



## HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 37 | Number 1

Article 10

June 2017

# Of "Tourist" Places: The Cultural Politics of Narrating Space in Thamel

Benjamin Linder

*University of Illinois at Chicago*, [blinde2@uic.edu](mailto:blinde2@uic.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

### Recommended Citation

Linder, Benjamin (2017) "Of "Tourist" Places: The Cultural Politics of Narrating Space in Thamel," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/10>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized



---

# Of "Tourist" Places: The Cultural Politics of Narrating Space in Thamel

## **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to thank the Fulbright Program for funding this research. He is also thankful to Andrew Nelson for initiating the conference panel that led to this special issue, and to Mark Liechty for his continued support of this research project. Furthermore, the author is grateful to Heather Hindman, Bryony Whitmarsh, Andrew Nelson, and the anonymous peer reviewers for strengthening this article with their extensive comments on earlier drafts. Nevertheless, the author is solely responsible for any remaining shortcomings and/or errors.

# Of “Tourist” Places: The Cultural Politics of Narrating Space in Thamel

Benjamin Linder

Thamel—a bustling neighborhood of restaurants, shops, bars, dance clubs, street vendors, and hotels in Kathmandu, Nepal—is overwhelmingly portrayed as a ‘tourist place’ by Nepalis and foreigners alike. Despite this widespread reputation, many user-groups assign divergent and contradictory meanings to the space, and these cannot be so easily reduced to the machinations of foreign tourism. This article critically considers this common trope that relegates Thamel to a ‘foreign’ status within Kathmandu’s cultural landscape. After reviewing the history of Thamel, the article details the various modes of reiteration through which the ‘tourist place’ characterization finds continued articulation. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015-2016, it then offers contrary evidence to undermine the assertion that tourism represents the most salient aspect for understanding contemporary Thamel. It argues that prevailing narratives of the

space eclipse other modes of meaning-making, thereby impoverishing scholarly understandings and simultaneously obscuring the ongoing contestations over Thamel’s cultural significance. In so doing, the article highlights the problematic cultural politics of continually positioning ‘tourism’ as Thamel’s sole (or central) referent. A discussion of Nepali cosmopolitan youth highlights the very real affective significance that Thamel holds for this particular user-group. Furthermore, it illustrates the implicit delegitimizing of youth experiences that occurs through reiterations of the ‘tourist place’ trope. The article concludes with a broader discussion of the theoretical, conceptual, and political stakes involved in critically engaging with attempts to fix spatial meaning in a neighborhood like Thamel.

**Keywords:** cities, space/place, tourism, cosmopolitanism, Kathmandu.



Figure 1. Thamel's central intersection (Narsingh Chowk) at night.

(Linder, 2016)

“This endlessly fascinating, sometimes infuriating, city is well worth a week of your time, but it’s easy to spend too much time stuck in touristy Thamel. Enjoy the internet cafes, the espresso and the lemon cheesecake, but make sure you also get out into the ‘real Nepal’ before your time runs out.”

–*Lonely Planet Nepal* (Bindloss, Holden, and Mayhew 2009: 113)

“I don’t think fucking Lonely Planet should tackle shit about real Nepal or not. What the fuck do they know?”

–Bishal, 33-year-old Nepali male

## Introduction

In the early 1970s, Thamel was a peripheral backwater on the northern edge of old Kathmandu, a rural bamboo-forested area dotted with scattered temples, Newar homes, and Rana palaces. A mere forty years later, the neighborhood has transformed into a strikingly cosmopolitan enclave of trekking agencies, guesthouses, hash-mongering streetwalkers, live music, curio shops, and dance clubs. It has become the center of Nepal’s tourism industry, though most tourists only spend a couple of days in the neighborhood before moving elsewhere. However, while transnational tourism was integral for Thamel’s historical development, the space has quite different meanings and affective associations for many Nepalis. Despite these Nepali experiences and their importance for the economic and social maintenance of the

neighborhood, Thamel retains its reputation as merely a ‘tourist place.’ This common characterization of the space both obscures a variety of other narratives and simultaneously has a variety of experiential impacts on differently situated Nepalis.

