the bikas ideology because, Pigg writes, nationalized textbooks chart and perpetuate Nepal as a place moving away from backwardness but still deeply entrenched in it. By illustrating rural villages in relation to cities and aid agencies, they echo national sentiments of the development imperative.27 Discourses located within the school system portray the future as the life that elite Nepalis enjoy today, implicitly suggesting a social evolutionary model. Gaining an education and thus learning the vocabulary of the Nepali education system and the representations of the country that the textbooks perpetuate, is to be bikasi.

By echoing the national critiques of underdevelopment, the educated align themselves with the institutions and vocabulary of bikas.

_Lodge walls collaged with photographs_
_Like tender._
_I stare at smiling white faces_
_And wonder why._

It was not only my foreign status that distinguished my physical features. As a college aged person, my presence was unusual as well. Most teenagers and young adults are away at school. Indeed, the only similarly aged Nepalis I met during my

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27 Nepal Tourism 2011 is a national goal, set by the new Maoist government, to attract one million tourists to the country in 2011. “Together for Tourism” is the slogan of this national campaign. This illustrates the ways in which tourism, in Nepal today, is a vital component of the national agenda for promoting growth, development, and a new Nepal. From nepalitimes.com.
time in Langtang were students on school break, visiting their families. Through two separate encounters, I heard the ways in which education is used for crafting lives.

The first was the daughter of the Tea Shop and Grocery Shop Sahuji. We were introduced after I met her sister at another lodge. She encouraged me to come greet her sister, freshly home from school. I’m not sure why I was pushed to meet her. Maybe it was because we were close in age, or maybe because her sister was trying to promote relations with foreigners.

The two of us sat in the shop drinking tea, she talking about studying biology in the city while I talked about my own home. I told her about my university studies and she explained that after finishing school, she wants to go to college and then hopes to go to rural parts of Nepal that are unfrequented by tourists. “These are the areas of Nepal that need the most help,” she said. It seemed that she was suggesting places without the ‘blessing’ of tourists were less bikasi. She seemed to envision her future as, what Pigg (1992: 511) calls an “agent of bikas, rather than one of its targets.” With her prospects for the future, she seemed to be suggesting that she could help other places because of her education, as if she could transfer her good fortune to others. “That’s good, isn’t it?” She asked me after she had explained her future plans, as if she wanted me to qualify the merits of her intentions.

She showed me an album with photographs of her five siblings, all of who go to school in Kathmandu. Interspersed with their school portraits were also pictures of foreigners, couples book-ending her and her brother and sisters. She pointed out her German sponsors who pay for her school and with whom, she said, she remains in close contact.
The second student I met during my stay in Langtang was already in college and had different plans for the future. We met as I was walking past Glacier Lodge, ambling around looking for company and conversation as I did on most days. She was sitting on the stoop with the Sahuni, a middle aged woman who is the sister of the Peace-Full Sahuji. Dressed in distinctly urban clothes—jeans and a tight black and white striped t-shirt emblazoned with “Angel Death” in bold Gothic letters—the young woman’s style contrasted to that of the woman sitting next to her. She looked up from her conversation and waved, inviting me in to join them. I had never seen her before but obliged, lifting up the wooden gate and entering into the lodge yard. The young woman seemed excited to see me and immediately began chatting in English, asking me where I was from and how I liked Langtang. She was visiting Langtang to see her sick grandmother, she explained. “Would you like to meet her?” she asked. “Yes,” I said so we walked across the way and through the passage between two houses into the communal backyard. “She’s old and doesn’t talk very much,” my new acquaintance explained to me. “She doesn’t speak any English or Nepali.” We sat on a mat outside under the sun with her grandmother, who looked quite old and frail and who was intently engaged with her prayer beads. Another young woman handed me tea that glistened in the brilliant sun like a glass brimming with amber. I asked the young woman if she could ask her grandmother about what Langtang was like when she was a young woman. She translated the question and the old woman looked up to respond. The young woman translated her answers back to me, half in Nepali and half in English. The old woman’s response was similarly themed to other elderly voices I had heard in the town. “We never went to school so we didn’t learn Nepali or
English. Everybody worked in the fields together and all of our food was grown here in Langtang,” she said. After a few short minutes, the young woman said her grandmother had to rest but invited me to walk through Langtang with her. We strolled along the cobbled path and she introduced me to a few of her grandmother’s neighbors. I asked if she was planning on moving back to Langtang after finishing school. “No,” she said, “I want to live in Kathmandu and maybe go abroad to work.” Just as I had done, she left home with education as her defense.

These two encounters illustrate the different ways in which education, and the mobility afforded by it, earns its participants bikasi status.

People living in Langtang did not place the importance of education, and achievement of bikas, ceremoniously on hallowed ground with no reflection or critiques. Indeed, there was an active dialogue concerning the implications for Langtang as children go away to school and return, or not, with newly carved visions of the future.

Buried in a footnote, Pigg (1992: 499) includes a brief discussion of villagers’ perception that development is “empty, bankrupt, and deceptive in its promises of prosperity.” I would like to elaborate on this point to illustrate the complex feelings with which people in Langtang are engaging with education and bikas. While parents are encouraging their children to go to school and are seeking money from tourists to do so, people are also actively critical of changes that precipitate from tourist interactions, bikas, and schooling.

