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The Trekkers' Gaze: Representation, Imagination, and Place Making in the Trekking Regions of Nepal

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The Trekkers' Gaze:

Representation, Imagination, and Place Making in the Trekking Regions of Nepal



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Geography
April 2015

Senior Thesis

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For the Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Before my second time living in Kathmandu in Summer 2014, I bought a new lens and a new tripod for my camera. Having been there once before, and wanting to continue my nascent interest in photography, I knew if I put planning and effort into it, I could come out of my summer with a worthwhile photography project under my belt. Doing photography in Nepal meant (at that time, for me) representing part of the place in as sensitive and accurate a manner as possible. I considered the ethical implications of photography, such as being intrusive or exploitative, but I thought that as long as I treaded lightly and respectfully all would be well. In preparation for this imagined photographic blossoming of mine, I read a few essays in Susan Sontag's collection *On Photography*. This is how my interest ground to a sudden halt.

It was a “shots fired” moment, so to speak. Sontag problematizes the motivations behind, and practices of doing, photography. She claims that photographs are acquisitions where the camera endows a person with the authority to “capture” its subjects, and in doing so they decide what to include and not include in a frame, reflecting the power inherent in photographic representation (Sontag 2). Her criticism has sharp teeth, so much so that my interest in taking pictures immediately withered—probably for at least a couple of weeks. My shutter finger was paralyzed by the realization that in each photograph of people or a place that I took, I was literally “capturing” a scene. I began to see westerners with cameras around their necks not as curious travelers but as intrusive, powerful actors ignorant of the violence they are perpetrating. When I would have the urge to take a picture of anything, I would ask myself “wait, why?” and often that

stopped me from taking a picture; when I saw others taking pictures of what was around them, I wanted to ask them the same thing. I wanted to say, “Do you know what you’re perpetuating? Do you know that photography, according to Susan Sontag, is the acquisitive arm of global power? Are you claiming ownership over and knowledge of this place as a powerful yet ignorant outsider?” That, though, would be awkward and rude, so instead I want to ask those questions in the context of this thesis, understanding the role of the westerner with a camera in the representation of Nepal.

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Taking a picture of someone or something is an act that takes place hundreds of thousands of times per day across Nepal. In almost every imaginable setting, be it a festival, a small Himalayan village, a slum in Kathmandu, or anywhere else, a camera has most likely “shot” and “captured” its image. What would conventionally be considered mundane in the home place of the person behind the lens is transformed into something deemed visually collectible, imbued with enough difference to be worth visual representation, because it is in the context of Nepal. By understanding what someone taking a picture of Nepal is trying to visually represent, what can be understood about the construction of Nepal as a place? Where does that urge to visually “capture” come from? What are the political consequences of the way that Nepal is visually represented as a place for consumption by outsiders?

To preface this thesis’ analysis, I must define my treatment of “Nepal.” It is a place, like any nation-state, that is diversely constituted, and trying to understand it as a whole from only particular sources of data risks essentializing it. As such, I will look

particularly at the way in which “trekking” in the Himalayan regions of central Nepal (predominantly in the regions defined through the trekking industry as the Annapurna/Mustang, Khumbu (Everest), and Langtang regions) is photographically represented. In the analysis of these regions, I will not attempt to understand the national and regional politics of Nepal, but rather the relationships between Nepal, in the context of trekking, and the West as represented in photography. Trekking, as an industry, an activity, and a spatial practice plays an important role in the imagination of Nepal as a place from the viewpoint of the West. It is an entry point from which one can comprehend visual representation and power. It is also an industry which has best scripted Nepal in the Western conscious. Trekking takes multiple forms, and is informed by local geographies as much as it is by transnational tourism. One set of constitutive actors are the trekkers, typically Western tourists, but also many Nepalis and increasingly tourists from China, India, Japan, and South Korea. I detail the trekking industry in the third chapter, describing its social and economic structure to understanding the complexity of its constituency, and its constituency’s relationships to photography.

I argue that these actors and their relations to trekking places are mediated by photography. These are power relationships, and photography does the work of revealing or concealing which parts of the trekking industry, which nodes of power relationships, are represented and communicated. Photography has the power to dictate the centrality and marginality of these actors by visually representing them interacting with, and so constituting, the places where they live, work, or travel. Part of what I am setting out to

do in this project is to understand the extent to which photography creates and reproduces the power relationships and place-making actions and actors that it depicts.

On travel blogs, in magazines, through Facebook, Instagram, and Flickr, many of pictures of trekking in Nepal are catalogued and transmitted to the West for consumption. While there has been discussion in theory, in critical politics, etc. about fetishization and exoticization of South Asian places via westerners' representations, I want to explore a specific site of this exoticization's reproduction. There exists a fairly comprehensive sphere of academic literature exploring the relationship between photography, tourism, space, and global power relationships, but none in the specific context of Nepal's trekking regions. As importantly, none of this literature considered the effects of social media on spatial representation. My analysis will incorporate the way photographs are taken and shared in 2015 to assess the spatial effects of visual representation on Nepal.

The importance of this assessment lies in a suggestion urged by John Urry and Jonas Larsen in *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*: "instead of seeing photographs as reflections or distortions of a pre-existing world, they can be understood as a technology of world-making" (Urry & Larsen 167). This thesis aims to endow photographs with agency, as actors that do not just reflect the world but, rather, help create it. I will argue that the tradition of photography has helped produce, bolster, and reproduce centuries-old power relationships, specifically those of Western dominance. My central question is, then, how do photographic representations of trekking in Nepal conceal and reveal these power relationships? And how does the visual testimony of these power relationships convey a positionality of central and marginal actors that constitutes an understanding of Nepal as

a place? Ultimately, through probing at the degree to which Nepal undergoes photography's alleged world-making, I will argue that touristic photographic representation is deployed as a powerful tool of the Western colonial spatial imagination.

Claiming that photography in Nepal is a colonial practice is a strong assertion. To do so, I make a pivotal connection between photography and colonial imagination in Nepal. In laying out the mechanisms of this connection, I explain how "difference" between Western and non-Western places exists in the western consciousness, and how that difference is reproduced. Through looking at photographs and other media, Westerners learn ideas of difference; those understandings are brought to Nepal, where the symbols and behaviors understood as different are seen and reproduced through photography. Those pictures are then transmitted to the West, where the signifiers of difference are again reaffirmed. In insisting that photography is a tool of colonialist thought, I will detail this loop of production and reproduction of images and meaning.

In my second chapter, this loop is delineated in deep and necessary detail. Based on Olivia Jenkins' idea of the "circle of representation" in tourist photography, I present my expansion of what I consider a circulation of photographic representation. The circulation begins with the historical creation of colonial knowledge and its translation to spatial imagination; critical here is the idea that the colonial project's material apprehension of non-European places was only possible through the imposition of Western ways of understanding space onto those places, a knowledge categorizing colonial places based on Western standards and ontologies. I argue, drawing from Edward

Said and Jane Jacobs, that representation is critical in forming the geographical imagination necessary for colonial practice.

The legacy of the colonial system coincides with the growth of modern capitalist political economic organization, which, as I will explain, helps create tourism and tourist places. Out of the colonial categories that differentiate places, tourist places form as the next iteration of the colonial global power hierarchy after formal colonialism fizzled out. From here, the circulation of photographic representation takes hold of its power. Photography emerges as a central tool attesting to one's travels, where tourist places are represented photographically through the symbols that signal their difference, or exoticness, and their "authenticity." Said's analysis of Orientalism is central here, where in the postcolonial era, exotic representation of non-Western tourist places serve to continually differentiate and elevate the West from "the Orient." Tourist photography's role in this process is crucial, as the tourist gaze, a central concept in this thesis, seeks out and photographically reproduces Westerners' Orientalized representations of non-western places. These photographs are learned as accurate representations of these places, thus cementing their contemporary understanding to Westerners within the colonial visual/spatial imagination.

Photography, then, is the angle at which I approach this circulation. Photography is a powerful representational technology because of its historical birth as a tool of scientific accuracy. Its employment in society can be interpreted as a tool to foster an understanding of the possibility of visual objectivity, born out of positivist Western thought. Sociohistorically, it is understood that photographs replicate reality, an

understanding that has held true for the so-far 170 years of its existence. Photography's promise of representational fidelity to reality legitimizes visual testimonies of tourist photography, where photographic representations are historically understood as accurate simply because they are produced through the supposedly objective medium of photography.

In navigating this circulation, I will be concerned with their place specificity—this thesis is foremost about how these powerful forces of representation are practiced and reproduced specifically in Nepal, and from there they will be scaled up and out. There is much literature describing the ways of knowing Asian places via exoticization, post-colonialism, etc., where Nepal's neighbors, China and India, are featured. It has proven difficult, however, to find more than a few sources about Nepal's specific place in the historical matrices of power between the West and western places and Asia and Asian places as they relate to tourism. Nepal, and the specific trekking regions therein on which I will focus, is particularly underrepresented in academic analysis. There are two Nepal-specific academics on whose work I will be relying: Sanjay K. Nepal, whose work describes the environmental and economic impact of trekking on trekking regions, and Francis Khek Gee Lim, who is concerned with the relationships between symbols and material processes in the Langtang region. My thesis fills in some of the gap between representation of Asia and the specific occurrence of it in Nepal, and within the gap between Nepal's trekking industry and the practice of tourist photography.

To undertake this project, I incorporate theory concerning tourist place making, representation, and power between the West and Asia. This is complemented by an in-

depth inspection of and comparison between texts of critical photographic theory. I will use David Harvey's writing on spaces of capitalism and globalization as the foundation informing more specific theory of tourism and place making (Harvey 2001). Edward Said's "Orientalism," on representation and imagination of Asia, will also feature prominently (Said 1978). I use these seminal texts to create the theoretical base of colonial spatial imagination that informs this thesis' specific investigation of tourist photography. The most critical chunk of literature will be on tourism, and specifically tourist photography. One central text is *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*—John Urry's updated seminal work will be heavily analyzed, as well as much of the tourism studies literature that has responded to or elaborated on that (Urry & Larsen 2012). Other central sources on the relationship between tourist and photography are Mike Robinson and David Picard's *The Framed World* and Peter Osborne's *Traveling Light* (Robinson & Picard 2009; Osborne 2000).

My primary source of data is the body of photographs produced by trekkers and/or for the consumption of trekkers. Because part of this project is trying to understand and deconstruct the Western gaze as it views trekking, I will draw from photographs taken by people from Europe, North America, and Australia, as well as the photographs used by Nepali agencies to advertise to Western consumers. This includes advertisements by trekking companies, articles on travel websites about Nepal, selected professional photographic projects with Nepali subjects, and amateur collections of photographs of Nepal selected from blogs and social media. These data represent a variety of sources, and they will help illuminate my arguments. In analyzing these data, I will deconstruct

each photograph to analyze their subjects and the symbols within them. I note the contents of each photo, recording what aspect of the landscape or built environment and/or which actor(s) are pictured. Added to this analysis will be a consideration of the intended audience of these photos: amateur tourists, advertisement by trekking agencies or the state, travel and features magazines (like *National Geographic* or *Time*), or travel books or websites (like *Lonely Planet*). These data will inform what I call the *trekkers'* gaze, which understands the tourist gaze as it gazes upon Nepal's trekking regions.

This data and analysis compiled into the trekkers' gaze will form chapter four. The second chapter will delimit the circulation of Photographic Representation, expanding on the theory that pushes images and meanings through this circulation of power and imagination. It will make the case for tourist photography's complicity in the reinscription of the colonial spatial imagination, creating a framework in which to consider Nepal's trekking industry.

In the third chapter, I detail the trekking industry. I will begin with a description of a trekker's practice and spatial engagement with trekking regions, transitioning into an inspection of the economic structure of trekking regions, informed by SK Nepal's information regarding the subject. The chapter culminates in a description of the Nepali state's relationship with trekking regions vis a vis militarization and development. The point of this chapter is to explain the reality of trekking places to understand what trekking photography disguises or misrepresents.

The fourth chapter will contain an analysis of the photographs from the sources listed above, and will be concerned with placing this data into the theoretical framework

already laid out. I will show how the web of power relationships in the trekking industry are reflected in and perpetuated by these photographs. Additionally, I will draw connections between where the photographs were taken, by whom they were taken, and who is consuming them, to expose their spatiality and their position within said power matrices.

In the conclusion, I delimit the gap which I constructed and will hope to have filled. This will include a culmination of the crucial bridge between the theory explained in the second and third chapters and concrete data provided in the fourth, where the particular places of the trekking regions in Nepal are contextualized in broader spatial politics. The purpose of this thesis is to understand what broad power relationships and spatial practices exist in and are perpetuated by the practice of travel photography, so in the concluding chapter I reflect on the degree to which I have understood that phenomenon. I will also try to prescribe a sensitive way of taking photographs that acknowledges these positions and acts of power, and in some way subverts them.

I, as the researcher, was unfortunately not able to be there when these photographs were taken—to see outside of the frame, so to speak, and to know these photographs' real context and the motivations of their takers. The questions in this thesis, however, have been spurred by intensely personal experiences where I saw the processes of taking photographs, and not only those processes' products. One moment stands out in particular: Nima and I were stopped for lunch at a lodge on our way up through the Rasuwa district's Langtang national park, in central Nepal's Himalayan hills. The 16-years-old or so daughter of the family who owns the lodge was in and out of the kitchen,

preparing vegetables to be cooked, and on her breaks would sit on a bench and comb her sleek, beautiful, meter-long hair. We were the only people inside the lodge, but on the outside patio there were four or so other trekkers, from Spain, and their guides. One of them, armed with a Nikon with a sufficiently impressive-looking (see: expensive) lens, leaned against the kitchen doorway (where the family was busily walking in and out, making the trekkers' food), taking picture after picture with her camera aimed squarely and insistently at the girl combing her hair. No words were exchanged, not even in English, yet the Spanish woman assumed that she could stand a meter away from the girl and capture her every brush stroke inside of an SD card. The Tibetan girl was a spectacle now framed in a photograph—dozens of photographs—to be discarded, edited, and shared with a world unknown yet deeply connected to her. I wanted to say so badly to the Spanish woman something along the lines of “Don’t you know the potentially insidious social implications of what you’re doing?” but tact, again, and the hike’s exhaustion restrained me.