This article discusses the persistent ‘tourist place’ trope, which is reproduced among older Nepalis, foreign scholars, and tourists alike. Such characterizations relegate Thamel to the status of a ‘foreign’ area in Kathmandu and simultaneously shift attention away from alternative imaginaries that tell a different story—namely, a story in which ‘foreign’ forces (especially tourists) do not play the defining role, but instead affords more cultural agency to urban Nepali youth. Drawing on my ongoing ethnographic research, this article critically examines the ‘tourist place’ narrative to highlight its shortcomings, omissions, and active obfuscations. A more holistic understanding of Thamel must be able to accommodate and grapple with the way in which Thamel, as both physical and semiotic space, has a variety of other meanings. The first step in this process (and the aim of this article) is to carve out a conceptual space in which such a holistic understanding might take shape.

Cultural and critical geographers have long considered the power dynamics inherent in assigning overarching meanings to space. From Henri Lefebvre’s ‘conceived space’ (1991) to de Certeau’s ‘voyeur city’ (1984), defining and controlling dominant spatialities exercises, reinforces, and maintains various registers of power (Soja 1989; Foucault 1986, 1995). The following discussion utilizes the distinction between

'space' and 'place' to highlight contestations over the meaning of Thamel. Contrasted to the physical materiality of space, 'place' represents all of the subjective meanings—experiences, memories, reputations, ambitions, etc.—that get assigned to particular spaces. Geographers employing a more political-economic approach have also noted the way in which 'place' gets (re)produced through its relations with other places and other geographic scales (e.g., Massey 1994). For the purposes at hand, then, place is "space invested with meaning in the context of power" (Cresswell 2004: 12). Place implies a subject within a socio-cultural context, and it further implies that differently situated subjects will invest different meanings—or different *places*—into a single space.

The space/place distinction partially explains the title of this article: the 'space' of Thamel (i.e. its material contours) acquires the signification of 'place,' in part, through the narrations users ascribe to it. The 'tourist place' trope defines Thamel exclusively (or primarily) through its relation to tourists/tourism. In so doing, it obscures the contestations over Thamel's significance and simultaneously masks the cultural politics involved in reiterating the trope itself. By 'cultural politics,' I refer to the way in which narrations of Thamel as a 'tourist place' implicitly demarcate the boundaries of 'authentic' Nepali culture, policing its borders and effectively delegitimizing alternative Nepali life-worlds. While Liechty (1996, 2010) has noted that Thamel's meanings are multiple and contested, this article specifically discusses the way in which one imaginary (the 'tourist place') has come to dominate and eclipse all others, which are (at least) as salient for understanding the space.

Before proceeding, it should be clearly stated that this article is not arguing that tourism is insignificant in Thamel's development and contemporary cultural dynamics. Thamel is a tourist place. However, it is also (or moreso) a Newar place, a Nepali youth sub-cultural place, a business/investment place, an historical place, a criminal place, a political place, a liberating place, a morally suspect place, and so much more. My argument is two-fold. First, the undeniable importance of tourism for the neighborhood has steadily diminished since the late 1990s, and it is highly questionable whether tourism represents the most salient facet of contemporary Thamel. Without denying the importance of tourism, I suggest that tourism ought not be the central referent any longer. In addition to highlighting Thamel's cultural contestations, Nepali cosmopolitan youth have at least as much influence as tourists in the (re)production of the neighborhood. Second, there are trenchant cultural politics in assigning meanings to space, and the 'Thamel as tourist place' trope—reiterated among Nepalis and foreigners alike—deserves critical attention for all that it reifies and

obscures. Rather than attempting to theorize what Thamel 'really' is, this article will focus primarily on the dominant characterization itself, its conceptual shortcomings, and the cultural politics embedded within it. After sketching the historical development of Thamel, I then demonstrate the way in which the 'tourist place' narration gets reproduced by various user-groups. This section is followed by evidence to undermine the assumptions of such characterizations. The article then turns briefly to the Nepali cosmopolitan youth who come to Thamel. This youth sub-culture will be theorized more comprehensively in future publications, but it is relevant here insofar as it highlights the cultural politics of assigning a singular meaning to Thamel. By way of conclusion, this article will consider the theoretical and conceptual stakes involved in undermining this widespread 'tourist place' trope.