I heard ambivalent remarks about changing generational skills. People seemed to be looking to the future as a time of positive change but equally as an era of
uncertainty. On the one hand, the younger generation is learning English and Nepali, and they are going abroad to work or living in Kathmandu earning money, and integrating into a community whose way of living has gained credence. But that lifestyle is also being critiqued by many of the parents and grandparents of young people living away from home. “Make sure you take care of your parents when they get old,” an elderly man once told me, as if to suggest that his children had failed to do so.

The old man seemed wary of the ways in which foreigners treat their elders (and indeed, this sentiment was expressed on another occasion when the Sahuni of Tibet Family Hotel told me she didn’t like how trekkers go so far away from home because they must be neglecting their parents), yet I simultaneously heard desires for more sustainable interaction with foreigners. For me, this desire for contact manifested in a plethora of marriage proposals. They came from many corners, it seemed: from men and woman on men’s behalf, mothers and sisters asking if I would marry their male relatives. The Sahuni of Namaste Guest House was not the only person to inquire into my ‘availability’ for her son. The Sahuji of Peace-Full told me about his younger sister, who met her Australian husband in Langtang while he was trekking. They now live in Australia together. I heard this story as a template, as if I, too, was being implicitly asked to marry a man in Langtang. Marriage to foreigners was perceived as means of accessing a particular modernity and moving away from Langtang. I was the archetypal foreigner, representing material wealth and bikas.

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Eco-Guest House was opened four years ago by a couple that also owns a lodge in Laama Hotel. Previous to opening the first, they had lived in the gau. Their four children all attend school outside of Langtang. Two are sponsored by foreigners, I was told, and the parents pay tuition for the others. When I asked why they had moved from the gau in the first place, the Sahuni told me they had opened a lodge in the hope of making life better for their children. By attracting more business with their new lodge, they had hopes of sending their children to receive higher levels of education. Her statement struck me because I could hear my own mother expressing a parallel sentiment. My mom has reminded me how different my upbringing was from hers. There seemed to be the expectation, or maybe it was a hope, that life for the future generations would be different, perhaps better in some way.

After we drank tea, the Sahuni took me into the dining room to show me some photographs. She saw me glance at an old looking sweater that was displayed on the wall, hung on a wire coat hanger. She unhooked it and handed the garment to me as she explained that it had belonged to her grandparents. “Our boys wore it when they were little,” she said. “But now it just hangs here on the wall.” I had seen the older people in the town wearing similarly styled sweaters, either white or grey with red ribbing. The one the Sahuni showed me that day had two embroidered birds on the back facing each other, their red beaks nearly touching. I commented how beautiful it was as the Sahuni neatly draped it back on the hanger and repositioned it on the wall. Only older people in the town still wear that style and the craft of making would
surely die with the generation who wears them, she said. Some older members of the community continue to practice the trade, the products sold to trekkers, she said. Hung on the wall, it seemed that the sweater could be meditated upon as a reminder of the past, as an important time to be learned from, but it also was an historical artifact whose lineage, while important to the present, was still distinguished from it.

As I was getting ready to leave, an old woman came in through the front door, slamming behind her as she escaped the blustery day, and almost snagging her thick old-styled sweater. She sat on the bench from which I had just risen, hunched next to the clay oven, and stuck her wrinkled, leathery hands practically in the flames. I sat down again after the Sahuni introduced us—the woman as her aunt, and I as an American. I asked the aunt, who I was told to address as “grandmother,” if she would tell me about Langtang when she was younger. She reiterated themes I had heard in other conversations about the different foods that were eaten and the different pace of life. After the Sahuji commented that the old woman’s sweater was similar to the one she had just shown me. The old woman proudly showed me its flawless stitching, decades-old seams still in perfect condition. “Work was done more thoroughly,” she said. “But these days, people are always in a rush.” While the craft of making clothes has become a relic of the past, her nostalgia was not an explicitly negative view of the present, I don’t think. She said she was happy her grandchildren are away at school and said she thinks that tourism is good for Langtang. All the same, I took note of her

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28 This is an example of how the past and ‘tradition,’ are commodified for tourist consumption. It seems to suggest that trekkers find these garments “authentic,” particularly in light of encountering local people wearing North Face jackets, which appear ‘inauthentic.’

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reflection on the past and the fact that the younger generations are not learning the
crafts of their grandparents.

Shrestha (1997: 31), in his critical examination of development projects in Nepal, highlights the ironies of how such ‘modernizing’ forces have relegated certain
lifestyles to a status of ‘backwardness.’ As he says,

Here is the ironic twist to the current focus on sustainable development. When Western development arrived in Nepal, the Nepalis were systematically encouraged to abort their sustainable practices and discard their tradition of self-help as embodied in the subsistence mode of production, communal cooperation, and co-existence. They were repeatedly told that such practices, when viewed through the microscope of Western economic rationality, were irrational and went against the grain of growth. Anybody who was not driven by profit motives, the central core of Western economics, was labeled traditional and hence anti-growth”

This is not to suggest that the past should be glorified in visions of pastoral egalitarian communities. But it is important to note the ironies of ‘development’ and tourism in crafting dependency. I heard people say that all of Langtang’s food used to be grown in Langtang or nearby, and that all of its clothes were produced locally; in other words, it was almost completely self-sufficient. People from Langtang are not passively accepting these discourses; ideas are not perfectly packaged or greased. Ideas do not slide into a community setting or appropriated without vacillating and critical reflections. The future is both positive and negative imaginations of interaction with a wider world.
Oh, traveler of today,
Running on your paternal engine
with such mobile facility.
Carrying power in your pleasure seeking,
going to distant lands to seek vitality,
inculcating your world.
Lending ‘aid’ because you can,and because you are the father
of a non-child who doesn’t need you.