I want the rest of this thesis, among other goals, to help understand the conditions that allowed for that interaction, to show that images have agency and that image-making is powerful. The goal of this thesis is to elucidate how a camera, depending on its usage, can be a powerful arm of global power. In this world, violence, control, immobility, and other consequences of power inequality emanate not only from warfare and explicit violence and governance but from histories and spatial organizations that groups and individuals reproduce willingly, even from activities from which we derive enjoyment. In this way, a camera may not seem like a tool of politics and of power, or like something

that can produce and reorient space and create places, but through analyzing the spate of theory and empirical data into which I am delving, I plan to show that that is indeed the case.

Chapter Two: Circulation

The Photographic Angle

The circulation introduced in the previous chapter—the structure connecting photography to the reproduction of colonial spatial organization—does not seem, at first, readily coherent. The following chapter will lay out the processes that create this circulation, using theory to fill in the gaps left open by uninitiated intuition. I will begin by outlining the angle from which I approach the circulation of touristic representation: photography.

Photography is impossible to theorize about without considering its origins—the reasoning and reputation of photography’s inception has resonated throughout its history. It is a representational medium reflective of the way Western society was thinking about and shaping the world in the mid-nineteenth century. Peter Osborne explains that photography was

On the one hand, a crystallization of three hundred years of culture and science preoccupied with space and mobility and, on the other, the expressions of its own time: the epoch of capitalist globalization, the construction of a new middle-class identity and the dramatic speeding-up of transportation and communication. Photography was a representational tool refined in the service of these processes (Osborne 9).

Representation prior to photography was ultimately subjective; painting, sculpture, and drawing, among other arts, were developed in pre-modern, pre-enlightenment society, where social objectives were not yet geared towards scientific accuracy and the discernment of objective truth. As the “epoch of capitalist globalization” dawned, the Western world needed a form of representation in “the service” of evolving industrial and

political processes and rational thought. Eadweard Muybridge's photographs, produced during photography's infancy, were some of the first to conduct scientific study using photography. His photographic depiction of a galloping horse imbued a reputation on photography as a technology of scientifically accurate representation—they proved, contrary to popular scientific opinion, that a horse's legs leave the ground at different times rather than being in sync (Cresswell 62). Tim Cresswell relates these images to scientific rationality: "The images...become 'overt expressions of the positivist concentration of the mathematization of empirics,' and the related notion that images, like graphs, could work without text and become controlled lexical space" (Cresswell 69). The photographs spoke for themselves, moreover spoke *scientifically* for themselves, and through Muybridge and other early photographers' work, cemented their reputation as views of objective truth.

One of the more important "services" that photography offered in its development was its role in framing and taming the increasingly complex world. According to Jonathan Crary, "the camera, in a sense, was a metaphor for the most rational possibilities of a perceiver within the increasingly dynamic disorder of the world" (Osborne 8). As mid-to-late-nineteenth century Western society was introduced to new processes of industrial production, communication, and transportation, and exposed to new places and forms of social organization, the ideology of rationality gained an even greater footing as it set to work to order and categorize the world's "increasingly dynamic disorder." Befitting this order, photography offered a way to perceive the world as a bounded set of places—when visual imagination was composed of discrete fragments acquired through

visual representations, the reality it reflected was understood in the same way. A photograph's perceived fidelity to reality was, of course, made possible by its understanding as an accurate, rational representation of the knowable world.

This understanding of photography is pervasive, and undergirds how it has developed through history, and is thought of today. The relationship between photography and scientific truth is in reality tenuous, as reality is obviously not bounded by a rectangular frame, nor is it ever frozen in time. Roland Barthes' prolific photographic criticism has played an important role in destabilizing photography's perceived objectivity. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes insists that a photograph is a "specter," that it is "funereal," in the sense that it captured a moment or a scene that does not exist (Barthes 4). "The photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially" (Barthes 4)—a photograph, then, to Barthes, is a fictional representation, where the photograph's truth is lost once its "moment" has passed. Barthes' notion illuminates photography's infidelity to reality, and he later notes that the perception of a photograph, while touted as an objective representation, is entirely subjective.¹

The "truth" of photography's untruth is widely acknowledged, yet the myth of its truthfulness is upheld by those who maintain an interest in it as a tool of representation that promises accuracy. Edward Said, in analyzing John Berger's seminal *Ways of Seeing*, discusses photography's scientific presentation:

In control systems and in scientific investigations, photographs supply identity and information respectively. In advertising or journalism, photographs are used *as if* they belonged to the same order of truth as science or control systems;

¹ This refers to Barthes' famous discussion of Punctum and Studium, where the Studium is the scene depicted and the Punctum is the individually varied affective response to a particular part of any photograph.

the communications industry would like to press viewers into accepting the photograph as evidence either of buyable goods or of immutable reality.” (Said 2000, 150)

This is important because the historical legitimacy of photographs—that they are accurate and scientific—has sustained to the present’s legitimation of photography, so when someone looks at a photograph of a place, they rely on photography’s legacy and believe it is an accurate representation. This sustained historical legacy, to Peter Osborne, has consequences for the practices of tourism. “As tourists,” Osborne contends, “we seek authenticity, an object, a truth somehow precedent to all representation—and then take photographs, lapsing back into the realm of image” (Osborne 72). This lapse is explained by photography’s promise to reproduce Said’s “immutable reality.” When a tourist experiences what they consider “authenticity” or “truth,” they think that through photography they can capture that experience. The tourist that sought after authenticity and truth thinks they have found it, and thus, by taking a photograph, wills reality into immutability. The “realm of the image” promises truth, accuracy, fidelity of representation. Muybridge’s work set a precedent for the residence of scientific accuracy in photography, and through today the belief that reality can be encapsulated in a frame lives on. Here, photography’s historical claim as an accurate representation of reality is legitimated.

The idea that photography represents science and modern rationality is a necessary and crucial piece in understanding photography’s role in creating colonial spatial imagination and social organization. As will be seen through this lens, the way the world was ordered according to colonialist thought both sanctioned and was bolstered by

photographic representation. This following section explicates the historical fusion of colonialism and photography as it resonance through the history of tourism and the “tourist gaze,” a process which circles back to itself through contemporary perpetuation of colonial spatial imagination.

Circulation: Interpreting Touristic Photographic Representation

To get at the circulation of meanings and representations about which this thesis is concerned, I employ a hermeneutic analysis of photographic images. A hermeneutic, or interpretive, understanding of representation can be applied to many aspects of society in which “texts” inform how people perceive and represent the world (so, in any aspect of society). By treating photographs as interpretable texts, their effect on the spatial configuration of colonialism can be read and understood as informing and representing a set of socio-spatial practices. In other words, the relationship between colonialism, photography, and tourism is circulatory, and the most effective way to explicate that relationship is to follow that circulation from its origins through its various stages of reproduction.

Olivia Jenkins, in her analysis of tourist brochures, introduces her idea of a “circle of representation” in the justification and perpetuation of tourist practices:

The notion that there are ‘circles of representation’ or ‘circuits of culture’ is useful in explaining tourist behavior...Visual images chosen for photography by a tourist are often selected in the destination and reproduced from the perspective of images already seen in travel brochures, postcards, personal photographs, films and television shows at home. Thus a ‘hermeneutic circle’ results where images are tracked down and recaptured, and the resulting photographs displayed at home (Jenkins 308).

This is instructive in explaining the relatively small circle of representation running through photography, tourist advertisement, and engagement in tourist practices. To include the important aspect of history and power, Robinson and Picard engage Jenkins, expanding the circle to encompass not only the relationship between photographic texts and the perpetuation of tourist practices, but also to structures of power: “In [Jenkins’ sense of tourists’ photographs as part of a circle of representation], the holiday snap is a moment of revelation on the global power of the visual and is implicated, often unknowingly, in a connecting to, and the creation of the ‘outside’ world and the ‘other’” (Robinson & Picard 7). What, then, constitutes the path of relationships that reveals the global power of the visual in the holiday snap? A starting point of the circulation is where the original practices and epistemologies of colonialism are produced. I begin with Jane Jacobs’ interpretation of one of Edward Said’s descriptions of imperialism: “Imperialism for Said is ‘an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control’” (Jacobs 194). The colonial expression of this widespread act of violence “established specific spatial arrangements in which the imaginative geographies of desires hardened into material spatialities of political connection, economic dependency, architectural imposition and landscape transformation” (Jacobs 194). This sentiment is important because Said and Jacobs explicitly connect the geographical imagination of colonialism to its material spatiality. What exists as imagination and immaterial representation is transformed into spatial realities, in a process that begins with Said’s idea of Imaginative Geographies. Crucial to the production of the colonial geographic

imagination is the delimitation of borders, creating an imagination of the difference between the people and ideas that are “inside” and “outside” those borders. Said finds this idea central to understanding the construction of difference, “for there is not doubt that imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away” (Said 1978, 55). Because the construction of hierarchical difference was so important to the colonial project, imaginative geographies were part and parcel of it.

A significant and necessary facet of colonialism was the imposition of rational Western knowledge over and within colonized places. This is where photography’s legitimacy becomes important: scientific, rational order was imposed upon colonized places, which both brought along and was fostered by scientific order’s representational tool of choice. Robinson and Picard allege “the historical centrality of colonial photography in constructing the colonial world,” due in no small part to the aforementioned relationship (Robinson & Picard 24). Jacobs asserts, alluding to the violent power of colonial cartography, that “the cartographic exercise within the colonization process depended upon a technique...of representing a stable and knowable reality in what were unknown lands inhabited by unknown people” (Jacobs 194). Photography, of course, plays this representational role. The system of colonialism understood that accurate knowledge of a place could be apprehended, and from that knowledge judgements about the place and decisions regarding it could be made. Colonial photography, and photography more broadly, was able to produce “accurate”

representations of a place: representations that contributed to and justified colonial knowledge.

For example, in the idea that it was advantageous to represent a colonized place as “undeveloped” and available to or in need of Western presence, photography works in two ways. The first is that when a place is already understood as undeveloped, and photographic representation of that place depicts “ancient” practices or irrational spatial arrangement or any other signifier of (what we now understand as) undeveloped, photography links those images to the idea of undevelopment, thus creating the *image* of “undeveloped.” The second way works in vice versa—when a place is desired by colonizing powers, photography can find images, fragments of that place, and allow them to represent the whole place; these fragments can depict “undeveloped,” thus tying the visual imagination of that place to justifications for colonial engagement. These two workings illustrate the *reproductive* nature of photography in colonialism, and its important relationship to the colonial visual—and hence geographical—imagination. This is part of the centrality to which Robinson and Picard were referring.

This example also illustrates the propensity of photography to teach signs and symbols through visual representation tied to socio-spatial processes. Photographic theory is concerned foremost with semiotics, the study of meaning-making and the relationship between signs and what they signify, which represents the next nexus on the hermeneutic circulation of photographic representation. A critically important concept to this thesis enters here: semiotics is fundamental in understanding the concept of “the gaze.” Gazing, John Berger’s construction in the historical *Ways of Seeing*, is looking in a

structured way; gazing is “not merely seeing, but involves cognitive work of interpreting, evaluating, drawing comparisons, and making mental connections between signs and their referents, and capturing signs photographically” (Urry & Larsen 17). Through visual understanding, the gaze—how to, when to, and where to look—is learned (Urry & Larsen 12). A gaze, then, can be thought of as a semiotic language, where each sign upon which the gaze falls corresponds to a specific referent (the meaning to which a sign refers). One type of gaze is the colonial gaze, shaped through the representational processes described earlier, which structures how a colonial actor looks at and therefore understands a colonized place.

At this point in the circulation of photographic representation, we are close to understanding contemporary tourist photography and its effect on Nepal’s trekking regions. Outlining these histories of colonial representation and knowledge production is important, though, in establishing *how* it is that Westerners look at places. *Because* the ways that Western tourists look at nonwestern tourist places are similar to, and descendent from, the ways that colonial actors looked at places, knowing how the colonial gaze came to be is essential. Drawing from this understanding, the next step of the circulation will begin to deal with the production of tourism and tourist places. I will explain how tourists places are created through difference, and how understandings of that difference are produced and reproduced through tourist photography.

As colonialism transitions to neocolonialism, many theorists note the shift in power relations from between colonizing and colonized places to between Western tourist-producing places and nonwestern places of tourism. Through this shift, the

historical function of a photograph has always been “strongly determined by its part in the process of unifying the geographical, economic, ideological and, indeed, imaginary territory across which capitalism was being extended” (Osborne 11-12). The extension of capitalism is central to both colonialism and tourism; as we have seen, photography has assisted colonialism in this capacity, and as we will see, so too does it assist tourism’s spatial extension.

Photography’s participation in spatial imagination and formation has cemented its connection to the production of places. In referring to regions (which I interchange with places), Harvey insists that “it is important to recognize that regions are ‘made’ or ‘constructed’ as much in imagination as in material form and that though entity-like, regions crystallize out as a distinctive form from some mix of material, social and mental processes” (Harvey 74). While this idea that places are imaginatively constructed is extremely important, Urry and Larsen, drawing from Massey, want to problematize this “crystallization.” Rather, places “come into existence through relationships,” and as such, they “float around in mobile, transnational networks...that continuously connect and disconnect them to other places.” They cite Massey as she states that places are “constructed out of ‘the constellation of relations articulated together at a particular locus’” (Urry & Larsen 64). This constructed, dynamic nature of places will inform the rest of this chapter’s treatment of tourist places, where their interpreted reality will be constantly opposed by constructed imaginations of their fixity and essentialism. “Places,” Urry and Larsen say, asserting what I agree with as an interpreted reality, “emerge as ‘tourist places’ when they are inscribed in circles of anticipation, performance and

remembrance. They are economically, politically, and culturally produced through networked mobilities of capital, persons, objects, [and] signs....And it is out of these complex movements that certain places to play are assembled” (Urry & Larsen 119).