### The Development of Thamel

Sarita is a Nepali woman, approximately 55 years old, who grew up in Chhetrapati, a now-bustling neighborhood adjacent to Thamel on the southwest side. She recalls being able to see the Himalayas from her street when she was a child, a phenomenon nearly unimaginable in modern Chhetrapati due to the congested development of high buildings and Kathmandu's ever-thickening layer of pollution obstructing the view. In the early 1970s, her youth scout troop used to meet in Lainchaur, north of Thamel. When the scout meetings concluded at 8:00 in the evening, her mother gave her specific instructions to avoid the direct route home back to Chhetrapati. Heeding this, the young Sarita would walk southeast to Narayanhiti Palace, south to Rani Pokhari, back west to Asan, and finally northwest home to Chhetrapati. If one traces this route on a map, it becomes clear that the intention was to avoid present-day greater Thamel. Asked why she needed to take such a circuitous route, she replied, "Because we heard that ghosts and murderers came there." Put simply, not much existed in Thamel. As the founder of Kathmandu Guest House wrote, "Thamel was, in those days, a rustic and rural locality, only sparsely dotted with houses that stood awkwardly in the vast emptiness" (Sakya 2009: 72).

What happened? How did this sleepy, haunted backwater transform so dramatically in a mere 30-40 years? Liechty (1996, 2005a, 2010, 2017) offers a variety of related answers to this question. The first lay in the demise of Jhochhen/Freak Street, the hippie tourist enclave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. This collapse was due largely to a general global backlash against hippie culture, Nepal's growing (and unwanted) reputation as a haven for dropped-out druggies, and the increasing realization that the hippie-tourist

demographic did not spend sufficient money to make it a development priority in Kathmandu. This last point relates to the second answer. The economic recession of the early 1970s led to a significant contraction of global tourism, and the shifting geo-politics of the Cold War undermined Nepal's leverage in its strategic bargaining for foreign aid. Furthermore, the 1970s also witnessed a growing awareness of, and openness to, the development of mid-market tourism—a demographic somewhere between the low-end hippies of Freak Street and the high-end tourists of Kathmandu's few luxury hotels. After King Mahendra's death, the newly crowned King Birendra took a more proactive stance toward tourism development. To this end, the German consultancy's 'Tourism Master Plan' called for more trekking and adventure tourism. Meanwhile, improved logistics and transport infrastructure finally enabled high-on-money, low-on-time tourists (the opposite of hippies) to visit Nepal. As Liechty (2005a, 2017) notes, this new breed of visitor demanded a new spatialization of tourism in Kathmandu. It was in this context that Freak Street gave way to Thamel.

This leads to a related question: why did this new breed of tourism spatialize in Thamel in particular? The answer is a mixture of happenstance, local business entrepreneurship, and geography—or, according to Liechty (2017), “space” and “capital.” As Morimoto notes, “In order to examine how Thamel has been developed, it is important to focus on local entrepreneurs who have to make business opportunities mainly by themselves” (2007: 352). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Karna Sakya transformed his family home, formerly a Rana palace in sparsely populated Thamel, into the now-renowned Kathmandu Guest House (Sakya 2009). By offering an affordable option with a Western standard not found in the dingy lodgings of Freak Street, Sakya consciously threw his lot in with the emerging mid-level tourist market. Initially frequented by Peace Corps volunteers, the hotel slowly caught on to become the last stop of overland bus tours from London to Kathmandu. More and more foreigners came, and a commercial enclave of restaurants, bakeries, curio shops, and guesthouses developed in Thamel. Still, by the end of the 1970s, only a handful of hotels existed in the area (Morimoto 2007).

As mass tourism into Nepal increased through the 1980s,<sup>1</sup> the commercial zone expanded. These forces created new business opportunities for Nepalis, which they seized. As a trekking guide in Thamel told me,

Thamel people were very good, very clever, very smart. They thought that if they could develop Thamel then more people would come to stay. They

made available everything that tourists needed, so they started coming and Thamel began to develop.

The number of hotels in Thamel grew dramatically during this decade, a trend that continued into the 1990s (Morimoto 2007: 368).

Had Karna Sakya's family owned a house elsewhere in the city, the equivalent of 'Thamel' might have emerged elsewhere. However, Thamel did have several distinct geographical advantages. It was already serviced by roads and electrical infrastructure, due largely to the presence of Rana palaces (Morimoto 2007). Beyond this, workers and business operators in Thamel often cite the area's centrality relative to various tourist sites, from Boudha, Pashupati, Swayambhu, and Narayanhiti Palace to logistically important sites like the embassies of Lazimpat and Maharajgunj. Furthermore, its very underdevelopment offered ample room for expansion, as subsequent decades of sprawl have demonstrated. All of this, coupled with relatively cheap land values through the 1980s, dovetailed to produce a site ideally suited to spatially absorb the emerging trekking tourism market. Given this history, it is reasonable and justifiable to characterize the historical development of Thamel in terms of tourism.