Trekking away from Langtang on our trip down, Erin, Hayley, and I stopped for a drink in a small lodge town called Landslide. Handmade socks and yak-wool shawls hung outside of the lodge next to where we dropped our bags. On a table next to the handmade items was a display of Tibetan trinkets. We walked inside, found the Sahuji, and asked for three mango juice boxes. He gave us the drinks and the four of us settled into conversation. He said we were the first trekkers to come by that day and was glad of our company; his wife lives in Thulo Syphru, a day’s walk from Landslide, while he tends to the business. As we greedily slurped on our juice boxes, the Sahuji asked us for a favor. He said he had been trying to get in contact with an Englishman he met seven years ago who had agreed to sponsor his son to go to school. We were told that the English man had sent the first year’s check but the Sahuji hadn’t received anything in the past five years. He said he’d been trying to get in contact with the sponsor via numerous e-mails, but had never been able to reach him. He asked if we would make a call to England from the lodge phone. Erin volunteered to call but she only got through to a message saying that the line had been disconnected. We suggested to the Sahuji that the man may have passed away or moved. His son continues to go to school, even though he is not receiving foreign sponsorship funding.
The power to disconnect, 
as if the connection was a forgery.
But what remains?

Throughout these modernity discourses we see echoes of colonial impulses, of foreigners contradictory relationship with Others. Of wanting both to see and to cure; to erase but revel in imaginations. This is how modernity and development and tourism are intertwined.

Langtang community members are not the only people engaging with changes and experiencing ambivalence toward social shifts. Tourism often operates under colonial urges of going to strange lands to see strange people, gawk at their peculiarities, and feel good that we have seen ‘another way of life’ but also helped show ‘our way.’ This is reminiscent of imaginations of frontiers, the creation of space for conquering, places imagined as landscapes of tradition where Europeans and Americans can fulfill urges of simultaneously and paradoxically civilizing and consuming Otherness. Others and difference are idealized as archetypal ‘noble savages’ and exotic lands dubbed as paradises of simple pleasures. This is the sermon Lonely Planet preaches. Intertwined, rather than distinct from this imagination is the notion of conquest, of conquering the barbarous and backwardness of exotic places and peoples. Both of these distorted imaginations serve to guide tourists.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) analyzes the impetus for the historically constructed imagination of Otherness. The preconceived notions of the socio-historical characteristics of the Other owe their popular connotations – impoverished, underdeveloped, Third World – to constructed fictions of travelogues read by those at ‘home’ as fact. The imaginations of Otherness, which are common practices among
travelers, tend, more often that not, to participate in Trouillot’s contested “Savage slot,” casting the far and away as inherently different to ‘we’ ‘here.’ Others may be fantasized, indeed manipulated to fit preconceived notions that when revealed to be different, are reformulated once again into constructed fictions, the metanarratives of the West. Indeed, as Trouillot says, “the Savage can be noble, wise, barbaric, victim or aggressor, depending on the debate and on the aims of the interlocutors. The space within the slot is not status” (23).

By applying the ways in which the “Savage slot” manifests in travel experiences in general, and more specifically mine to Nepal, I hope not only to denounce these manifestations but also to suggest that by examining their construction, I can contest their imaginations.

While I do not think that tourists passively accept images provided by Lonely Planet, or from home, I do think that these images are often naturalized and subconsciously (or not) involved in perceptions of place. I was surprised to hear the vocabulary with which trekkers described their experiences. I’m highlighting these conversations not because I wish to isolate and problematize these individuals but rather, I want to use their conversations to illuminate how imaginations and perceptions are constructed in a larger context.

The ambivalence with which foreigners talked about development in Nepal was paradoxical and self-sustaining; self-sustaining because the comments always left open a space for the self to speak. I heard reiterations that new roads and “greedy” Nepalis’ monetary pursuits, from the trekkers’ perspective, served to taint their
sublime experiences. Ironically, I simultaneously also heard people speak of the ‘ill-equipped’ nature of the country.

A young French woman sat on a bench outside of Tibet Family Hotel as I walked by one late afternoon. She had a book propped on her lap but her gaze turned out toward the mountains, that far off, hazy-eyed look that accompanies people absorbing a panorama; it was like the expression on the faces of people happening upon a wedding. Lips curled ever so slightly up in semi-sedated looking pleasure. This is the view from the porch.

I greeted her, as was routine between trekkers, a custom maybe we could call the foreigners’ ‘code of the brethren.’ We struck up the trekker-to-trekker type of conversation: how long have you been in Nepal, where else have you been, how long are planning on staying, where else are you traveling? She said she came to Nepal because she’d heard stories from her parents who had traveled to the Himalayas in the seventies. The stories she had heard were of Kathmandu as a “quaint” little town, “with only three guest houses.” She seemed to be interpreting Nepal through the lens of the stories from her childhood, a lens that had cast the country as different from the place she herself was encountering. She said she had trekked the Jomson circuit (in the Annapuran range of the Himalayas) with her boyfriend before coming to Langtang. “They’re building a new road there and we were trekking right next to jeeps! The exhaust kept getting in our eyes and noses while we were trying to enjoy
The roads and jeeps had interrupted her experience of being in the Himalayas, which at home (the land of jeeps), had been cast in the mold of the sublime. Her indignation was less geared toward individuals as it was toward the process—the irrefutable process of changes, spoken about simultaneously as a both unfortunate and inevitable.