Tourism’s construction—resulting from capitalism’s socio-spatial arrangements, through the “complex movements” that Urry and Larsen describe—is important to tease out. Tourism as a spatial and cultural practice is structured by socioeconomic forces that make us want to go to certain places and gaze at certain things. To Urry and Larsen, “acting as a tourist is one of the defining characteristics of being ‘modern’ and is bound up with major transformations in paid work” (Urry & Larsen 4). Capitalism’s socioeconomic order has imposed the familiar dichotomy on Western life between “work” and “leisure.” The construction of tourist practices happened through this dichotomy, where extended leisure time became a span in which one could rejuvenate himself, thus leading to the practice of going on “holiday” or “vacation” (Urry & Larsen 50). The idea of the holiday or vacation represents a disconnection from one’s banal, everyday life, structured through modern capitalism’s labor relations. Therefore, when someone has the opportunity for extended leisure, it makes sense to dislocate themselves from (to vacate) the place they understand as their own and as ordinary, and go to a place that has been sufficiently different. This difference is the basis for the construction of a place as a tourist place.

If we are to take anything from the lessons imparted by Edward Said, it is that difference is not inherent, it is always constructed. One of the most pervasive and powerful ontologies imparted by colonialism was the separation of “Europe” from the

rest of the world, where colonized-colonizer became east-west. To Said, this difference created the Orient, a stage on which an other is created, an other against which the West can and does define itself (Said 1978, 71). Orientalism, essentially, is the practice of using the categories that allowed for colonialism to understand and represent formerly colonized places and those places' relationships to the West. The Orient, to Said, "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 1978, 1-2). If Europe or the West has come to stand for a productive, labor-oriented society, then it is contrasted against an Orient that, being ordered in a non-Western way, is a place for the expression of leisure, for gazing—hence, a place for tourism.

This relationship is, of course, not inherent to either set of places (just as the distinction itself between those places is imaged), but because of Orientalist thinking, that relationship became inscribed in Western imagination. Said characterizes the Orientalist actor as making it "his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture" (Said 1978, 65). That an "Oriental" place provides a sufficient immersion in difference is not because of that place's inherent cultural and economic traits, but because of what an "Orientalist," or a Westerner, has learned to see and to experience. A tourist prompted by Western culture to vacation in a nonwestern place will tend to visually and experientially seek not that place's economic reality but the sights and activities that symbolize and enact its difference, its *exoticness*, from the West. According to Delfin, "while the things that tourists look for in their holidays may be specific, the landscapes in which these needs

may be met are often very general, interchangeable, or even negligible. This is especially true in postcolonial tourism sites, where foreigners have long arrived and made their own meanings of spaces, in most cases ignoring history, geography, and topography” (Delfin 141). This sentiment is particularly salient in connecting tourism to colonial practice, where meaning is imposed and therefore knowledge is learned about postcolonial tourist sites, a knowledge that perpetuates those places’ difference and exoticness.

It is not enough to assert only that this process happens. To explain how it happens, I turn to tourist photography. Photography, true to its history, plays a major role in this process of learning. The knowledge that exists, as I argue, is learned—or produced and reproduced—in cycles. Robinson and Picard detail an important part of the cycle in which tourist media circulates and disseminates images of places that are visual expressions of colonial knowledge:

Various media, including tourism brochures, guide books, travel forums together with future tourists in preparation of their trip themselves, appear to model their ideas about ‘destinations’ according to a largely collective imagining. Destinations are constituted as, more or less, closed systems; as intrinsically structured worlds built upon sets of aesthetically significant signs. The geographical separation and distance with these ‘worlds’ mark a more important ontological separation and distance where destinations are enchanted and ‘othered”” (Robinson & Picard 10).

If tourist destinations are “intrinsically structured worlds,” then this closed off-ness distances them from the world from where tourists originate, thus distancing them from the ideas and politics of places of tourist’s origins. As tourist media depicts tourist places as closed-off *as they are*, this distance disguises the fact that these places are subjects of the colonial geographic imagination, and that they, as tourist places, are wholly a part of global financial flows and international political organization. The signs, then, that have

come to represent these closed places signify not those places' othering and exoticness pinned by the Western imagination, but as traits inherent to those places. These signs, these traits, make it possible to represent a tourist place's essence. The process of the circulation of symbolic images of tourist places as closed systems creates an idea of what makes that place *authentic*. This is an important point on the path of the circulation of touristic representation—it is the characterization of a fundamental tourist practice: the search for authenticity.

The camera, then, is the holding cell for when a tourist thinks they have found authenticity; in the visual culture of tourism, a picture—through attesting to their encounter with that place's symbols of authenticity—proves that a tourist has been to a place. This search and collection of the authentic is essentially, through photography, a “collection of signs,” where tourists become an “unsung army of semioticians” (Urry & Larsen 4, 5). They are semioticians in that they interpret signs in their semiotic language, the language of what Urry has termed the Tourist Gaze. They collect these signs because these signs signal authenticity; signs that have come to represent a place's static projection of what the West thinks that place is.

The funny thing about this collection process is that tourists seek to experience in reality what they've already experienced in imagination (Urry & Larsen 51). The tourist seeks to discover the authentic for himself, engaging in what is called the “ritual of ‘quotation,’” which “ends up with travelers demonstrating that they really have been ‘there’ by showing to friends and family [and now everyone on the internet] that their version of the images they had seen before they set off” (Urry & Larsen 179). If a tourist

in Nepal takes a picture of prayer flags with snow-capped peaks in the background, he is both attesting to his encounter with “Nepal” in its authentic form, but also mimicking, “quoting,” the images of Nepal that he viewed before coming. Additionally, as he shows these pictures to his friends, family, and the internet, he is feeding into the circulation of tourist media, described by Robinson and Picard, that fosters the existence of symbols of authenticity.

For this reason, Osborne asserts that “tourist photography is more a process of confirmation than of discovery” (Osborne 79). He continues, indicating a tourist’s implication in tourist practices: “when one photographs a tourist attraction one is confirming the general system of tourism and one’s place within it” (Osborne 85). In the circular world of tourist representation, this process of confirmation, of quotation, performs an important function: it legitimates the idea of touristic travel; that the authentic is indeed able to be encountered, as confirmed through mimetic images that are brought back home. This is part of what Robinson and Picard referred to earlier as the tourist photograph’s moment of revelation on the global power of the visual. Taking a picture of a symbol that has become known as authentic turns the tourist into a link between the representational forces that have brought them there and the visual confirmation of those representations, where the portrayed “authentic” is authenticated. That picture-taking tourist is a symbolic domino, a foot soldier in the Western semiotic army.

This process, the linkage between advertising representations, tourist photographs, and the confirmation and continuation of tourist practices, is essential in the

formation of the tourist gaze (which is the gaze that first seeks out the authentic). That the tourist gaze both produces and is produced by this process of confirmation is explained by the fact that “the tourist gaze is largely *performed* by and within existing mediascapes” (Urry & Larsen 179). This “*preformation*” accounts for perpetual confirmation, for the already-quoted images that tourists then continue to quote.² The tourist gaze is then formed out of these mediascapes, growing out of its preformation. The tourist gaze transcends photography’s “ritual of quotation”; it grows out of, is *performed*, by the mediascapes that the ritual of quotation creates and perpetuates, but in its social expression it is much more than that. The tourist gaze is not only a way of framing photographs and seeking out the photogenic, it is a way of seeing. It is a way of viewing the world that is imbued with the power to alter what it gazes upon. In the next part of the circulation of photographic representation, I will describe what the tourist gaze *sees* by detailing the idea of the landscape view and how it is fundamental to the constitution of the tourist gaze.

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Gazing, as a way of seeing, is where looking intersects with power and space. To foreground an understanding of this intersection, it is important to keep in mind Urry and Larsen’s sentiment: “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Urry & Larsen 2). This echoes a profound sense of spatial relationality. When looking at a place’s landscape for example, that “landscape”

² It is immanently important to note that this is a generalization. Many tourists do not, or do not only, photograph in quotation of preordained sites. This, of course, does not remove them from the act of searching for authenticity, and it also questions whether quotation must mean the reproduction of a specific site or of a more broadly defined combination of symbols. At any rate, I will complicate these so-far described categories in my conclusion.

does not exist unless a person places herself within it, views it, and interacts with it from a single locus. If one understands the relationality of landscape, then it is clear that landscape as an idea, as a spatial scale, is a construction. This idea of relationality, of position-contingent interaction, and of construction, however, has been ignored by the colonial and tourist gazes.

If looking is always a view of the relationship between things and ourselves, then how one views the land is equivalent to how one perceives of their place within that land. “Landscape,” then, provides much information about the spatial imagination of the originators and perpetuators of the understanding of landscape. Landscape, to Urry and Larsen, is “a *human* way of visually forming, through cultivated eyes, skillful techniques and technologies of representing, a physical environment...It is a specific way of relating to ‘nature’ that fuses ‘reality’ with images and representations. It is about appearances and the look of places; it de-materializes places” (Urry & Larsen 110). Urry and Larsen are not-so-subtly referring to the cultivated eyes of the western gaze and the technologies of representation of photography, where an understanding of an environment requires a knowledge of how it looks. This description of landscape pairs with Don Mitchell’s assertion that “landscape is a form of ideology” (Mitchell 100). For this reason, David Harvey insists that “the facts of landscape production can never be divorced from the mode and purpose of landscape representation” (Mitchell 115). When the ideology is understood that land should be and is organized for the purpose of visual symbolic arrangement, then that spatial understanding will be expressed in the production of landscape. To Mitchell, “the degree to which landscapes are *made*...and

represented....indicates that landscapes are in some very important senses ‘authored’” (Mitchell 121). Landscapes, then, are produced not by passive socioeconomic conditions, but by deliberate processes that shape an environment according to an ideological visual understanding. And the way landscape can be conceptualized is by having a visual knowledge of the *idea* of landscape, which can only happen through visual representation. Landscape photography, then, is the landscape author’s inspiration.

Landscape representation has ideological origins, and as a powerful and pervasive way of seeing and visually knowing, its ideology has become hegemonic (Mitchell 115). Based on this chapter’s analysis of colonial knowledge, it might be clear at this point that the landscape view, under the tourist gaze, is a product of Western thinking. If how one views the land is equivalent to how one perceives their place in that land, then seeing land as a landscape posits the viewer as separate from the land, as a removed observer. The landscape view’s perceived objectivity is integral to the construction of colonial categories. Because a photographic representation assumes an accurate reproduction of reality, when the landscape observer takes pictures of a landscape, those pictures assume that a place can be understood, ordered, and controlled from a removed vantage point, “free of the distortions of the observer’s subjectivity” (Osborne 7). The observer’s subjectivity is removed from the frame; their subjectivity lies in their ability to choose what to represent objectively. Denis Cosgrove refers to the ideology of landscape’s view of objective reality, where “subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and the viewer—those who control the landscape—not those who belong to it” (Mitchell 116).

This line of thinking encapsulates the landscape view, in which the power of representation is abundantly evident.

In this sense, landscape photography betrays the reality of a place—a person living or working in a place would more likely not recognize that place from a landscape view. Their visualization of their place of work or of living would be street level compared to someone who engages with that place touristically. The fictionality of landscape photography supports the greater fictionality of tourist photography. “By erasing contemporary signs, modern humans and connections elsewhere,” Urry and Larsen assert, “western travel photography imprisoned the Orient in a timeless ancient space of architecture and monuments to produce the desired authentic orient” (Urry & Larsen 169). Urry and Larsen identify what is probably *the* most powerful process that tourist photography undertakes: erasure. The landscape view, in its formation as a view, was never concerned about gazing upon a working country, a real place (Urry & Larsen 110). It is “land organized and reduced to the point ‘where the human eye can comprehend its breadth and depth within one frame or short scan’” (Urry & Larsen 110). A landscape gaze can comprehend the spatial organization of the world, but in reality no person or institution can do so. The landscape view erases the intricacies, contradictions, and histories of a place. By representing a place via the landscape gaze, tourist photography has the power to decide exactly how a place is visually constituted from a removed, “objective” perspective.

This protracted discussion of landscape is important particularly in the context of photography in Nepal’s trekking regions. Without giving away the results of my

photographic textual analysis, it may come as little surprise that the vast majority of trekkers' photographs include mountains, valleys, or other natural landscapes. If we're talking about "imprisoning the Orient in a timeless ancient space," then these photographs of natural landscapes do exactly that. When a place is represented as "natural," without "contemporary signs" or any human signs at all, that place becomes imagined as empty, as undeveloped. This simple connection harkens back to the origins of colonialism, where representations of a place's empty nature were invitations to manipulate that place. Moreover, representation of a place as natural and timeless invited colonial manipulation not only of that place's environment but of its society, understood as natural and therefore exploitable as well.³

This argument holds true in many cases of colonialism and neocolonialism, but it is also complicated by different geographical relations. Regarding landscape, one complication is the fact that landscape representation is not only problematic when it represents a "natural" environment,⁴ but also when it represents a "developed" environment (towns, cities, roads, etc). Keeping in mind Harvey's idea that landscape production cannot be divorced from landscape representation, an imagination of a place as aestheticized rather than functional dictates how social, economic, and political relationships of that place are thought about. This returns to the idea that landscape ideology is hegemonic. While the landscape view is a historically Western view (Mitchell 100), because it is hegemonic, it tends to manifest as the default visual imagination of

³ This relationship will be examined further in this thesis' later analysis

⁴ By "natural environment" I'm referring to the conventional use of the word natural. "Nature" in Nepal's trekking regions, for example, is highly regulated by having been gazetted as national parks that maintain its "nature."

any place organized by capitalist economic logic. This hegemony creates a commensurable playing field across which places can be appraised based on their landscape. Because the view is from the same vantage point—removed and objective—a suburban American town or highly ordered European city can be compared to a Himalayan village. Visually imagining places from a landscape view “embeds” places “in unified space” (Osborne 7), therefore allowing places to be compared and, again, categorized from a Western system of knowing and ordering. Thinking of landscape photography in this way connects back to the reproduction of tourist visual representation. As will be evidenced later, a central part of tourism advertising and photography in Nepal’s trekking regions involves landscape representation. Thus, circulating touristic images of Nepal’s landscape produce and reproduce visual imaginations of Nepal from the removed, objective, observing, and powerful point of view.