Nevertheless, places are not bounded, static objects (Massey 1994; Cresswell 2004), and a space's physical and semiotic landscape shifts along with its demographic, political, social, and cultural context. Places are always being (re-)made by their various users (de Certeau 1984; Soja 1989; Lefebvre 1991). By the late 1990s, an incipient shift had already begun to take hold in the neighborhood. First, there was a generation coming of age in Kathmandu's emergent consumer middle class (Liechty 2003). Second, the political upheavals of 1990 (see Hutt 1994) had relaxed earlier media repression, exposing young Nepalis to new media influences (Onta 2006; Liechty 2010). Thamel was the site of Kathmandu's live music scene and early internet cafes, which attracted this young group interested in foreign pop culture. Third, the royal massacre (2001) caused a major downturn in tourist arrivals,<sup>2</sup> and the Maoist war (1996-2006) spurred a massive internal migration from the countryside to Kathmandu. In light of these forces, many Thamel businesses began catering more and more to Nepali consumers (see also Morimoto 2015).

As the case of Thamel demonstrates, the historical emergence of a place, and the related social significations that were assigned to it by actors in a particular historical moment, do not necessarily hold four decades later. Whatever accuracy the 'tourist place' trope had previously, it now requires renewed critical engagement. Tourism is one

among many possible narrations, and it is an increasingly peripheral part of the story.

### The Narrative Construction of Thamel as a 'Tourist Place'

Before challenging the characterization that relegates Thamel to foreign status, one must first understand the way in which such thinking gets (re)produced among tourists, scholars, and Nepalis alike.<sup>3</sup> This section will examine each of these groups in turn, taking examples gleaned from interviews, academic articles, personal experience/observation, and popular touristic media.

One of the easiest ways to understand how foreign tourists experience Thamel is to look at the media that they consume (and produce). The value of such sources is two-fold: on the one hand, it offers a first-hand account of one's travel experience, and on the other it plays a significant role in producing imaginaries of place before and during a visit (Lew 1991; Mansfeld 1992; McGregor 2000; Siegenthaler 2002; Nishimura, Waryszak, and King 2006; Zillinger 2006; Sorensen 2013). In another report, a colleague and I conducted an analysis of Thamel's representation in popular touristic media, which included everything from guidebooks to blog posts, personal memoirs to travel websites (Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2014). In that article, we identified three common themes that pervaded representations of the neighborhood: (1) Thamel as inauthentic, (2) Thamel as tourist haven, and (3) Thamel as liminal space.

In general, these sources view Thamel as a space for tourists. Even when portrayed positively, these sources tend to dichotomize Kathmandu (and Nepal). There is the 'real,' 'authentic' Nepal of tourists' media-infused imaginaries, and then there is Thamel. Conor Brennan's bestselling memoir *Little Princes* does this explicitly:

There are really two Kathmandus: the district of Thamel and the rest. In the general madness of Nepal's capital, Thamel is a six-block embassy compound for those who want to drink beer and eat pizza and meat that they pretend is beef but is almost certainly yak or water buffalo. Backpackers and climbers set up camp here before touring the local temples or hiking into the mountains for a trek or white-water rafting. It is safe and comfortable, with the only real danger being that the street vendors may well drive you to lunacy. It was like the Nepal that you might find at Epcot Center at Disney World. (Grennan 2011: 8)

Thamel is a place "to set up camp" before viewing the "local" temples. Meanwhile, the appeal to Disney's Epcot

Center elicits connotations of the shallowest sort of tourism rife with "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1976) and no real "local" culture.

While my review of these sources was not exhaustive, I have found only one mention of Nepali presence in Thamel that is not presented as a mere byproduct of international tourism. This comes in the *Kathmandu Valley Guide Book*, which includes only one sentence indicating that Thamel might not only be about tourism: "Thamel is also a favorite spot for many Kathmandu youths, who come here to enjoy live music at local restaurants and bars" (Dhoju 2013: 44). It is notable that this guidebook was written recently by a resident of Nepal and published by a Nepali press.