I heard a similar commentary on another occasion when I was trekking down from Langtang the second time only in this occurrence, the comment was more articulated toward individuals, aimed at money-driven, “Westernizing” Nepalis. I had spent the night in a small cluster of lodges called Bamboo, at the edge of the Langtang River. I sat the next morning with the one other traveler staying there, a Dutch woman who was also trekking alone. We ate our breakfasts, listening to the river thunder down the mountains. “This is paradise,” she said. “I could just sit here forever.” I agreed and lamented the fact that I had to be on my way. She asked me how I had come to Nepal and I explained that I had been studying there for the past semester. I mentioned how I had considered going to New Zealand for the semester but had decided on Nepal instead. She agreed that I had made the right choice. “New Zealand will always be there,” she said. “But Nepal is changing so fast. It’s a good thing you’re here now so you can see how it was originally.” Baffled by her comment about ‘originality,’ I asked her how she thought Nepal was changing. “People will try

29 A recent New York Times travel section showcased an article called “Last Foothold in Nepal,” by Ethan Todras-Whitehill, which discusses the construction of this road. In an uncritical examination of the new road, the article states that, “trekkers want places where only their own feet can take them.” The article is explicit in its claims that the road, for tourists, is negative. “The towns were more developed and less charming,” the author, who trekked along the road to refute the construction of the road, writes. From nytimes.com/travel. March 21, 2010.
to sell me a shirt at six in the morning!" She exclaimed. "And I’m like, ‘I haven’t
even eaten my breakfast yet!’" She continued, “Nepal is becoming extremely money
focused. It’s becoming more and more westernized.”

Westernization, in the context of how this woman was using the term, seemed
to be negative for her, damaging her experience, and serving to pollute her image of
Nepal as a site for exploration. It was as if once ‘westernized,’ and Nepal had lost its
‘originality,’ it would not be worth coming to. She equated ‘authentic’ travel
experiences with encounters with ‘untouched,’ ‘unspoiled’ people.

Looking through a blog by a couple of trekkers in Langtang in 2007, I was
struck by the following comment that echoed the Dutch woman’s comment about
money. This post compared Langtang to the Annapurna circuit, a much more traveled
route:

“We gave ourselves 7 days to do the Langtang trek (not counting travel days).
This one is much less traveled than the Annapurna circuit, and thus the people less
tainted by tourist dollars. It's mostly the Tibetan and Sherpa people who live in this
area. Both are known for their friendly honest smiles.”


This remark suggests that money corrupts the tradition and ‘purity’ of rural
Nepalis who have not entered the ‘modern’ milieu of capital based economies. It
seems that the impression of this blogger is that money makes people not smile.
‘Authentic’ interactions with locals, as interpreted in this comment, are considered as
the experiences with locals who remain ‘untouched.’ Modernity, as conceived of by
this post and the Dutch woman from the previous anecdote, is a damaging process, from which tourists imagine themselves to be escaping from at home and who are encountering a place that is conceived of as amidst the process of becoming like home. In this elucidation, for foreign tourists, Nepal is becoming less of an escape, and is read as becoming more like home.

*Presence taints purity,*  
*And this paradox stifles imagination.*  
*We race time,*  
*rushing to see it before*  
*the ravages of rapidity*  
*consume what was never there.*

I heard other comments from trekkers illuminating the perception that Nepal should be ‘preserved.’ One afternoon, I was sitting outside of Peace-Full with the Sahuji as he told me a story of an avalanche in Langtang decades before. Two trekkers and their guide strode by, on their way back to Syphru Besi to pick up the bus. They stopped in at Peace-Full for some tea. I began conversing with the trekkers as the guide started talking with the Sauhuji. They were from Canada and said they had been trekking in Langtang as a break from their hospital volunteer jobs in Kathmandu. They asked if I was heading up or down so I said neither, “I’ve been staying in Langtang for a little over a week.” They were curious about my project and I explained a bit of what I was talking to people about in the area about. As I mentioned how lodge owners had been commenting on the competition in the town, the woman exclaimed, “Oh! It must be ruining their entire culture!” I mumbled something about changes happening everywhere in response because I found her remark troubling but she also seemed to expect confirmation about the validity of her statement. She seemed to be operating under the pretense that ‘they’ are victims,
having suffered the deadly process of contact with ‘us,’” suggesting that people from Langtang had never interacted with outsiders and implicitly proposing that Langtang should be preserved, its “culture” fossilized for the eternal enjoyment of others (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 44). I wondered if she was self-reflecting at all on the irony of her statement in light of her presence.

On another occasion, I was sitting with Sophia inside the gift shop of Tibet Hotel. The monsoon rains had started to make their presence felt and we had come inside to dry off. Two Dutch men followed our lead, escaping the downpour just as it started cascading from the sky. Sophia and I had been in Langtang for just under a week, about five times as long as most foreigners spend there so we felt like pros. The two men were curious about us and about Langtang, and began asking us questions about the local economy. They asked if Langtang community members are aware of national news. I bluntly replied, “of course,” embarrassed by their ignorance. They proceeded to talk about all of their development ideas, as if to say they could teach people in Langtang how to live ‘better.’ It seemed that their imagination of Langtang as a rural village pre-constituted its inhabitants as ignorant non-participants and themselves as the bearers of model living.