While much of my upcoming photographic analysis will deal with landscape because that is the dominant view in the touristic representation of Nepal’s trekking regions, it is only a partial view of the colonial semiotic regime. The colonial semiotic language is learned and reproduced not only through landscape photography but through signs represented at intimately close range, or at any range between landscape and the up-close. The precipitating event for my writing of this thesis was a woman taking pictures of a girl from a range of only a meter, not of distant mountains. Riina Yrjola’s analysis of Bob Geldof’s and Bono’s representations of Africa is helpful in understanding the powerful point of view of the Western observer. Rather than Africa’s political reality,

Yrjola writes, “Geldof’s eyes are instead fixed on the distinctions of which he writes extensively.” Expressed through the representations of Africa presented by these two men, “Africa [is] where the white man can still designate himself as superior through words and images” (Yrjola 16); images, in this case, that bolster the narratives of Africa as impoverished or “underdeveloped.” To this point, Yrjola comments, “these various and circular African descriptions can be seen as deriving from the colonial practices where Western actors...made their own histories” (Yrjola 17). The circular cycle of meaning production in Nepal’s trekking regions is similar in that imagined geographies are western-made, and the power-laden creation of a cycle of representation leaves room for only Western understanding. Signs that are represented in photography are learned to be represented as such through histories made by Western actors. From these histories and imposed understandings, space is ordered and powerful perceptions of places arise—spaces and places imbued with signs. Western eyes learn to see signs representing difference and exoticness among the signs representing modernity and politics, but only seek out and therefore take away the signs of the former.

Throughout this chapter I have discussed this circulation of not only images but visual and therefore spatial imaginations, and I will now focus that discussion towards the role of advertising in these processes. I’ve already touched upon the place of advertising in the circle of representation, but its power in and centrality to global tourist practices warrants a lengthier discussion. Landscapes and other symbolic arrangements of space take on a layer of commodification and therefore political economic relation when they are the subjects of advertisement. In the next section, I trace the connection between

circulating representations of tourist places and tourism advertising that comprises a vital stretch of the circulation of photographic representation.

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Advertising analysis is important to this thesis because it is the primary means of understanding the circulation of representation as it is affected by the culture of Western consumerism. “The knowledge-power art of commercial photography,” Urry and Larsen explain, “involves crafting images that stimulate—and not substitute—desires for ‘transporting one’s body’ to the photographed place” (Urry & Larsen 173). Urry and Larsen describe the creation of an “imaginative mobility” that is incomplete—advertising crafts images that may or may not include tourists, but are always images in which potential tourists can place themselves. As discussed earlier, the enticement for tourism stems from the construction of geographical difference. In looking to travel, then, a tourist imagines placing himself in a context of difference. Commercial photography banks on this difference, and in particular embellishes, erases, exaggerates, stereotypes, and repeats representations that produce “place-myths.” These contain the “various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality” (Urry & Larsen 173). Places “in reality” cannot be commodified; their multidimensional, overlapping, analog, and contested nature precludes their being flattened into commodification. Advertising, though, does exactly that, reducing a place to its discrete cluster of place-myths that benefit the particular advertiser, the tourism industry as a whole, and potential tourists.

Advertising images create “spatial fictions,” but fictions only exist powerfully if they are authenticated and accepted. “Tourists can treat tourism’s imaginative geographies as so real because they are built upon convictions of ‘actualities’—views, national types, and buildings. Tourism’s desires and fantasies are located within a palpable visual grammar that looks real and invites identification” (Urry & Larsen 176). This visual grammar, as described throughout this chapter, is learned and reproduced through representation, where continual quotation and reproduction provides an authentication for what is ultimately a fictive construction. This is part of the process where advertising representations in various media “generated through different tourist gazes come to constitute a closed self-perpetuating system of illusions which provide tourists with the basis for selecting and evaluating potential places to visit” (Urry & Larsen 8). This “closed system” idea has been pulled apart earlier, but advertising specifically closes off potential imaginations of places in that they are confined, through advertising representation, as “places to visit” and places at which to gaze, not as places with an agency of their own. The advertising gaze, which constitutes a basis for selection and evaluation of places to visit, in a sense *creates* tourist places. Advertising, then, is the way that these places are disseminated and represented to the world of potential tourists.

This wide and powerful role to which I have assigned advertising is broader than its previous academic treatments. Academic study of tourism has always considered the effects of formal advertising on the wants and choices of tourists, but at this point in the evolution of technology, academia has yet to catch up. Many studies about tourism advertisements or works that cite those studies are based off of tourist brochures,

postcards, advertisements in physical magazines, or descriptions in physical guide books. The internet, at first through a proliferation of travel websites and then through the total revolution of social media, has significantly altered the advertising with which tourist studies is familiar. Social media and the “Web 2.0” broadly have altered more than just advertisement, of course; they dissolve the boundaries that have previously stifled any given internet user’s influence on how events or places are represented. For these reasons, we must expand our conceptions of “advertising.” Peter Osborne relevantly makes clear to us that images become an “enticement,” offering “the incitement to travel, to purchase the real in the form of visual consumption” (Osborne 11). What more does visual advertisement do, formal or otherwise? I pose this question because I want to assert the comparability of the power of a picture on a formal travel website and a picture on social media.

Robinson and Picard, as seen throughout this chapter, have made significant contributions to the study of tourist photography in *The Framed World*, but their analysis is weighted down by the book’s time of writing and publishing date. Published in 2009, their writing and research process presumably took place in 2007 or 2008; another of this thesis’ central texts, Urry and Larsen’s *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, published in 2012, is mostly an edited version of Urry’s 1990 text, with an added section on web-based tourist practices and only a tiny update on the role of social media; Another central text, Osborne’s *Traveling Light*, was published in 2000, preceding the rise of social media by at least 5 years. Flickr rose to popularity in 2006, Facebook rose to popularity between 2007 and 2008, and Instagram was not even founded until 2010. The point here is that the

texts I have listed as well as the other of the more contemporary academic analyses of tourist photography have been produced in the midst of or before the initial social media revolution. None have been produced more than one or two years into the second decade of the twenty-first century, which is the first decade dominated by social media.

This social media-sized hole in this sphere of academic literature is quite glaring. The effects of this social activity are widespread and entrenched, especially in the visual aspects of these media. Combined, Facebook and Instagram have 1.4 *billion* monthly users; a combined 400 million images are uploaded to Facebook and Instagram *every day* (Smith 2013). As of 2014, Instagram has compiled 20 billion photos on its service; Facebook has compiled, as of 2013, a staggering 250 billion photos (*ibid*). While my personal social media experience is apparently only 1 in 1.4 billion, its connectivity has allowed me to understand a general sense of my cohort's social media activity. One significant phenomenon I have observed is that photo uploading markedly increases when a social media user is traveling. This is not at all surprising considering the observations by many tourist photography theorists that people take far more pictures while engaging in tourist activity than they do at home. Now, however, those photos are captured in byte form and rendered infinitely replicable and searchable (theoretically) forever. Instead of tourist photographs being stored in physical photo albums or isolated computer desktop folders, they exist on digital profiles, easily accessible by thousands and searchable by millions. While Robinson and Picard have downplayed the effects of digital tourist photography (Robinson & Picard 9)—a sentiment blaring in its silence

throughout this field—the effect of visual social media must now be considered at this field's fore.

Social media's photographic collections represent the final part of the circulation of photographic representation. Interpreting the scores of tourist photography uploads on these sites through the lens developed in this chapter brings the power of these pictures into focus. Social media users encounter representations of places, and people they know in those places, on a daily basis, visible on their Facebook news feeds or through instagram hash tag searches. Once, potential tourists sought travel agents, brochures, and travel websites on their own. Their close friends and family would share slides, emailed pictures, or prints of disposable camera photos. Now, however, many of the West's potential tourists are inundated with travel pictures; if they are part of the 1.2 billion who use Facebook, they will be subject to targeted advertising, where if they visit a travel website or search for a place somewhere on the internet, they could see an advertisement for that place on the side of their Facebook page. This is only a snapshot of the interconnection of the internet's contemporary social-visual nexus, but it is illustrative of the new era in which tourist advertising exists. "Advertising" is no longer (if it ever was) a discrete category, and it is no longer only an industry. To be sure, it is still an industry—there are now thousands of tourism companies vying for business in Nepal's tourism economy—but it has transcended the prior confines of an industry of representational enticement. It bleeds into a dominant contemporary form of sociality, becoming more than what it once was and incorporating more than what it used to.

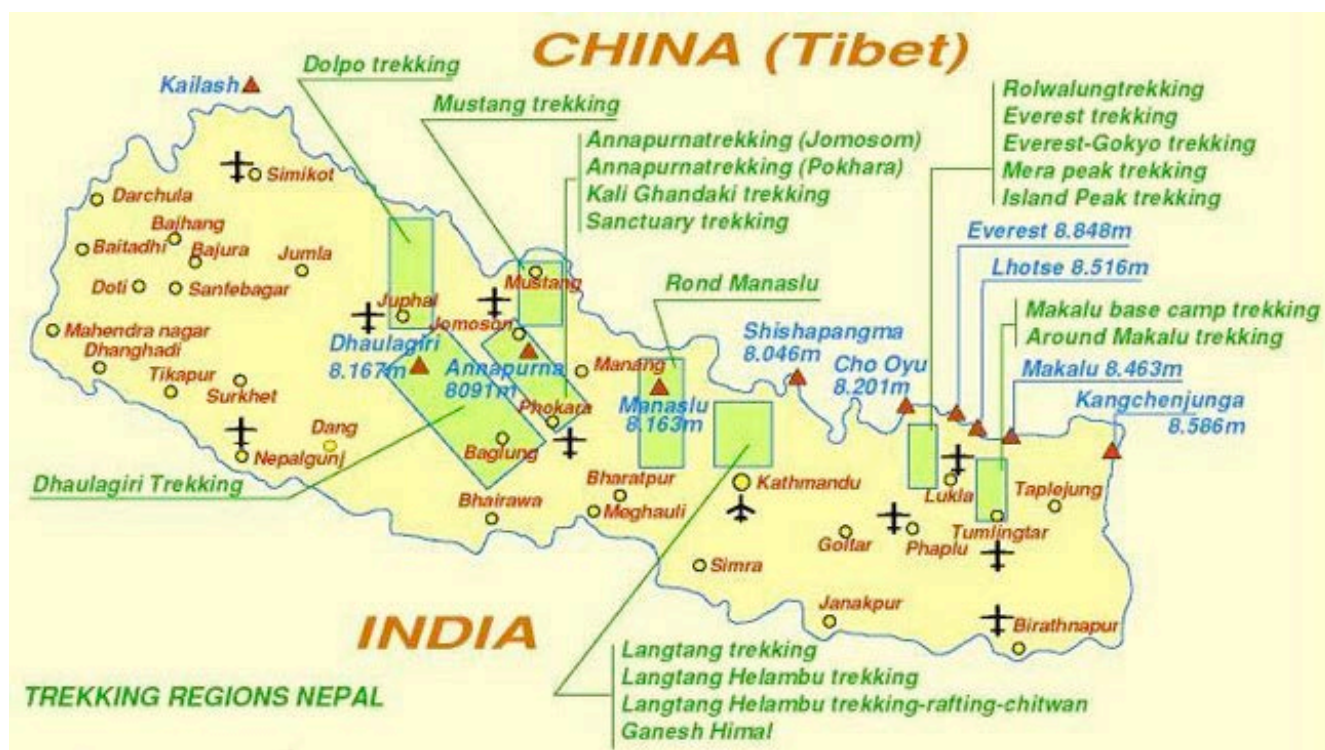
Social media, though, has left many of advertisement's power relationships intact. Tourism representation's power relationships are able to be mapped onto social media, which is why advertising in social media is the last step in the circulation of photographic representation before it circles back to its described beginning, colonial image-making. The colonial categories that tourist photography bolster and reproduce are manifested more broadly than ever through social media, increasing unprecedentedly in volume. The processes described in this chapter have built up momentum and historical legitimacy, and are currently expressed through contemporary society's dominant mediascape. The power of the birth of photography and its collusion in the creation of the colonial world order resonates through the pictures shared on Facebook and Instagram, which do their part in re-inscribing colonialism's sustained domination. Here, the circulation of photographic representation completes itself.

In the following chapter, I discuss the economic, social, and political organization of Nepal's trekking industry, creating an account to hold up against representations of Nepal's trekking regions. It is an effort to portray my account of the reality of trekking, which will then be contrasted against the imagination imparted by photographs taken by trekkers. This chapter made the case that material geographies are influenced by imaginative/represented geographies—to understand the relationship between material and imaginative/represented geography in Nepal's trekking regions, I need to lay out its material spatiality, seen through the trekking industry. In effect, trekking photography will be a case study for my interpretations of the circulatory system of tourist photography. As complicated as tourist photographic representation is, similarly so is

Nepal's trekking industry, and to understand how they are connected requires a fair and comprehensive treatment of the industry's socio-spatial structure.

Chapter 3

Nepal's Trekking Industry: Cast and Setting



Map of Nepal's trekking regions.

The goal of this chapter is to understand the power embedded in Nepal's trekking industry, power made visible when viewed through the lens established in the previous chapter. Trekking in Nepal is a prolific industry with set structures, practices, hierarchies, and outcomes. As an industry, trekking affects the myriad economic actors and places of which it is comprised; as a spatial practice—through its prominence in Nepal's identity and GDP, and its power to channel development—trekking affects the majority of people in Nepal, especially those who live in the Himalayas. In other words, the geography of the trekking industry is tangled and multidimensional. In this chapter I will try to unravel trekking's spatiality in such a way that stresses the photography-mediated (or

unmediated) power relationships of which the industry is constituted. Ultimately, this account of the trekking industry will lay the place-specific foundation for understanding the practice and power of photographic representation in Nepal's trekking regions.