Tourists themselves frequently express a general sense—often in a dissatisfied way—that Thamel is 'touristy.' In the endless search for authentic experiences among backpackers and tourists, spending too much time in Thamel renders one less impressive in the eyes of backpacker peers. During the peak tourist season of 2015, as foreigners started showing up in Thamel, I witnessed a middle-aged European man, dressed like a *saddhu* (holy man), eating a falafel wrap at a popular stand in Thamel. As he ate, he turned to the Nepali working at the falafel counter, who was dressed in blue jeans and a screen-printed T-shirt, and asked, "Where can I find real yak cheese? Like, *real* yak cheese?" One could spend pages unpacking this question, but two things stand out in particular. First, nearly all of the grocery stores in Thamel, two of which were within 30 meters of the falafel stand, sell yak cheese. Second, the phrasing of the question implies that the man knew yak cheese was available in the grocery stores, but it simply was not real enough. On the one hand, it is baffling to guess what "real" yak cheese meant to this man. On the other, it is irrelevant, as the exchange ultimately was not about cheese at all. Instead, the man was showcasing his (mis)perceived 'insider' knowledge. In other words, even if he did not know where to get "real" yak cheese, he was at least hip to the fact that touristy Thamel does not offer it—which, of course, it does.

Beyond tourists, Nepalis themselves frequently narrate Thamel as a 'tourist place.' This is most common among older Nepalis, but even younger Nepalis who frequent Thamel as consumers and/or workers reiterate it. Towards the end of all interviews, I read a quote from the *Lonely Planet* guide, excerpted above as the epigraph to this article, and asked them to respond. The majority agreed that Thamel is not the 'real' Nepal, though this was often followed by more complicated explanations. One bartender in Thamel, when he found out that I lived in Chhetrapati, said, "That's good. It's half Thamel, half local place." Many say that Nepal is in the

villages or mountains, which excludes Kathmandu as a part of the 'real' Nepal. When asked what non-tourist things exist in Thamel, a trekking guide who works in the neighborhood replied, "I don't think there is anything." A barista at a well-known coffee shop responded similarly. When pressed to address the fact that many Nepalis also come to Thamel, he said, "Yeah, but this is mostly a tourist place." Situations like this happen frequently in my research. Nepalis will speak at length of the Nepali youth coming to Thamel for all sorts of things (both licit and illicit), but many retain the perspective that Thamel is still fundamentally a 'tourist neighborhood.'<sup>4</sup>

This perspective also finds warm reception among scholars, though it manifests in more subtle ways. In his study of street children in Thamel, the anthropologist Jean-Christophe Ryckmans describes Thamel as follows:

Noises, smells of spices, crowds, street vendors, street musicians, no one is left to rest in Thamel. It either captivates or irritates, and *even if it doesn't represent Nepal*, it feels compulsory to transit through it for those who want to enter the country. (Ryckmans 2012: 235, emphasis added)

He posits that Thamel, as a place of cultural interaction, "doesn't carry any value nor local culture" (ibid.: 240). Because so little is published by foreign scholars about Thamel, much of this attitude remains implicit. It even manifests in their reactions to my research agenda. The revelation of the field site for my research is met by either incomprehension or good-natured laughter, often the former followed by the latter. One night, after a conference in Kathmandu, two colleagues and I decided to eat together in Thamel. As the three of us walked to dinner, one of the colleagues explained that another scholar had asked him about his plans for the night. "I told him that I was going to an anthropologist's field site for dinner. He seemed impressed... until he found out where your field site was." None of this is malicious or dismissive of my research. In fact, I often speak of Thamel this way in everyday conversations, referring to it as a "tourist hub" or "tourist neighborhood." Nevertheless, even my own usage of these terms illuminates the entrenchment of the 'tourist place' trope.