Trekkers, with our power of mobility, come and go, and take away statements and descriptions of other people, statements that are carried across continents and oceans and delivered home, neatly packaged as fact. In Orientalism, Edward Said (1979: 3, 7) scrutinizes the ways in which “Orientalism,” is, and has been, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” The ways in which European hegemony have been able to “manage,” indeed “make” the Orient
by disciplining its image as always “other.” This eternal Other, always imagined in juxtaposition with the Occident (i.e. the Self), is crafted through a “flexible positional superiority,” which always locates the “Oriental” in a denigrated position. In travel discourses, tourists both want to ‘know’ and ‘manage’ rural Nepalis simultaneously by the implicit suggested way of living derived by way of their presence (which illustrates to locals ‘modern’ living) but are also criticize locals for living somehow ‘incorrectly’ (i.e. not ‘traditionally’ enough). The two Dutch men echoed these contradictory sentiments, of both wanting to understand and manage local people.

This vocabulary resonates with the notion of bringing ‘development.’ In Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World, Arturo Escobar (1995: 53-54) discusses how “development assumes a teleology to the extent that it proposes that the ‘natives’ will sooner or later be reformed; at the same time, however, it reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior; as having limited humanity in relation to the accomplished European.” This is precisely the attitude that the two Dutch men were suggesting. That they were the harbingers of a way of life that would soon take its hold on rural villages but that this ‘catch-up’ on the part of Langtang would never seal the rift between the European homeland and Nepal that is implicitly suggested. Indeed, from its conception, Trouillot (2003: 21) states that the West’s vision of order consisted of “two complementary spaces, the Here and the Elsewhere, which premised one another and were conceived as inseparable…Elsewhere… was a space of colonized peoples by others who would
eventually become ‘us’—or at the very least who should—in a project of assimilation.”

In addition to their comments serving to erase the complexity with which people in Langtang are engaging with changes, the two men seemed perceive that Langtang community members were archetypal ‘villagers,’ undifferentiated from other rural residents, in Appadurai’s (1988: 37) words, “incarcerated, or confined,” as ‘natives,’ typified by social and spatial habitations, perceived of as physically immobile, indeed grounded to places, with no relief from the externally produced image. Locals, imagined as distinct from the metropolitan West, lose their ‘authenticity’ when this distinction is perceived to have faded. Tourist attitudes not only inadvertently participate in development endeavors but also assume the same language of hierarchical ordering.

This is the manner in which foreign visitors in Nepal speak about the changes they perceive occurring. Nepal is imagined as a place away from the damages of modernity, constructed as a world of better living, and as a place to where one can escape. When tourists witness this imagination deconstructing, the reactions elicited are disdainful; disdainful toward perceiving attributes of home while away. The implicit blame seems to be on the same abstract construction for our reasons for escape—the vulgarity and materialism of home. But the implicit blame is also, perhaps, on the locals, who are always somehow ‘incorrectly’ modernizing.

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When we arrived in Langtang, our guide directed us to a lodge called Peace-Full. Kame had told us that he knew the couple that owns the lodge so they would
give us a good rate. Upon first glance, Peace-Full looked like many of the other lodges we had stayed in. It was basic but had all that we considered necessary. The eight rooms were on the second floor of a two-story building. The first floor housed the dining room, a small display of handmade souvenirs for sale, the owners’ bedroom, a solar shower, and a Buddhist shrine next to a television. The Sahuni told us we could use any of the blankets stacked in the hallway; we needn’t worry about the one hundred rupee per blanket charge. It was the off-season and it gets chilly at night, the Sahuni said. We were the only guests that night, and for many of the subsequent nights it was the same.

Peace-Full was the first building one approaches when entering Langtang so, despite our fatigue, we dropped our bags in our room and went to take a look around town. As we climbed higher, we passed another lodge that advertised a German Bakery. A sign for a cheese factory pointed left, another sign for Eco-Guest House in the same direction, still another for Shangri-La Guest House a little further up. As we gained elevation, we turned and looked back to where we had come from. Sculpted snow capped peaks loomed on either side, their silhouettes slowing inching toward the town. I half expected a pack of dinosaurs to come thundering through the valley toward us.

We walked past the Mani prayer walls, which divide the path into two parallel routes, making sure to stay to the left as Buddhist tradition demands. When we passed a public water tap, the buildings changed. Rather than being made of wood and cement like those near Peace-Full, these were built of stone and looked much older. Straight ahead from the water tap, sticking perpendicularly out of a house was a little
store called Kerosene Depot. A man with a glass eye stood out in front, tapping his foot. He nodded his head in acknowledgment as we approached. “Namaste,” we greeted him, raising our hands with the palms turned inward and touching each other—“we salute the god within you.” He returned the greeting, and we introduced ourselves as American students working on projects for school. He wanted to know which lodge we were staying in so we told him we had just arrived and had been led by our guide to Peace-Full. A dour look of resignation crossed his face. He told us that he also owns a small lodge, and pointed to it across from his shop. “Nobody stays there anymore because of the competition,” he told us. All the trekkers stay outside of the town’s periphery. “The owners of Peace-Full are rich because they get lots of business”, he said. “The people who live in the town center near me are poor,” he continued. The Peace-Full owners are not gaukomanche, or townspeople, he claimed, but live in what he referred to as the “business district.”

We continued up through the gau, its character unique compared to the other lodge towns we had seen on our way up. The houses were close together and many of them faced inward toward each other, contrasting both in material and spatial layout to the lodges.