The Trek Itself

There are several major key players in the trekking industry. I first turn to an essential part of the trekking industry—trekkers themselves. What does one see, and what exchanges does one engage in, when he treks through this social and economic landscape? In what ways are the processes of that landscape essentialized or made invisible? The former question can partially be answered by the following autobiographical account of my trek in the Langtang national park, and the latter will be addressed throughout the rest of this thesis.

As I began my trekking process, I was lucky enough to be able to circumvent the trekking company system.⁵ Instead of choosing a guide or formal trekking group from the many hundreds, I had a friend set me up with a guide, Nima Lama, who is a friend of my friend's uncle. I met Nima at Dhunche, the town 30 miles north of Kathmandu that is the entrance and initial trekking checkpoint of the Langtang national park. For the purpose of this thesis, I will not describe the first three days of my trek, in which we were along a route that did not have any formal trekking infrastructure and was mostly uninhabited. We eventually reconnected, on the third day, to the formal Langtang trail in Nima's home village, Brabal. A "trail," such as the main one in Langtang, is a hiking path through Himalayan terrain connected by nodes of villages. Villages can be as small as two or

⁵ Lucky, in my case, because group treks are typically twice to three times as expensive as going alone or with a single, privately hired guide.

three guest houses (herein referred to as lodges or hotels, interchangeably), or as large as a small town with a couple thousand people; in the popular, developed trekking regions (such as Langtang, Annapurna, and Khumbu) trekkers usually stay in these, in one of the guest houses within these clusters. If a trekker is with a group or a guide, the guide will choose the guest house at which they stay, based on relationships the guides have forged with lodge owners. If a trekker is by herself, lodge owners will solicit their patronage as they enter that lodge's village, or somewhere earlier on the trail.

Hotels' structures are standardized (Lim 2007, 730), consisting of guest rooms, a main dining room (always with a central fireplace), and a cooking space that doubles as a congregative space for lodge employees, guides, and porters as well as small groups of guests. Guests are offered, in the words of Lim, a "bewildering array" of menu items including many classic Nepali dishes, Tibetan dishes, American pizzas, Chinese dishes, pancakes, and Snickers dumplings. Guests are also encouraged by the lodge owners to buy alcohol, snacks, and other amenities that are expensive and yield high profits. Everyone else will typically eat the Nepali every-meal dish *daal bhat*. My trek was during the off-season, in the cloudy monsoon months of summer, so I was usually the only guest in the lodges in which I stayed. In the peak season, however, when they are full, guides, porters, and hotel staff sleep on benches, or on the floor, in the common dining room or kitchen.

Trekkers on the trail compose a typical scene. The trekker will be decked out in outdoor-brand hiking gear—fresh North Face boots, khaki-scale gore-tex pants, down jacket, with some sort of walking stick, either bought in Kathmandu or found somewhere

along the trail (mine was a bamboo stick sold to me by enterprising children in Dhunche). And, significantly for this thesis, most of these tourists are equipped with an SLR camera of some sort. On these same trails, villagers commute between regional hubs, hauling heavy loads on their backs, wearing various combinations of traditional Tibetan clothes and metropolitan garb. In trekking groups, or sometimes with a single trekker, one or more porters carry all the trekkers' things (except for a day pack, that the trekkers carry themselves). Nima, who was a porter before he became a guide, told me that porters usually carry 30 to 40 kilograms (70 to 90 pounds), and up to 70 kilograms (150 pounds), of gear at a time. While the trekkers and guides will often stop for water or picture breaks, the porters will continue at a steady pace to the day's final destination.

Porters are an interesting and significant group to this thesis, because they tend to be represented quite often in tourist photography. For as long as people have lived in these hilly regions with no roads, villagers have transported goods for consumption and trade on packs slung over their foreheads and down their backs. As trekking established itself and dominated the region's economy, the porterage skill became an asset, as trekking groups require supplies to be hauled up mountainous terrain in the same way that a household needs their month's rice or kerosene tank hauled. In fact, porters are the literal and figurative backbone of the trekking industry, without whom the entire industry would have never existed (Lim 2008 [1], 80). While porterage is not an economic imposition onto Nepal's trekking regions, porters' relationship to trekkers and trekking agencies is extremely unequal. Porters are typically treated as expendable and disrespectable labor, exacerbated by the fact that their employers are based in Nepal's big

cities while they typically hail from rural parts of the country; the difference between those two spaces is reflective of an entrenched spatiality of inequality in Nepal. In this sense, porters are wholly marginalized actors, essential to the trekking industry but also silenced by it.

Concerning hierarchy in trekking's labor force, porters are towards the bottom while guides are towards the top. Owners of trekking companies, many of whom were or are still guides, make the most money and wield the most power. A successful trekking company will typically employ at least a few guides who are familiar with all the major trekking routes, and who speak the language of the tourists who choose their agency. This is a desirable source of employment for many Nepali people in rural areas, and as we have seen in Nima's case, the position of guide is one to be worked up towards. One can become a guide only when they have been certified by Nepal's trekking bureaucracies, otherwise locals may act as porter/guides who are hired independently, working outside of the agency system. Because agency owners and english-speaking guides have access to wealth and influence in the trekking industry, their voices are heard, so to speak, by the powers that influence trekking tourism development. Porters, however, who make up the largest percentage of trekking industry workers, are allowed minimal if any political participation.

Yet, they are not invisible. An important note is that "porter" is often used synonymously with "Sherpa" by Westerners. This semantic linkage exists because where trekking first blossomed, in the Everest region, the porters were drawn from the local population who in that region are the ethnic Sherpa. Most contemporary porters are not

Sherpas, but are still often collectively referred to as “sherpas.” The merging of an essential labor role in an industry with an ethnicity by Western trekkers is significant, especially when expressed through representation. The “sherpa” acts as a central sign in trekking semiotics, encapsulating “Nepal” in its lack of development (people instead of cars on roads carrying goods) and its non-economic nature (sherpa, an ethnic role, rather than porter, an economic role). When this group is represented in photography, they are not exposed as a marginalized labor force, they are exoticized as an authentic trekking sign.

As porters’ representation exemplifies, the relationships and practices portrayed in this section both reflect and conceal the social and economic intricacies of trekking. Trekkers see the built environment of trekking infrastructure, and they interact with some of the actors involved in the industry. Most, however, do not know the historical and social contexts of the places through which they are walking. This history of economic opportunity, of fluctuating power relationships and overlap between religion, ethnicity, and politics, is typically unknown to trekkers. The rest of this chapter will expand our engagement with the trekking industry from that of the trekker to that which reckons with the complexity of the construction of the industry.

The Economic Himalayan Landscape

From talking to many Nepalis and understanding the country’s political-economic geography, it is clear that wealth is generally funneled to the capital, and most rural areas are impoverished. There is a coalescence of historical and structural issues that contribute to Nepal’s pervasive and entrenched spatial inequality, a gap that is neatly reflected in the

trekking industry. As development is geared towards maintenance and expansion of trekking trails and trekking's economy, the development of other parts of Nepal's mountain economy is marginalized or wholly ignored. According to Nepal and other commentators, development typically only occurs in Nepal when that development benefits interested and powerful parties in Kathmandu and abroad. This is evidenced by what SK Nepal refers to as "economic leakage" from tourism, where around only half of income derived from tourism is retained locally (Nepal 670). The other half goes to the tour companies and government bureaucracies centralized in Kathmandu. Because trekking tourism is so lucrative for those benefitting from its top-down structure, its development is prioritized over development that would be more equitable for the people in the trekking regions. These economic practices foster inequality not only between Kathmandu and rural trekking regions but also within the rural regions themselves.

While the trails, where trekkers walk and sleep, are only a fraction of the physical area of Nepal's trekking regions, the economic effect of trekking is spread throughout the mountains and valleys of the Himalayas. SK Nepal outlines the clear disadvantage of communities in and around heavy trekking areas. He analyzes three of the most popular trekking regions—Khumbu (Everest), Annapurna, and Upper Mustang—discussing the environmental and economic consequences of trekking. In both the Khumbu and Annapurna regions, Nepal's two most popular trekking regions, "only a few people (mostly lodge owners) have been able to take advantage of the tourism boom" (Nepal 670). SK Nepal provides a specific example in a case study of Ghandruk, a village in the Annapurna region, where "only 12% of the active population is directly engaged in

tourism. Most of the community development programs initiated by [the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) Annapurna Sanctuary Trail project] are concentrated in the Ghandruk area while the vast majority of poor farmers in other areas have hardly benefitted” (Nepal 670).

This scenario, where development and economic benefit are unequally distributed, plays out across much of Nepal’s Himalayan social landscape. A “strained relationship” occurs as “a significant proportion of the rural population [of the Ghandruk and Ghorepani area] did not receive adequate incentives or opportunities to realize tourism benefits” (Nepal 670). The narrowness of trekking development, as evidenced by the Ghandruk case, fosters inequality in opportunity and access to resources, and thus inequality in economic outcomes. In concrete terms, Nepal et al. explain that, “for the poorer sections of society, development of tourism has meant further restriction of erstwhile accessible natural resources, as well as higher prices for basic goods such as food” (Nepal et al. 15). This inequality is an effect of the trekking industry’s power, a power that is bolstered by trekking photography. As trekking photography helps circulate the ideas and practices of trekking tourism, popularizing it and elevating its importance in the global imagination of Nepal, the state’s and businesses’ efforts will necessarily continue to be funneled into that lucrative, economically reproductive process.

These economic and social components of the “strained relationship” to which SK Nepal refers are easily seen—although unseen by the Western gaze—through the transformation of labor relations in trekking regions. Economic inequity, SK Nepal explains, is reflected in “local inflation of essential goods and services and shortage of

labor in agricultural activities” in villages on and around trekking trails (Nepal 664). As its demand increases and its infrastructure develops, trekking drains labor from the trails’ surrounding areas. The traditional focus of labor in these regions, agriculture, as well is overwhelmed by trekking’s enormous labor demand, wholly transforming these places’ labor relations and thus their political, social, and economic relations. Lim dissects the importance of the hotel in the economic landscape of trekking regions, especially its effects on labor. “As a result of tourism [in the Langtang region],” Lim explains, “two new economic classes have emerged in the village: the hotel-owners as primary employers, and the rest of the village depending on them for waged work” (Lim 2007, 727). He continues by asserting that this power hierarchy, at the top of which are hotels, is stabilized by the lack of viable alternative sources of employment for villagers in the Langtang region—any alternative employment sources have been phased out by trekking’s prominence. The construction and maintenance work that a hotel presents for unemployed or underemployed villagers “is one of the primary means through which [they] first become tied to the tourism industry and become dependent upon it for income” (Lim 2007, 727). Urry and Larsen echo this arrangement in a generalized observation of the tourist economy: “much employment generated in tourist-related services is relatively low skilled and may reproduce the servile character of” colonial economic arrangement (Urry & Larsen 74). For these reasons, the hotel symbolizes a significant shift in labor relations in trekking places.

Elaborating the hotel’s significance, Nepal et al. assert that the lodge represents the highest rung on the “clear hierarchy of activities” within trekking tourism (Nepal et

al. 55). Even in their hopeful appraisal of mountain tourism development, they note that the contemporary mountain tourism economy “has strengthened the position of the traditionally wealthy” (Nepal et al. 56). Prior to Nepal’s trekking influx, people in the Annapurna region, for example, gained wealth and rose in socioeconomic status through service in national or foreign militaries, where their salaries (and even pensions) were much higher than what they would make in the production of agriculture or crafts (Nepal et al. 55). That wealth contributed to the economic case today, where many lodge owners in the Annapurna region “are either retirees from the army or are supported by family members engaged in army service” (Nepal et al. 22). Those who already had wealth were able to create “machines of capital” (Lim 2008 [1], 122) to further their monetary success and consolidate their local power. Others took cues from this success, and the number of lodges across Nepal’s trekking has been steadily increasing, where people understand lodges as symbols of opportunity and go so far as to pull their children out of school to afford lodge construction (Nepal et al. 41). This has increased local competition between individual lodges, causing a notable amount of social and political antagonism not only between socioeconomic classes but within them (Lim 2008, 7).

Additionally, Lim argues that the hotel replaces the temple as the most central place for the exercising and representation of power in trekking villages. Because hotels are both harbingers of trekking development and structures that sediment a touristic way of life in trekking regions, Lim suggests that they have become “the physical embodiment of *bikas* [(development)]” (Lim 2007, 728). Because their economic success is obvious, symbolized in their material wealth and the owner’s newly accrued power, hotels create

examples for the possibility of other hotels, increasing trekking development's momentum in a given village. The reasons for the hotel's transformative aspects are not only economic, as Lim explains, but ideological, as they are metaphorically "moving through diverse semiotic domains and discursive contexts underlying varied forms of social interaction" (Lim 2007, 734). These ideas that the hotel is multiply contextual, that it exists in not just one but multiple "semiotic domains," resonate with the politics of seeing, with the power-determined intersection of gazes. Lim's point is that understanding the trekking industry, its history and its material relations, must be situated in contexts and understandings of human activity and motivation.

The hotel is not restricted to "the one specific domain of economic production" (Lim 2007, 735), nor are the other places and practices that comprise and perpetuate Nepal's trekking industry. If understanding human motivation is key to not restricting the industry to the specific domain of economic production, then visual imagination must be considered. The centrality of the hotel could only be achieved by hotels being endowed with aesthetic significance, where the tourist gaze legitimates their presence. Hotels could, of course, be built without their aesthetic role in mind, but that is completely unprecedented in the history of tourist place design (Urry & Larsen 120). If tourists are collectors of signs, and landscapes where these signs can be found are valued, then it would make sense for a tourist place's economic actors to utilize these signs. Hotel owners understand that a hotel needs to look a certain way to be gazed upon as legitimate and "authentic" by trekkers and the trekking industry—it must be significantly different from the other houses and shops of villages, but must be aesthetically pleasing and

complimentary enough to fit in with the landscape in trekkers' infinitely quoted landscape photographs.