Several times, scholars assume instead that the most important aspect of Thamel, from an anthropological perspective, lay with the traditional Newars of the area. They offer knowledge about Bhagwan Bahal (the old Buddhist temple on the northeast end of Thamel) and the Pradhans who control the *guthi* (religious land trust). In these situations, they seem to be giving me the benefit of the doubt. Yet the proverbial 'doubt' is that I must be interested not in Thamel per se, but rather in 'traditional' Thamel, as though the

former lacks any anthropological or social-theoretical value. All of these reactions do not necessarily betray an ignorance of Thamel. Rather, they evidence the pre-reflexive, initial sense that Thamel does not constitute a proper arena for anthropological fieldwork, and that 'real' and 'local' culture is somewhere else in Nepal. The discourse illuminates the related presumptions that Thamel is for tourists, that foreign tourism is still the driving force behind Thamel, and that whatever Nepalis might get up to in the neighborhood is ultimately reducible to tourism.

Morimoto's (2007) early treatment of Thamel largely upholds this perspective. While she acknowledges alternative meanings in Thamel—for example, when tourists (mis) interpret ethnically specific architecture as exemplary of a monolithic Orient—her discussion ultimately reduces the neighborhood to tourism. A more recent book chapter, however, offers a brief discussion of the re-appropriation of Thamel by Nepali consumers (Morimoto 2015). Liechty's (1996, 2010) discussion of Thamel provides a step in the right direction. He conceptualizes Thamel as a translocality, or a space in which multiple places coexist (Liechty 1996). He describes the way in which foreign tourists can (and do) move through Thamel while remaining oblivious to the many alternative meanings circulating around them. The realization that Nepali elites, drug addicts, and foreign tourists have widely disparate imaginaries of Thamel opens a conceptual space to take Nepali experiences of the neighborhood seriously. The 'space/place' distinction inherently reminds us that all spaces get imbued with a variety of meanings constituted by subjects situated differently in social space. However, Liechty also applies terms like "tourist bubble" (Judd 1999) and "enclavic tourist space" (Edensor 1998) to Thamel.

In what follows, I want to take Liechty's argument one step further by reversing the script: what insights might emerge if we stopped assuming that Thamel is primarily a tourist place? What if we dislocated tourism from its central place in the discourse? The next section presents a variety of counter-evidence against the dominant 'tourist place' characterization. The point is not that tourism does not matter in Thamel. Of course it does. Rather, my argument is that tourism does not matter nearly as much as common narrations and omissions suggest. Furthermore, I contend that challenging such characterizations of the neighborhood has important conceptual and theoretical implications.

### Probing the 'Tourist Place' Trope

The first way of approaching this critique is through a simple appeal to Thamel's demography. If by 'tourist place,' one means a neighborhood frequented primarily by tourists,



then such a label is blatantly misapplied. These days in Thamel, there are more Nepalis than foreigners at any given moment, even during the peak season. While many of the Nepalis in Thamel come to the neighborhood to work in tourist-oriented businesses, many others do not. Thamel has a reputation among Nepalis for being one of the best commercial shopping areas in Kathmandu. Everything from books and clothing to art and food is available in the neighborhood. Despite its notoriously higher prices relative to other commercial areas, Nepalis still come for the dizzying array of eclectic commodities being offered.

Many Thamel businesses cater primarily to Nepalis, even those that might initially appear to be catering to tourists. One restaurant owner told me:

Thamel is just really saturated with these things, catering mostly not to tourists, not to residents of Thamel.[...] I know, sometimes when [Nepali] visitors come from other parts of Kathmandu or even from another country, they go, 'Let's go and check out Thamel.' You know, now they're curious. Now they are the tourists.

Bars like Purple Haze, Lhasa, and Buddha Bar are popular and profitable haunts where tourists are usually the minority.<sup>5</sup> There are still hole-in-the-wall teashops and restaurants that almost exclusively serve Nepalis. Even the discothèque dance clubs—from Ibiza to Faces to Club OMG—are populated mostly by Nepali youth in stylish jackets and short skirts, dancing to DJs spinning mash-up mix tapes of electronic and hip-hop songs from all over the world. Then there are the less reputable 'dance bars' and 'massage centers'—code for places to hire a prostitute. These, too, do not draw their business primarily from tourists, but rather from Nepalis and Indians.<sup>6</sup>

After the earthquake of April 25, 2015, the streets of Thamel were empty. When I returned several months later, the disaster was still on everyone's minds, but Thamel had largely returned to business as usual. Given the disaster and the fact that it was the off-season for tourism, the streets were crowded almost entirely by Nepalis and some foreign volunteer groups engaged in relief work. When I mentioned this to a Nepali friend of mine, he pointed at the Nepali crowds and said, "Look. We don't need tourists." When I discussed this with another Nepali friend, he completely agreed: "Even if you took all the tourists out of Thamel, like banned them from coming, Nepalis would still be in Thamel. It's become a modern tradition." Nepalis do come to Thamel in significant numbers. To assume that they do so only to see and interact with tourists/tourism does a conceptual disservice to their experiences and cultural agency.