An old looking man, bundled in multiple tattered layers and smelling of alcohol, stopped us along the path. After making sure we understood that he was Tibetan, he pulled out a gold medallion from around his neck and started explaining its meaning. A woman walked by mid-explanation and insisted, “you buy, you buy?!?” Sophia and I replied that we didn’t have any money with us, an excuse that would be used on numerous occasions to come.
Sophia and I returned to Peace-Full and sat on our beds to discuss what we had just heard. “It kind of feels like the city and the suburbs,” I wondered out loud as I unclipped my sleeping bag from my backpack and unfurled it onto the bed.

The Competition has come about because there were no set rules for pricing, of room or meals for tourists, in Langtang. As a result, lodge owners were offering discounts to tourists, either cheaper food prices or foregoing the room prices (knowing that they will make money off meal prices) in an effort to attract business. The competition is especially fierce during the off-season when there are few tourists.

The intense competition begins half a day’s trek from Langtang, where some lodge owners own other accommodations, gaining a competitive edge over those who do not have multiple establishments. Trekkers coming up the mountain are promised free rooms or other discounts for staying at a particular lodge ‘recommended’ in Langtang. It becomes a case of the rich growing richer—those who own multiple lodges have a marketing advantage over those who own only one lodge. This creates a further class divide between the lodge owners. To be successful, one must own more than one lodge.

The Kerosene Depot Sahuji, the man with whom I had that first encounter on the eve of my arrival in Langtang, and the owners of Tibet Family Hotel, on two separate occasions, said that corruption in an election ten years previously had allowed for the Peace-Full lodge owners to construct their new business. During this election, the Village View Sahuji was elected First Chairman and the Peace-Full Sahuji Second Chairman by bribing townspeople to vote for them and then in turn taking the government funds, meant for the improvement of Langtang, for themselves.
and their own individual pursuits. When I probed the Peace-Full owner about the leaders of Langtang, he told me that he was elected Second Chairman to an eleven-person committee that had since disbanded. On another occasion, the Kerosene Depot Sahuji mentioned the reasons why the workers at Village View were all from Khumbu, another region. "The Village View Sahuji doesn’t want to hire workers from the gau because he’s worried they will get rich,” he said. He suggested that in order for him to maintain his class status, the Village View Sahuji not only had to make money for himself, but he also had to make sure others would not be able to surpass his wealth and with it, his status.

Ortner (1999: 200), in her discussion of the burgeoning tourist industry in the Solu-Khumbu region, remarks on the Sherpa class divisions that have resulted from the tourism induced fiscal flows into the region. The “exploitation involved in maintaining [high Sherpa status] position” involves “keeping one step ahead.” Ortner uses this discussion about evolving class hierarchies to lead into a conversation about the disillusionment of Euro-North American mountaineers upon seeing the perceived greed that climbers in the 1970s finally began to acknowledge the ‘untouched’ imagination of Sherpas as an Orientalist construction. According to Ortner, early European and North American mountaineers believed Sherpas climbed because of their loyalty to mountaineers. Mountaineers from the 1950s and ‘60s perceived Sherpas as sharing their romantic and adventurous visions of climbing. Not until the 1970s did mountaineers begin to question the Orientalist constructions of Sherpas as ‘counter modern’ and ‘anti-materialist. The assertions of 1970s mountaineers that Sherpas were motivated to climb because of money assumed different tones.
Mountaineers were “saddened, or disillusioned, or simply realistic” when it was recognized that the stereotypes of Sherpas as “pure” and “untainted” were false constructions. As I have illustrated with trekkers’ perceptions of “greed”, this imagination persists, continuously in a process of being deconstructed.

But people living in Langtang also made comments about the “greed” of certain people in their community—“People didn’t used to know they were poor,” the Sahuji of Peace-Full once said, “because everybody had the same things and ate the same food. With tourism came money and the chance to buy new things. People have gotten greedy because of the competition between lodges. People in Langtang now seen foreigners and Nepalis [from Kathmandu] coming through and want the things outsiders have. Once a neighbor gets something, others want it as well.” This is the modernity Langtang is experiencing. A process by which some people are becoming wealthy through business and proximity to foreigners, while others’ social and economic status remains the same; a process by which greed is being attributed to particular individuals, who are personally benefiting from the process. The comments surrounding the exaggerated social stratification were predominantly negative.

Indeed, those benefiting and those less fortunate seemed to perceive the inter-lodge competition of as harmful. As I discussed earlier, Pigg writes that bikas is perceived of as “empty,” crafting changes that are viewed as regrettable for both individuals and the community.

Langtang’s modernity is deeply classed, and is a process about which people are noting amplified social stratification. Indeed, as the Kerosene Depot Sahuji said, “nowadays all the people who help out in the lodges come from other towns. The rich
lodge owners do not invite people from the gau to help in their lodges because they are afraid that the townspeople will make some money, build lodges, and become wealthy themselves.” The social stratifications, induced by disproportionate lodge profits engender a social wariness that results in strained relationships amongst Langtang’s inhabitants.