While these quoted photographs exist on hard drives and social media and in the minds of Western tourists, as part of the circulation of photographic representation they also contribute to the imagery used in the trekking industry's formal advertising. The connection between advertising and the spatial make up of trekking regions is quite clear. Representations in trekking advertising portray a landscape that entices tourists, and this landscape in reality must match the expectation—constructed through representation—of the landscape. In turn, these advertised tourists sites are created by the state to cater to the tourist gaze. Tourists want to go to the represented places as advertised, thus the trekking industry has shaped itself accordingly. Through advertisement, as much as through tourist photography itself, the unequal economy of trekking is bolstered, where crucial elements of the industry are ignored or glorified accordingly.

Trekking and the State

An important party in the trekking industry's practices, as evidenced already, is the state. This section discusses the way the state sanctions certain bodies, behaviors, and forms of economic practice in trekking regions while marginalizing or criminalizing others. As will become obvious, these sanctions reinforce the power differential between the centralized state and the disadvantaged communities on the receiving end of the dual-headed force of state power and the tourist gaze.

The conditions for the state's relationship to trekking were incepted most formally with the 1957 Forest act of Nepal, where forests were nationalized and became state

property. This paved the way for the establishment of national parks in the 1970s, most notably the Langtang and Sagarmatha national parks (Nepal et al. 29). Through local resistance, the Annapurna region was gazetted into a conservation area rather than a national park, which affords inhabitants slightly more although still very restricted control over their environment (ibid). Regardless, the gazetting of these regions was “largely driven by foreign interests including conservation and tourism circles,” placing the government “in a position to exert a strong influence on local forest management” (ibid). This introduction of strong influence has and continues to foster conflict between local communities and the government. Consistently, the government’s asymmetrical power, backed by international agencies and Nepali business, overwhelms the local communities and entrenches their marginality.

Development is key for Francis Khek Gee Lim in tying the state’s disciplinary practices to state discourse. “Accompanying the arrival of *bikas* [(development)] to Langtang Village...was a set of externally imposed rules and surveillance that reconfigure the villagers’ relationships with their homeland, the Nepalese state and, ultimately, the world” (Lim 2008, 5). This development, materialized as national parks and trekking infrastructure, “calls for the intervention of ‘expert’ knowledge in local lives” (Lim 2008, 84). This effort of intervention and imposition is geared towards constructing the trekking regions as tourist places, as “tourism became a crucial component” of the state’s overall project of development. Tourism is crucial to the state because it presents a significant means of income contributing to 15% of Nepal’s foreign currency earnings and 3% of its GDP, as well as a means of legitimation of its power across its territory. This

development benefits the state and international interests, but it is at the expense of the traditionally, and contemporarily, marginalized local communities.

Lim provides a thorough account of how exactly the state exercises its social control in the Langtang region through its practices vis a vis national park regulation. Framing the “development” in the region as a Foucauldian form of discipline, he asserts the violence that the state perpetrates: “With the establishment of the National Park came the enforcers of discipline—the army and the police” (Lim 2008, 86). Here Lim refers to the army post and manned checkpoint in the center of the national park, and to the police outposts stationed in the Langtang VDC (village development committee). These officials maintain the extensive spate of park rules to which locals are subject, many of which stunt their traditional and beneficial use of the land. The rules include “the prohibition against further clearing of agricultural lands” or vegetation for firewood and construction without permission, prohibition against hunting animals without permission, prohibition against “fixing or maintaining advertisements” without permission; the list goes on (Lim 2008 [1], 85). This encompassing set of rules limits the economic choices of the Langtangpa, compelling them to participate in the tourism industry (Lim 2008 [1], 121). The army and police ensure this legal system is upheld by overseeing the park, thus constituting “a form of state surveillance of the local people, made possible by an uncanny collusion between the Nepalese state and development practitioners” (Lim 2008 [1], 86).

Here one can see that the importance of the construction and maintenance of tourist places for the Nepali state. The consequences, broadly, are twofold: one is the

social control and narrowing of economic choices imposed onto the communities in trekking regions by the state. The other is the inequality that materializes as the state focuses its development efforts on tourism. Trekking regions are uniquely advantageous for the state because their maintenance cuts two carrots with one knife: the one carrot of conservation and the ability to commercialize and market Nepal as being a haven of nature, and the other carrot of revenue. This is why, as Lim notes, “the growth of the tourism industry went hand in hand with the country’s overall project of development” (Lim 2008 [1], 120). Put simply, places within Nepal’s territory that are not tourist places are denied the adequate attention of their government’s brand of development.

Nepal’s trekking regions are tourist places simultaneously on the margins of state power and close to the center of its considerations. Drawing on the arguments of the previous chapter, the economic and spatial configuration of these places develops through geographic imagination, and in this power-laden matrix of places and power representation must play a crucial role. The economic reality and power relationships that constitute trekking regions have been laid out in this chapter; the next chapter will analyze the visual representations of these regions. In interpreting trekking photography’s relationship to the realities of the trekking industry, I can come to understand the power that photographs have in shaping the imagination and thus the reality of these tourist places.

Chapter 4

Data and Analytical Arguments

The place-based reality described in the previous chapter contextualizes the theoretical generalizations of the second chapter. How does the vision and the imagination described in the second chapter betray, disguise, alter, and dictate the spatial configuration described in the third chapter? What exactly does the *trekkers'* gaze look like, and look at? How does the representation of trekking's dominant symbols perpetuate a colonial imagination of Nepal? How is this power relationship complicated, questioned, and punctured? The rest of this thesis seeks to answer these questions. This chapter will attempt to analyze the vast and scattered collections of pictures of Nepal's trekking regions, produced by and for Westerners, that exist on the internet. The two primary goals of this analysis are to uncover 1) the constituency of the trekkers' gaze, of what the trekker has learned to see and therefore reproduces in her photography, and 2) the degree to which the complex reality of the trekking industry is reflected or excluded in trekking photography.

I conducted my research exclusively on the internet, which, due to its seemingly infinite and thus confusing nature, requires me to offer some considerations. The first is that imposing a systematic process of analysis on the internet is an act informed by a misapprehension of the medium. It is conceivable to create parameters for a systematic analysis of a group of similar websites or of another specific dimension of the internet. This thesis' investigation, however, is not simple enough for that. Looking at only social media photographs of trekking, for example, would exclude the significance of the photos shared by trekking agencies and the interconnection of those two media. Additionally,

many of the photographs in this analysis are similar to each other, but their reach varies from being seen by dozens of people to thousands of people. I did not want to exclude any of the photos I found, regardless of their audience or medium, as long as they were representations of trekking places.

The process of searching for these images involved sampling between the internet's realms of social media, advertising, conventional media, public, private, and other boundaries multiple times. It would make sense in some instances to analyze a photograph collection as a whole, while other photographs could be analyzed individually. As the internet does not have rules for how and where trekking photography should be shared, my analysis similarly lacked confines to where those photographs should be sought and how they should be viewed. In other words, as important as context is in an interpretive analysis of photographs, especially so is the context of where and how they are shared. This method is loose, but it is systematic in that in each medium, whether it was a travel website (Matador Network, agency websites etc.) or a social network (Flickr, Facebook, etc.), my research would be organized according to the structure of each medium. For example, I could see every photo essay on Matador Network concerning trekking in Nepal and note the symbolic make up of each photograph, but photographs on media such as Flickr or Google were far too multiple to be accounted for, so those were sampled. I state this to show that my analysis accounted for the variation in structure across the internet's media even though it could not have a wholly systematic approach.

A fundamental part of this thesis' argument is that the constructed objectivity of photography as a social technology is just that, a construction. The gaze is informed by

subjectivity, of the looker's position in power and space; I kept this sentiment in mind throughout my analysis. While I have taken it upon myself to interpret these tourists' pictures, I am aware that, because of the subjective nature of photographs, so too is my analysis also ultimately subjective. As an (technically) academic studying the gaze, I am a gazer in the second degree, a distinction made by MacCannell (MacCannell 31), where I understand that "seeing is not believing." I am still, though, gazing at gazed-upon representations. If the gaze is understood as subjective, then this analysis must be taken as a subjectivity, informed by an immersion in critical tourism and photographic theory.

Recognizing my own subjectivity begs the delineation of the inherent biases and limitations of this position. One of the more glaring biases is in my interpretation of the contents of photographs—where I see symbols of exoticness or the framing of a Western, colonial gaze, others may see cultural symbols of which they are proud, for example, or an awe-inspiring view of beautiful landscapes. I have assumed and internalized a semiotic language of critique, which is one among many semiotic languages, and in this sense there is much room for disagreement in my interpretations. This is not to discredit the critical lens: the point of a critical interpretation is not to prescribe a correct way of understanding a text; rather it is to create tension and contestation in how a text is understood. My hope in this analysis, and specifically in choosing this particularly subjective manner of analysis, is to offer an alternative framework of seeing photographs after having destabilized the definition and practice of photography.

A further limitation is my knowledge of the internet. The entrance points into this analysis (google searches, hashtag searches, and recall of my own mental library of websites) dictated how I navigated the web and this which pictures I saw. Another

researcher would most likely see a different set of pictures because they would have searched for different keywords and websites than I did. In this sense, the internet's own nature and a researcher's engagement with the internet combine to create a particularly subjective and limited experience.

Aware of photographic analysis' inherent subjectivity and the internet's opaque and ambiguously delimited nature, I move forward with my analysis of photographs of Nepal's trekking regions. My main sources of data were Flickr, Matador Network, Instagram, Facebook, Google image search, trekking agency websites, and travel magazines and websites. Each of these media present images uniquely, so instead of categorizing images independent of their medium, I will discuss each medium's collections of images. While I would not describe my research as systematic, I did employ a structure of searching across these media: I would search for, in varying combinations, "Nepal," "Annapurna," "Langtang," "Everest," "Nepal trekking," "Annapurna trekking," "Langtang trekking," and "Everest trekking." From the result of these searches, though, links to other photographs or collections of photographs presented themselves, so sometimes I found photographs that were not search results but that were gotten to through following hyperlinks. From here, I will start by describing photographs shared by trekking agencies, and then move from the more explicitly private to public media. I begin with a corner of the sphere of the internet concerned with trekking in Nepal whose photographs strictly maintain an uncomplicatedly colonial imagination of Nepal.

REI, the outdoors outfitter, runs four different treks in Nepal, two in the Khumbu region, one in Annapurna, and one in Langtang. REI sells high quality and typically

expensive outdoor recreation gear, sporting goods, and clothing, and their market is affluent westerners. These treks are \$3100 each, clearly pandering to the elite tier of Nepal's tourists. National Geographic runs a similar expedition to Everest base camp. The websites for these treks contain curated photo galleries—the pictures are, semiotically, purely tourist photographs, never betraying the exotic and authentic construction of the trekking regions. Not only do REI and National Geographic's treks propagate only these essentialist images, so do many other high-end trekking companies.⁶ REI and National Geographic's photographs were unique, though, in that they were captioned. These pictures have captions describing what is to be seen: below one picture, of a village hillside on which are 8 or 9 hotels and with a snowcapped mountain in the background, a caption reads "Travelers hike and camp in remote villages little changed over the years." This, as we saw in the previous chapter, is a fiction, playing into the enticing idea of "timelessness" in a tourist place. These villages, of course, have changed dramatically in the past few decades. This also teaches the viewer of the photographs a vocabulary for viewing similar pictures. When looking at a different photograph of a hotel-dotted hillside, the unwritten caption is known through association: this village has changed little over the years. This is a stark example of the process of these photographs creating and perpetuating a visual language.

While the exoticization of Nepal is very palpable in high-end trekking agencies, the gamut of trekking agencies utilizes this same symbology.⁷ This fact is visible through

⁶ These companies included Himalayan Eco Treks and Travel, KE Adventures, Exodus Travels, World Expeditions, Everest Treks New Zealand, and others.

⁷ I consider high-end agencies as tours that cost \$2000 and up. I distinguish between high-end and all other trekking agencies because high-end agencies are typically run outside of Nepal while those run from within Nepal are more reasonably priced.

both looking at multiple agency websites as well as through using Google's image search. Other, non high-end agencies employ essentialized images of Nepal on their individual websites, and these photographs are aggregated on Google. When I search "Trekking Nepal" on Google's image search, the results are strikingly similar. In the first 100 results, an overwhelming majority depict mountain landscapes devoid of human presence except for trekkers and their guides and/or porters. There are few human structures except for hotels, all mostly dwarfed by the mountains, or stupas and other sacred structures (and what is probably *the* central symbol of the Himalayas, besides the mountains themselves —prayer flags). It is important to note that in this search, almost all the pictures that show up first are posted by trekking companies, and clicking on the pictures can direct you to the companies' websites. The unanimity of these pictures is striking, especially so considering they are all shared by trekking agencies. In this realm of formal advertising of trekking, the visual language used seems to be repeated in almost facsimile.

Interestingly, when I search the same phrase with the option of only seeing results "labeled for noncommercial use," the results differ significantly. Rather than linking to trekking company websites, each picture links to either Flickr, Wikipedia, or other various picture sharing websites. The first 100 results are similarly of the dominant visual language of Nepal's trekking regions, but they are more varied than the first search. 21 of the photographs are of only nature, 7 are maps, only 9 are with only trekkers and trekking staff, and, again, the only signs of modernity are hotels. There are pictures of some women and children, and a few of elderly men. Compared to the first search, these pictures exemplify tourists or professional photographers' views of Nepal, which are

visibly different from but still symbolically similar to the photographs posted for the purpose of advertising.



Image 1: thelongestwayhome.com

From a blog post titled “How to prepare for a trek in Nepal,” this image is a fitting representation of a snapshot of the trekkers’ gaze.