One might argue that the economic basis of Thamel is still the tourism market, and that it is on that basis that the 'tourist place' trope fairly characterizes the neighborhood. Even on this score, there are reasons to be skeptical. One restaurant owner explained that the average Nepali consumer spends more money than the average tourist on a meal in Thamel. Given the choice between one table of Nepali customers and two tables of tourist customers, he claimed he would choose the former every time. When Nepalis go to Thamel, they have a 'night out.' By contrast, when tourists do so, spending money drains their travel budget, leading to greater frugality.

Pradip owns a bar in Thamel. The walls are decorated with portraits of Jim Morrison, Jimi Hendrix, Slash, and other rock stars. Pradip is extremely personable, speaking excellent English and being able to interact comfortably among any group of people. After spending several months with Pradip, I still assumed that his bar could reasonably fall into the 'tourist' category—that is, depending primarily on tourist customers. In general, though, most of his business has come from Nepali consumers since he opened a few years ago. According to him, this is common practical knowledge among Thamel's bar owners:

Pradip: All of the people in Thamel, all of the business owners, they understand that Nepali customers, Nepali consumers give you more business than the Westerners.

Author: Really?

Pradip: Yeah, everyone understands it. Everyone knows it.[...] We know that if like five Nepali teenagers would come and then there would be a group of like 10 other foreigners, the Nepalese would spend more. Yeah, it is very obvious. [...] We all survive from Nepalese. The foreigners are just like the decoratives [sic] that they have for the bar, you know? It's just to give a vibe, like, "OK, this is Thamel. Here are tourists," you know? That's it, but the business comes out of Nepali people.

Even when businesses do draw most of their income from foreign tourists (e.g., a trekking agency or a hotel), the income is not exclusively generated by this group. Many Nepalis come to Thamel to book rafting trips, bungee jumps, and the like. Another prominent example is low-budget guesthouses, which many Nepali youth utilize as a place to have sexual encounters beyond the watchful gaze of the families with whom they live. A hash dealer in Thamel surprised me by explaining that, while he can sell drugs to tourists for greater profit, many of his customers are, in fact, Nepali.

Given all of this information, in what sense can Thamel be considered a tourist place? It does, indeed, have a disproportionate concentration of tourists relative to other areas of the city. However, despite this concentration, their presence alone does not define Thamel. First, there are parts of Thamel that remain 'traditional' and outside the cosmopolitan establishments of the neighborhood (e.g., residences, schools, temples, etc.). Second, there are more Nepalis than foreigners in the area at any given moment. Perhaps most importantly, Nepalis also constitute a dominant economic presence for many of Thamel's businesses, even those that one might passingly assume belong in the 'tourist-oriented' category. Recognizing these facts widens the conceptual space, initially opened by Liechty, to consider Nepali experiences of the neighborhood. Furthermore, by undermining the 'tourist place' narrative, this conceptual space also shifts in focus. It makes it far less tenable to assume that Nepalis are in Thamel *because* of tourists/tourism. The next section will begin exploring some of these Nepali experiences without privileging foreignness as their underlying engine. The Nepalis in Thamel are strategically taking advantage of the space's permissiveness, utilizing it to perform (authentic) identities forged within the dynamic, transformative context of Kathmandu's recent decades. It will not be an exhaustive survey, as there are many divergent imaginaries of Thamel among Nepalis. Rather, the section focuses primarily on the experiences of cosmopolitan Nepali youth in Thamel.