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Upon my return to Langtang, ten days after my first departure, change was in the air before we breached Langtang’s borders. Just down from Gompaa Gau, a lodge owner stopped us and asked if we would stay in her lodge. “We have to make it to Langtang today,” we told her, knowing it would be easy to be held up if we spent the night there. She told us we would have to pay two hundred and fifty rupees, less than four U.S dollars, if we stayed in Langtang. “No,” I told her. “Last time I was here I did not have to pay for the room.” This was true—the owners of Peace-Full had not charged me for the room. After a back-and-forth exchange during which it was made clear that we would not spend the night in her lodge, the Sahuni became very nervous and in a seemingly unnecessary hushed tone asked us not to tell anybody in Langtang that she had offered us a free room. She said she would get in trouble. Bewildered, we finished our journey and decided to stay with my friends at Tibet Family Hotel in Gompaa Gau. The room charge was not discussed and I assumed we would not be charged for it. At dinner that night, a few men from Langtang came over to eat. One of them, who I later learned works at Village View, began talking about a

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30 Free rooms were often offered because it was the off-season and lodge owners attracted business by offering discounts and, as I have discussed, making recommendations from other lodges. For Sophia and I, our guide, Kame, arranged a free room for us.
committee meeting that was in the midst of wrapping up. The meeting had lasted three days, he said, and had revolved around the creation of new standardizing rules that govern the lodges. Only three lodges, Village View, Eco-Guest House, and Shangri-La are currently open, he said. Indeed, the rest had to close. I was confused about what he was talking about was unable to gain a clearer picture that night.

The next morning, as we were preparing to leave, the Sahuji of Eco-Guest House and the son of the owners of Shangri-La lodge came down to Gompaa Gau from Langtang; word had spread that we were staying there. Erin, Hayley, and I were told that we were not officially supposed to have stayed at Tibet Family lodge because as of the previous day, it should have been closed. Because the Tibet Family hotel Sahuji was at the committee meeting upon our arrival the day before, the lodge would not be fined for having allowed us to stay there but we, still, would have to pay the new prices that had been set by the committee. These newly institutionalized prices were much higher than we had anticipated and despite our efforts to argue our bill down, the price remained firmly at two-hundred and fifty rupees, less than four U.S dollars. I began asking them about the new rules and why they had come at this time. The Sahuji of Eco-Guest House spoke with a particular urgency that made me think that he was hoping for my confirmation that the changes were a good idea. I listened as he talked about how only three lodges (of the 12 that there are in Langtang) would be open during the off-season and the additional four that would be allowed to accept guests when the tourist season began in the fall. The three open for the off-season, Village View, Shangri-La, and Eco-Guest House, three of the wealthiest lodges, would rotate every two-weeks as the only open lodge. The smaller,
less equipped lodges would have to close but would be paid a stipend. There would be fines if the rules were broken. Trekkers, thus, would only be allowed to stay in the lodges with “adequate facilities.” The other lodges don’t have good showers or toilets or kitchens, the two men used to support their claims. Porters would be allowed to stay in the lodges that were unsatisfactory for trekkers, the Sahuji said. He also talked about the tension between Nepali guides and Langtang lodge owners. Guides demand commissions from lodge owners for bringing their clients, he said, and take advantage of the business relationship. They also praised the future as being more agriculturally productive. They insisted that as lodges close, people will go back to food production, which will benefit the town as a whole.

Many of his intentions seemed as if they would benefit the community as a whole. But the motivation didn’t sound purely selfless; after all, his lodge was not in danger of being closed. I wondered what the lodge owners who were soon to experience being left with standardized, and perhaps insufficient income, would think. Over the next couple of days, I spoke with the owners of the lodges being shut down. I heard bitterness and anxiety about the future, a future in which several lodge owners only would control and regulate the rest.

The next day, after I had been directed to move to Village View, I spoke with the Sahuji of the Tibet Family Hotel. “The new rules are for the benefit of the big lodges only,” he said when I asked how things were going. His brow furrowed as he talked about his fears for the future. Where would money for his daughter’s education come from? The stipend each of the smaller lodges was receiving was not sufficient,

31 I talked in chapter 2 about the fear of trekkers complaining to tourist agencies in Kathmandu, which results in less business for the lodges.
and was not as much as he could have made if his lodge open, he said. Moreover, his family didn’t have a field to farm so they had no means of productivity.

The Kerosene Depot Sahuji also seemed to think that the new rules would provoke greater animosity between lodge owners. Indeed, for the poor people of Langtang, he said, the new rules would have negative consequences.

As he was one of the central drafters of the new rules, I was not surprised when I spoke with the Sahuji of Village View, to hear that he had positive expectations for the future: “the new rules are to help develop the Langtang community and to make everybody equal,” he said. He seemed to think that the wealthy lodge owners wouldn’t benefit from the new rules. “I probably won’t make as much money because we will give so much to the other lodge owners,” he said. He explicitly stated that “everybody will meet in the middle,” as if to mend old wounds. In light of my previous conversations during which the owners of the smaller lodges said that the new rules would expand the divide and perpetuate unequal power distributions, it seemed contradictory that one of the goals of the new rules was to “make everybody equal.”

These new rules will most likely change the town and will, perhaps, reiterate Langtang’s social dynamics and power structures. All the same, community members have taken action to manage what was perceived of as problem. Whether these new rules will serve to abolish competition, help renew natural resources, or generate a higher level of food production, all aspects of Langtang’s interactions with modernity processes, is unclear. The direction of town relations is also unclear. The new rules may exacerbate problems and accentuate pre-existing inequalities. Or, perhaps,
engagement in this particular modernity dialogue, in which people are actively
critiquing the social process in which they are implicated, will generate benefit. What
I can say is that I saw a community actively working towards change, change that
may benefit some and hurt others but which, nonetheless, is enabling a community
dialogue. This is the process of Langtang’s becoming, the modernity process with
which the town is engaged, critiquing, molding, forever changing.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed multiple modernities, whose complexities I have illustrated. Through an exploration of the dialogues between tourists and Nepalis in Nepal today emerges the socially and historically grounded context of these different groups. European and North American travel is based in a long and highly classed history. From the aristocratic Grand Tours of the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century rise of the middle class romantic ethic and the cult of the sublime, people have been enticed to travel for different reasons—educational, aesthetic, personal, and social incentives. There are infinite reasons why we go away. Travel prompts dialogues with the people we interact with while away, with the people we return home to, and with ourselves.