Image 1 presents a typical snapshot of the trekkers’ gaze. It is from a travel blog website instead of a travel agency website, but the picture would regardless do well to meet the ends of a travel agency. There are three important signs in this photograph: the prayer flags streaking in front of the foregrounded village, the buildings of the village (most likely hotels, based on their appearance), and the snowcapped mountains in the

background. There is a glaring lack of people, or of any signs of modernity.⁸ The gaze in this photograph is directed over the village and up towards the mountains—a common view in many trekking photographs. The mountains, symbols of timelessness, immovability, and nature, combine with the prayer flags, symbols of ancient religion, spirituality, and exotic culture, to create a potent semiotic statement. These combinations abound in the photographs I analyzed, where the mountains and/or prayer flags assert a particular understanding to be “read,” namely that of an exoticized and natural place.

The Flickr photographs that show up on this filtered search are a small cross-section of the stores that Flickr holds. Flickr is one of the internet’s original picture sharing websites, where users are now able to upload as many as 500,000 photographs onto their account to tag, share, and otherwise use as they wish. This platform is rife with trekking photography, where tags like “Everest base camp” or “Nepal trekking” returned seemingly endless results. When I searched “Langtang,” the results, unsurprisingly, were mostly pictures of mountains, more than a few of which were foregrounded by prayer flags or Buddhist shrines. Many were of landscapes featuring villages structurally dominated by hotel architecture and visibly dwarfed by mountains. When I searched “Annapurna,” there were more mountain landscape-only pictures than in the Langtang search. Many pictures in here (and also elsewhere in my research) were of people but are titled “Gurung,” “Manang,” or “Annapurna,” where the people are named after the places and not given a life of their own. Any work or economic activity depicted is directly involved in the hospitality industry, with only a few exceptions of truckers or women

⁸ Even though the hotel’s aesthetic has developed through the tourist economy, which is a modern system, it is designed to look pre-modern. By signs of modernity I mean power lines, non-traditional dress, electronics, and other signs that would remove this village from a place of timelessness.

weaving (and those exceptions are possibly involved in tourist hospitality anyway).

Almost exclusively, the architecture depicted in the pictures shared on Flickr is either hotels or Buddhist sacred sites (stupas, monasteries, prayer wheels, and the ubiquitous prayer flags).

Flickr presents an exceptionally broad collection of trekking photographs, so not surprisingly, it also contains the most potent exceptions to the dominant portrayal of Nepal's trekking regions by Westerners. A Spanish trekker who—based on his Flickr account—considers himself a professional photographer shared about a dozen photos from his trek, all of which were pictures of lodge kitchens featuring people working, and mostly cooking; he did not post pictures of anything else from his trek (at least not on Flickr). While his framing of and choice of subject could be subject to this thesis' scrutiny, for now he represents a break from the trekkers' gaze. Another exception is a Welsh man's Flickr collection of photographs from his Annapurna trek. He trekked during the Monsoon season, so his gaze was directed forwards and down rather than up, towards the mountains (as they were shrouded in clouds). This was similar to my experience, where the search for photographable signs was relegated to the immediate landscape, or to human functions and material constructions. This man included, among other photographs, a rarely depicted scene—two women working in a rice field (Image 2). While this choice of representation, like the Spanish man's choices, can be seen as an expression of an exotic- and authenticity-seeking gaze (because both those women and the people in their kitchens have been doing what they are depicted as doing “for ages”), it is also a representation of economic life. Regarding the degree to which photographs



Image 2: Photograph from a Welsh trekker's Flickr account. What this photograph lacks in modern signs and temporality, it makes up for in depiction of economic activity. This is not a typical view from the trekkers' gaze, although it is still interpretable as reproductive of colonial imagination, as this could be a scene from yesterday or hundreds of years ago.

represent the trekking industry, these two examples are depicting an important and underrepresented facet of the industry: how trekkers get their food.⁹

Flickr represents an important node in the internet's realm of visual social media. Photographs uploaded on Flickr can be shared directly from Flickr onto the various big social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc). Flickr is used by amateurs, professionals, and private companies, all to promote themselves in different ways. As a founding member of the social media era, it set a baseline for image sharing from which others developed. It is, though, less active than Instagram or Facebook sharing because it is more of a place of storage. It has a smaller audience—most of the pictures of the site

⁹ These pictures are also rare for the reason that they mainly depict people, or if not, human constructions are the subject of the photograph. My original intention of this analysis was to see how the locals in the photographs were positioned, and in what activities or scenarios they were depicted. Overwhelmingly, however, trekking photographs did not include people, and if they did, they were either in the distant background or of the trekkers themselves.

had between only 30 to 60 views. What Flickr contributes to this analysis, then, is an impression, a picture so to speak, of trekking photography. These pictures' agency is minimized, so the medium occupies a dual power role of collecting symbolically powerful images yet holding on to and disseminating them to a lesser degree than most other internet media.

This is important to note because, regarding the discussion in the second chapter about social media's minimization in tourist studies literature, the theorists who did mention visual social media often referred to Flickr. Their argument was bolstered, then, by Flickr's inertness, its relatively small reach and lessened amount of sharing between user. But as we will see as this analysis departs from Flickr, the photographs on other media have much more digital agency, where photographs are shared and viewed at a much higher rate. The relationship between Flickr and other social media sites helps exemplify social media's muddy waters: advertising, professional, and amateur photographs are shared on all these media but are used in different ways depending on the medium; other social media sites grew out of or were influenced by Flickr, but now Flickr has been changing its format to keep up with the popularity of Facebook and Instagram; in other words, the boundaries that exist here are dynamic and permeable. The reason I am making these assertions is to show that while Flickr photographs are relatively "inert" in that medium, the representations that they portray are mobilized elsewhere.

That they are not mobilized, though, is important to note because Flickr does not "advertise" someone's social media life like Facebook and Instagram do. Rather than

saying “this is where I am” or “this is what I am doing,” Flickr photographs say “these are my pictures.” On the other hand, photographs shared on Facebook and Instagram are saying the former phrases. Sharing photographs on Instagram is understood as “instant” sharing (unless the photograph is given the hashtag “#latergram”). When a photograph is posted with the hashtag “#Langtang” or “#Everestbasecamp” or other trekking related hashtags, and the pictures represents these places in a dominant way, all of that instagram user’s followers can see that that is what that place looks like at that exact time. It is also assumed that the picture was taken by that instagram user, asserting that user’s presence in that place. As would be expected, when I searched for various hashtags related to trekking in Nepal, the vast majority were of picturesque mountains or parts of villages dwarfed by mountains, and sometimes apolitical and “timeless”-looking villagers. Additionally, many of the pictures were of the users themselves in these places. The only Instagram pictures that contested the dominant representations of these places were those posted by Nepali people, otherwise the colonial semiotic language and the trekkers’ gaze remains ironclad on this specific medium.

Facebook presents a similar but more complicated case. Analyzing Facebook is imperative because of its sheer influential and constitutive power as explained in the second chapter, but its search function is different from other websites because of its layers of user security. Therefore, analysis of Facebook requires an amount of speculation. Only a few of my Facebook “friends” have trekked in Nepal, so the photographs that they have posted are a limited source of data. However, based on their Facebook practices and the practices of most people on Facebook who travel to

exoticized places, it is safe to assume that many people who go trekking in Nepal will upload a select amount of photographs from their trek to their Facebook profiles. From those pictures, it is typical to make the most picturesque photos one's "profile picture" or "cover photo" (the photographs that are displayed on one's main Facebook page). These profile and cover pictures are the most visible of all the pictures shared on Facebook, and thus the most powerful. In the way that Facebook use requires users to "advertise" themselves, where they select what will be shared about their identities in order to garner likes, friends, and tags in posts, the profile and cover photos are the main advertisements of users' selves. The prominence of using tourist photographs as these advertising photos illuminates the propensity for these photographs to garner social capital. In this light, I have observed that photographs of Facebook users in exoticized places are more valuable than photographs of people in home places or places perceived as more ordinary.

Why is this important? Because this is a significant part of the contemporary iteration of the circle of advertising representation discussed early in chapter two. After photographs are taken in trekking regions, the impulse is to share them on Facebook where thousands of people will see them, which will teach these viewers the trekkers' gaze and direct them to channels through which they themselves can replicate that coveted mobile tourist identity by going to those places and taking similar pictures. This is a crucial contemporary cycle, one of which 1.2 billion people are a part. Due to the inherently varied nature of Facebook, this cycle is tenuous and inconsistent, but even when considered warts and all it still comes out as powerful. In these ways, where Instagram and Facebook show the possibility and reward for engaging in tourist

practices, they are indeed advertising that behavior. The enticement is strong, and also represents a further blurring of the internet's boundaries between formal, private advertising and personal activity on the internet.

This blur is also present between formal and private advertising, social media, and travel websites. It is blurred in the case of these websites because the rhetoric and image repertoire that travel websites employ are very similar to that used by trekking agency websites. The colonial visual imagination in Nepal's trekking regions is reflected with fidelity on effectively all the travel websites that I found that discussed trekking in Nepal: Backpacker, Lonely Planet, The Longest Way Home, Wanderlust, Be My Travel Muse, Indie Trekking, and Uncornered Market all represented the trekking regions in the same visual language as the example of REI's ads. Unlike trekking agencies, though, these websites have a wider social media presence, as they are media outlets instead of private companies. They have Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts that are followed as sources of knowledge and not purveyors of business; their websites are read as accounts of fact and experience. Their stories are not understood as enticements (although, of course, they are), but as authentic accounts of what these places are like. Bolstered by a broad history of guidebooks and travel writing in the West, these websites are particularly understood as sources of accurate representation. Yet, as I mentioned, they contain representations of Nepal's trekking regions congruent to formal trekking agency websites.

One website that contained some interesting exceptions was an interesting medium itself: the Matador Network. Self-described as an independent travel website producing quality travel journalism, this website contains thousands of articles of interest

to people who identify as “independent travelers,” which typically means those who would avoid trekking agency websites and mainstream travel websites like Lonely Planet. This website contains six picture essays, in photojournalistic style, of Nepal’s trekking regions: two in Langtang, one in the Everest region, and three in the Annapurna/Mustang region. The photojournalism aspect is interesting because it engages a qualitatively different gaze than the tourist gaze,¹⁰ but in each essay, these photojournalists were engaging in the same tourist practices as any other trekker, so their gazes still certainly constitute the trekkers’ gaze. They do, however, contain far more representations of economic life and the varied facets of the human trekking landscape than any other medium. Whereas most representations in all the previously described media mostly contain representations of either solely natural landscape, religious symbols among the mountain landscape, human symbols dwarfed by the landscape, pictures with only trekkers among the natural landscape, or pictures of children, women, and elderly people, these pictures transcended those trends. Of the 96 total pictures in these six essays, 22 represented typically disguised facets of the trekking industry (non-trekking porters, food production, and other facets of a diverse economic life), and only 12 were of a solely natural landscape. 37 of the 96 were still of exoticized human aspects of the mountain landscape (devoid of signs of economy or modernity), but that number is lower than what is typical, especially relating to the surprisingly low number of pictures of natural landscape and of only trekkers among the natural landscape (of which there were also 12).

¹⁰ Whereas the tourist gaze is constructed through the power inherent in tourism’s specific spatial engagement with leisure and difference, photojournalists gaze at places looking for stories and subjects. They subjectify a place more than a tourist would, which is why their photographs contain more varied subject matter.

These photographs are the products of a hybrid gaze, that of the photojournalist tourist, and as such produce these irregular collections of photographs. And this is the same way of seeing in which the Spanish and Welsh men on Flickr operate. Even though they are hybrid, they are still fully informed by and reproducers of the trekkers' gaze. It is significant that even though these photographers are shining a photographic light on a dark spot in the representation of Nepal's trekking regions, they are still interspersed with dominant symbolic representations.

Regardless of the truth or untruth represented in the Matador Network's photo essays, they have a powerful affective quality. Being produced by photojournalistic professionals, they are technically sound, but also, they represent a more varied, nuanced, and therefore more "real" Nepal, producing a combination that most effectively entices viewers. Going through them, I experienced a profound sense of enticement, of wanting to travel to these places. This is especially true after viewing the photographs of Langtang, as my experience did not visually live up to, so to speak, the spectacular photographs that I see on the internet (the weather on my trek was poor, so the mountains that I expected to see were shrouded in clouds). These photographs' power is palpable, regardless of the fidelity to the represented places' realities.

The trekking landscape offers a constant question, or invitation of exploration, to all who view its photography—because of the constant depiction of mountains and valleys, of pocked and undulating terrain, some of it is left unseen, hidden behind the pictured protruding earth. The same holds true with the prevalent representation of "mistiness" in these regions' representation. And trekking is formulated as an activity that walks across the terrain, ascending the mountains and visually trawling the landscape.

The stationary nature of photography combined with the mobile understanding of trekking creates a potent mix, where viewing representations of the landscape entices one to trek through it. These mobile tourists see the “culture-in-place”: the stupas, prayer flags, hotels, and especially the people spiritually, ethnically, and economically tied to their land. The environment is depicted as the master over the trekking regions’ human populations—the people and their structures are overwhelmingly represented as existing among humungous mountains, determining their lives. And this is true—the mountain environment *does* dictate these peoples’ lives. But so does the trekking industry. So does the Nepali state and its militarization of the national park landscape. So does the international economic system, draining these regions of their young men who go to work in Kathmandu or as migrant workers in other countries. None of this, except the first condition, is known through the dominant representations of these places. To address the question of the degree to which the conditions described in the previous chapter are disguised through the trekkers’ gaze, the response is “significantly.”

The trekkers’ gaze is fixed on strings of prayer flags against a rugged and environmentally exotic landscape; on remote and aesthetically pleasing villages miniaturized by the great Himalayas; on the pre-modern ways of living present in these places; on themselves and their Nepali guides, symbols of the familiar and mobile west, sharply juxtaposed against a comparatively drastically different place; and on the mountains themselves. While there are exceptions in the data I have collected, this is undoubtedly the constituency of the trekkers’ gaze. In images, and therefore in imaginations, this is what Nepal looks like to the West. This resolute assessment, however, is not a conclusion. The next and concluding chapter presents a further

engagement with these data and this analysis, including reconsiderations, caveats, and challenges to the arguments and analyses thus far made and maintained.

Chapter 5

Gazing in Place: Negotiating the Problematics of Photography

This thesis has been concerned with the disconnect between representation and reality in Nepal's trekking regions. Even though trekking regions contain visible signs of economic and political life, of modernity, and of repression, trekking photographs more than typically depict scenes and sets of symbols that communicate exoticness, timelessness, and distance. Besides a handful of Flickr users and Matador Network contributors, visual representations of trekking regions are endlessly quoted, and the broad picture of what trekking photography looks like is overwhelmingly homogenous. This broad picture contains mountains, prayer flags, green valleys, religious and ancient-looking architecture, "locals," and trekkers themselves. This picture does not contain military bases, construction work, or other signs that break from trekking places' exotic representation. Even though it is abundantly true that trekking regions "as tourist site[s]" are "arenas of social interactions, and not just objects of the tourist gaze," one would never know this from looking at a given trekking photograph.

Lim considers expression of the visual imagination to be coming from a place of "reverie." In a state of reverie, Lim explains, "the spectator becomes a voyeur who feels a partial escape from temporal flux, while at the same time attributes qualities of completion, stability and innocence to the landscape, hence lifting it out of the vicissitudes of history" (Lim 2008 [2], 389). A state of reverie is crucial for trekking tourism; as Lim argues, "the construction of the Langtang Valley by the media as a site of cultural tourism transforms its sheer physicality into an aestheticised spectacle fit for tourist consumption" (Lim 2008 [2], 390). He continues his application of reverie to the

Langtang region, saying that being lifted “out of the temporal flux under a tourist gaze has the effect of transforming its inhabitants into a timeless Other, and concealing fractures...of everyday life” (ibid). Reverie, then, is a necessary condition of the powerful process of reproduction of colonial imagination through photographic representation. The feeling of reverie accounts for the possibility of the tourist gaze, describing the metaphysical *feeling* of gazing, or of regarding a landscape aesthetically and as a removed observer. Photographers in trekking regions seem to be channeling this reverie into their photographs, and in so doing they communicate this metaphysical state of the gaze.

This becomes complicated when you consider that a Western trekker encounters sites and experiences on their trek that contradict the dominant representations of trekking regions; in this way, Lim realizes that reverie and the tourist’s gaze do not cover the whole of the trekking experience. Responding to the trekker’s state of reverie, Lim describes what he terms the feeling of “emplacement”: “the re-situating of the subject ‘in a historically and existentially specific condition’—that is, the subject metaphorically being brought down to earth from the Olympian height” of reverie (Lim 2008 [2], 390). This is an important and powerful experience for a trekker, where a “a representational discrepancy, a symbol out of place” reveals “the farce of the represented pretensions constructed under the tourist gaze” (ibid). Emplacement is instilled, for example, when a trekker sees a police officer disciplining a villager, when lodge owners try to solicit a trekker to stay in one lodge over another, or when Khumbu trekkers see the piles of trash generated by trekkers past. Generally, it occurs “when the crucial element of *difference*

that is inherent in the construction of the tourist gaze is replaced by *convergence*, the awareness that the spectator and the spectacle are both...subjected to the cares and pressures of everyday living” (ibid). Difference—the difference upon which tourism and tourist photography is predicated—is crucially disrupted here.

Emplacement represents a significant moment of the shattering (or at least questioning) of place myths, where a trekker is offered the possibility of having a revelation about the reality of a trekking place. The trouble lies, though, in what we have seen as the product of trekking: even though trekkers may and, according to Lim, often do experience the feeling of emplacement, their photographs ubiquitously reflect a state of reverie. Lim suggests that when “the general type with which the Langtang people were conceived [is] destabilized,” trekkers will “carry away with them when they leave...a more nuanced image or type” (Lim 2008 [2], 389). If this is indeed the case, then it would follow that visual representation of Langtang and its people would be “more nuanced.” This, however, is not the case. Trekkers’ images reflect general types and non-nuanced representations. How does this happen? Why isn’t the state of emplacement, of “convergence,” strong enough to redirect the trekkers’ gaze?

Urry and Larsen provide the beginnings of an answer to this question. In chapter two, we saw that representations of tourist places are not only gazed upon, but are learned and internalized. These authors suggest that a tourist learns not only *at what* to gaze but *how* to gaze, and in so doing a tourist can gaze at a tourist place without actually seeing it. In their exact words,

What people ‘gaze upon’ are ideal representations of the view in question which they internalize from various mobile representations. And even when they cannot

in fact ‘see’ the natural wonder in question, they can still sense it, see it in their mind. And even when the object fails to live up to its representation, it is the latter which will stay in people’s minds, as what they have really ‘seen’ (Urry and Larsen 101).

Even if a trekker *sees* piles of trash or military bases or a local’s economic-mindedness, they are still gazing upon trekking regions through a preconditioned lens. The object, in this case the trekking region, contains “representational discrepancies,” failing to “live up to its representation,” yet these places’ representations are what live on through trekking photography. The tourist gaze itself is never directed towards scenes of emplacement; only in a break from the tourist gaze can emplacement be seen—even if the tourist gaze is redirected, it is still engaged in the powerful looking that constitutes the gaze itself. The question presents itself, then, of whether it is possible for a tourist to break from the tourist gaze?

The importance of this question cannot be minimized. Its answer, I think, is both yes and no. The answer is no because, in short, if someone is a Western tourist, then their gazing (looking + power) is inherently imbued with their Western epistemologies, their categories and boundaries of the world understood through being raised in a Western place and society. They, as tourists, are part of the circulation of photographic representation, and in their knowledges and practices they inevitably reinscribe colonial spatial organization. The answer is yes because tourism as a category is subject to disintegration. “Trekking” is a type of tourism, but depending on a trekker’s race, nationality, gender, class, religion, etc., their experience is ultimately different from any other given trekker. Trekkers each experience power in different ways, and although they are navigating the power-imbued industry that is trekking in Nepal, they can choose to

undermine that power through how they engage spatially. They can choose to believe the signs and narratives that they have learned and internalized, or they can question and learn in the place in which they are practicing tourism.

From this notion stems Lim's defense of his theory of emplacement, responding to what he perceives as the totality of Urry's tourist gaze. "While Urry's concept of the 'tourist gaze' is a useful tool for understanding tourism practice," Lim contends, "we must guard against over-visualization of tourism analysis by paying attention to what Coleman and Crang call the performativity of tourism, that is, the concrete interactions between tourists and host communities that consist of a constant negotiation of spatial meanings" (Lim 2008 [2], 378). Since tourism is indeed performative and "concrete" and not just a practice of gazing, the fidelity of the visual products of trekking to the concrete experiences of trekking becomes untenable. For this reason, it is possible to conceive of a break in the tourist gaze. The conundrum arises, though, when one considers that these concrete interactions, these negotiations of spatial meanings, are rarely if ever seen through photographic representation of trekking regions. Even if a trekker's actions do not align with the trekking industry's prescribed spatial relations, their gaze certainly does.

Robinson and Picard help us understand this disjuncture—one that is again between experience/reality and representation. They address one of the more central issues this thesis has thus far ignored: even if I can make an ironclad argument about the power that trekking photography has in the perpetuation of a colonial spatial arrangement in Nepal's trekking regions, what about the trekkers taking the photographs? They

certainly do not see their acts as tying to a global system of power relationships and to local inequality; they do not understand their photographs as anything close to violent. Robinson and Picard assert that, “While this ‘knowledge/power’ relationship which Urry identifies as being a feature of tourist photography could be ascribed *post hoc* as being instrumental in, for instance, perpetuating colonialist relations, it would not seem to be consciously exercised by the tourists themselves” (Robinson & Picard 6). A tourist’s power “is arguably exercised not in any knowingly exploitative way but as a function of normative human curiosity” (Robinson & Picard 19). While ignorance is no excuse for oppressive, or at least socially questionable, behavior, Robinson and Picard’s claims are significant. If a trekker does not understand their role in the circulation of photographic representation, then no crisis will occur for them when they experience feelings of emplacement yet continue to take pictures from a state of reverie.

This possibility leads me to a potential indictment: that trekking photography, the practice and medium itself, is problematic. The reality of trekking regions, although hinted at by visible signs, cannot be visualized in a picture. The history of these places that subverts the narratives that lead to their exploitation is one that is wholly processual, one to which photography does violence. These regions are historically marked by movement, by trade and development. A central violence that the trekking industry committed on the communities in these regions was putting them in place, reducing their mobility. Concomitantly, highly mobile tourists are allowed to walk through a land constructed as still and timeless (Lim 2008 [1], 86). And this construction was only possible through tying the people of trekking regions to their land, entrenching an

economic system that forces people who want to avoid poverty into the trekking industry. The industry is then legitimated and perpetuated, and the power relationships that serve that industry are bolstered. Lodge owners become the central figures in local politics, given a voice in the regions' development and often lending money to less wealthy villagers (Lim 2007, 730); national park rules are imposed and enforced, limiting agriculture and other traditional and productive activity; lodges and tourist amenities are continually constructed, rather than structures that would keep money and resources within the region.

Photography can never do representational justice to these issues, to these histories and realities. Photography, in this way, not only gives a timeless quality to these places, but also a space-less quality. When a picture shows a place, framing it and claiming to represent it, that place is denied its fair situation in space. Just as trekking regions are represented by Westerners as outside of time, they are also represented as outside of space: these regions are represented as *not* subject to the relationships, processes, and histories that dictate arrangements of people and landscapes. They are perceived as not national parks imposed on ethnic communities, nor as parts of an impoverished and peripheral nation, nor as places against which Westerners define themselves by understanding as different. Photography upholds *this* reality of place, a place that would not exist without the photographs that constitute it.

But there is an issue here in maintaining that photography is partially but necessarily to blame; that photography is a problematic barrier to an imaginative re-situation of Nepal's trekking regions in space-time. As long as these regions are tourist

places, tourists going there will always take pictures. Even though tourism is indeed embodied and sensuous, and some tourists prefer not to take photographs, tourism is first and foremost a visual activity. Paired with the currency with which social media has imbued pictures, trekking regions will conceivably always be represented by tourist's photographs. This insight, however, does not leave this author walking away with his tail between his legs. Like many practices and technologies that I and billions of others engage with, photography is problematic, but we must live with the problematic. So how do we do that?

This question is weighty and important in that it is also the question of how to subvert a 200+ year legacy of colonial imagination etched into the very means through which Westerners understand and relate to the world. And there is, of course, no single answer to this question. One place to start, though, is with Delfin's view of tourist spaces: they are "palimpsests, with layers of meaning to negotiate and contribute to" (Delfin 141). This frames any possible solutions or adjustments to trekking tourism practices—rather than trying to peel back layers of structure and narrative that have contributed to the construction of trekking places, such as photography's centrality or the state's material presence, the place must be engaged with as is. Any change in these regions will bear the marks, the signs, and the invisible histories of the past from which the present departs and by which it is informed. As a Westerner, someone who was himself a trekker, I do not want to even try to suggest a more just or equitable strategy for the communities in these regions. To gain a perspective on the potentially positive futures of Nepal's mountain regions, read SK Nepal et al.'s *Great Himalaya* or Francis Khek Gee Lim's

Imagining the Good Life, for their authority on in-country and in-region solutions far surpasses mine. What I can offer is suggestions to the trekker, to the gazer, to the potential consumer of Nepal's trekking regions and to those who will gaze at the representations of these regions.

As we have seen, the dominant representations of trekking regions are informed by a certain geographical knowledge, one tied to "a politics of exploitation" (Harvey 233). We can engage with photography's problematic by taking pictures in the context of a different geographical knowledge. Geographical knowledges, to Harvey, "have the largely unrealized *potentiality* to...seek universal understandings based on mutual respect and concern, and to articulate firmer bases for human cooperation in a world marked by strong geographical differences" (Harvey 232). Trekkers and locals in trekking communities have the *potential* to engage geographical knowledges that foster practices "tied to principles of mutual respect and advantage" (ibid). For trekkers, this means understanding these regions and the people in these communities as historical and political, or, in other words, as human as a trekker is. In practice, a trekker must actively consider and sustain moments of emplacement, engaging with moments of convergence. Rather than writing off the feeling of emplacement as incongruous to what they have learned they should be experiencing, a trekker must understand representational discrepancies as central to the experience of trekking places. This would translate to photographs that, to the extent to which they can diminish their own misrepresentative power, do their best to subvert representational myths. Image 3 is a photograph that I took on my trek, one that represents a rarely gazed-upon scene. These young men are porters,

and they are the subjects; the camera's gaze is pointed up towards them, and there is only a dark kitchen background mostly devoid of signs of difference (as opposed to mountains or prayer flags). The subject, in this framing, is not of smiling locals, artifacts of an apolitical and ahistorical culture, but of locals smiling despite their marginalized social positions and laborious employment. When taking photographs, a good method for a trekker might be to ask a local (assuming the language barrier is navigable) the significance of the scene at which the trekker's camera is pointed. "What is the history of this village?" "What is the name of that mountain?" "How old is this hotel?" These questions will not deflate the power relations bolstering the trekking industry, nor will they overpower the tourist gaze. They do, however, open up a conversation between the trekker and local community members. This gesture of "mutual respect" is simple, but it is a first step towards practically addressing the concerns of this thesis. Which is to say, it is a first step towards draining the colonial vitality of the powerful circulation of photographic representation.



Image 3: Four porters in a lodge kitchen in the village of Lama Hotel. Their job is to haul propane and other goods up and down the Langtang trail in service of the area's lodges. They were stopping in the lodge in which I was staying for a quick meal and a moment of dry warmth. Their clothing (as well as the proprietor's head scarf in the background) represent a disjuncture in the narrative of this region—this picture, I hope, helps place these people and this region in time and space.

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