The perceived monotony of my middle class identity pushed me to escape home. I have discussed how my social conditioning has habituated the beneficial nature of travel and of broadening my world scope. My travel experiences, ironically, have provided me social capital I can use to affirm myself within the middle class, the same class I felt compelled to leave behind.

The genealogy of American and European travel, of which I am a part, meets the political history of foreigners in Nepal, two lineages converging, manifesting in trekker/local interaction. The history of foreigners in Nepal echoes colonial engagements, often mimicking colonial/colonized relationships, despite Nepal never having been directly colonized. This history is important for understanding contemporary development pursuits, in which tourists are implicated.
The imaginations that are constructed ‘here’ of ‘elsewhere’ are essentializing and problematic. Places such as Nepal are crafted as mythic and magical, as illustrated by *Lonely Planet*. Utilizing the theory of the gaze, drawn from Urry and Foucault, provided me with a means of understanding the unequal power relations of travel and the systematization of landscapes and people encountered by tourists into a concept of another space. Yet this *singular* gaze failed to do justice to the complex social relations of tourism in Nepal. To broaden this framing, I found thinking about the mutual gaze helpful for demonstrating that Nepalis also systematize tourists within generalized schemes of the West. Encounters between European and American tourists and Nepalis are shaped by converging genealogies, individuals of all parties interpellating one another by way of their own subjectivities.

But the visual, acknowledged as mutual or unilateral, is still limiting. To expand beyond the gaze as the only means of interpreting power dynamics and to illustrate individual bodily subjectivities, discussing embodiment and the politics of bodies’ actions within trekker/local interaction is critical. The bodily nature of trekking in the Himalayas and the discourses surrounding bodily weakness and strength, too, participate in the wider dialogue between tourists and locals. By way of this discussion, emerges the perception of modernity as a process by which people are weakening, physically compromised by modern living. The ambivalence Nepalis, those living in Langtang specifically, have toward this modernizing process was made evident in conversations when people seemed to be expressing contradictory desires. This perceived contradiction illuminates the complexity with which people engage
with the world and themselves. Multi-faceted aspirations precipitate from
encountering and interacting with the present.

The ways in which tourists react to perceived changes encountered when
traveling are enveloped in development and modernizing mechanisms. The
conversations I have shared with other tourists express the encounters with a
modernity that is perceived as out of place, belonging to home, and that, thus, pollutes
the experience of escape.

This project has required engaging with texts that discuss ‘classic’
anthropological problems, such as the persistent creation, indeed re-creation, of the
“savage slot,” but this project is also firmly grounded in the unique present, in the
historic now because each passing moment is historical and new (Trouillot 2003). By
engaging with the present, I have illustrated the dialectic narrative of modernities, the
complicated schema that is particular to contemporary development and late
modernity. Development processes are unique in Nepal, historically spurred by the
overthrow of an oppressive oligarchy in 1951. Foreigners, and their Himalayan
ventures have long been implicated in processes of bikas, from Edmund Hillary’s (the
first man to summit Mount Everest with Sherpa guide, Tenzing Norgay) school
constructions and contemporary trekkers’ school sponsorships, to acting as an image
to be emulated.

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As I reflect on the overall findings of this thesis, I realize that there are many
more directions in which research continue out of what I have discussed here. Just as
all places, Langtang is in the midst of changes, encountering, interacting, critiquing,
and reflecting upon contemporary life and implications for the community. I am curious how the new rules that have come to govern the lodges in Langtang will pan out and if they will make the changes that some people hope they will. I wonder how class stratification will manifest in the future and whether some of the lodge owners’ hopes for a changed future will come to fruition. In Langtang’s residents’ management of the lodges and modernity processes, I am curious if class distinctions will continue broadening, or if changes will result in an unexpected trajectory, spurred by the present or by some unforeseeable future.

I would also like to engage with more tourists who have returned home from abroad. I am curious how other people are interpreting and integrating their experiences abroad in Nepal to think differently at and about home. I would like to understand more of the way in which experiences of travel, as problematic as they may sometimes be, influence or redirect home and the notions of being ‘here.’ This is where I would like to see more tourism research done.

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The discussions in this thesis have included autoethnographic components because they expand upon what prompted me to go to Nepal and of the lineages I carried with me along the way. They are the means by which I understand the now and the ways in which I, too, am implicated in travel and cross-cultural genealogies. Methodologically, only through interrogation of my social self have I come to the conclusions of this present. Because I have been discussing dialogues in which I participate, it has been necessary to discuss more than the subjectivities of my experience in Nepal. Combined with conventional ethnography, the two forms of
analysis have compounded in a text that, I hope, allows for a textured analysis that is deeply personal and critical.

Ultimately, I have tried to illuminate our shared experience of re-routing, our actions crafted by self and others, by the past and present, practicing but not bound to participate in controversially fraught genealogical trajectories, spurring and being snagged in our constant reinterpretation and enactment of our lives.
Bibliography