### Nepali Cosmopolitanism in Thamel

Cosmopolitanism as a theoretical concept has a genealogy dating to the Cynics of the 4th century B.C., for whom it signified "a rejection of the conventional view that every civilized person belonged to a community among communities" (Appiah 2007: xiv). More recently, political and legal theory has revived the concept in relation to notions of universal citizenship, global sovereignty, and human rights (Brown and Held 2010). In short, a cosmopolitan identifies first and foremost as a human, in contradistinction to more parochial affiliations like religion, nationality, or ethnicity. Cultural cosmopolitanism is not an end goal so much as a general perspective, "a cultural disposition involving an intellectual and aesthetic stance of 'openness' toward peoples" (Szerzynski and Urry 2002: 468). Therefore, cosmopolitanism is not simply a list of traits to be expressed as fashion; nor is it coterminous with concepts like 'Western liberalism' or 'global culture.' It inherently blurs the culturally policed boundaries between 'here' and 'there,' 'us' and 'them.' Conceptually, cosmopolitanism offers a way of thinking about the undeniably transnational character of Thamel without reifying the arbitrary and contingent boundaries between

'Nepali' and 'foreign.' It connotes an inherently fluid, processual view of subjectivity and culture.

Youth in Thamel can be both Nepali and cosmopolitan. The latter simply signifies a willingness to engage with new modes of meaning-making. Rather than debating whether or not Thamel is 'Nepali' or 'foreign,' cosmopolitanism offers a tool for destabilizing such spatio-cultural categories in the first place. The remainder of this section will describe the practices of what I call 'Nepali cosmopolitan youth.' These are young, middle- and upper-class Nepalis who frequent Thamel as consumers and performers. Thamel is different from other neighborhoods in Kathmandu, and it has the strange effect of both producing and enabling the performance of cosmopolitan attitudes among young Nepalis.

Consider the following example: Ashok is 22 years old and plays guitar in a rock band three nights a week at one of Thamel's popular bars. The band's set lists, like most others in Thamel, consists of a mixture of Nepali and Western songs. The venue is always filled with Nepalis, and only a few foreigners can be seen. It is not uncommon at these gigs for me to be the only *bideshi* (foreigner) in the bar. They do adjust their set lists depending on the demographic makeup of the audience, but not as one might assume. "Sweet Child O' Mine" by Guns N' Roses is a favorite among the Nepalis, he told me. When he plays Slash's notorious solos, he walks to the edge of the stage and down into the crowd (thanks to his newly purchased wireless amplifier input). Young Nepali women dance and young Nepali men slam beer glasses on the tables and bang their heads beneath portraits of Bob Marley.

Nights like this are not for tourist benefit. Ashok and the cosmopolitan Nepalis in Thamel do not self-consciously perform under a "tourist gaze" (Urry 1990), even on the rare nights when there are many foreigners in the bar. When it comes to the bands themselves, they do not play what they imagine tourists want to hear. They play the songs that they like, Nepali or American. In a bar like the one where Ashok plays—where tourists (if present at all) are a small minority, where the band plays the songs they enjoy, and where Nepalis act the same regardless of whether tourists are around—how can it be justifiable to reduce such a setting to tourism? Ashok agrees: "Before [Thamel] was really a touristic place, but now it's like really for Nepalis also." His fiancé, a Swiss woman who has lived with Ashok's family for over a year now, chimed in: "The longer I'm here, the less I think of Thamel as the tourist place."

The Thamel described by Liechty (1996, 2002, 2010) is a rough-and-tumble neighborhood for Nepalis. By all accounts I have received, this accurately describes the 1990s

in Thamel (when Liechty conducted that research). To be a young Nepali “punk” in Thamel meant that “one should be tough and ready to prove it” (Liechty 2002: 37). However, since the late 1990s, and especially since the conclusion of the 10-year civil war in 2006, Thamel has cleaned up its act and reputation. There is a stronger police presence in the area, the drug abuse and sex work are less visible (though still present), and CCTV cameras have been installed in many parts of the neighborhood. Thamel still has a bad reputation among many Nepalis, especially conservative elders, but the tide seems to be turning. These days, Thamel is a space where young Nepalis can escape the everyday social conventions of older generations. “It’s a place to let your hair down,” said one restaurant owner. One Nepali said, “Even for us, it’s the only place with a lot of pubs and bars.” Another Nepali explained, “It’s the only place to go and have fun.” One older Nepali woman, who owns a small hotel in Thamel, had similar feelings: “People in Thamel don’t care what you do, and the Nepalis have a budget to go out now.” A waiter at a local coffee shop explained why Nepalis enjoy coming to the neighborhood: “In the village, there is one festival per month, but in Thamel every Friday/Saturday is a festival.” Thamel enables practices—drinking, eating out, dancing—that the Nepali youth desire. At the same time, Thamel’s permissiveness reinforces these emergent identities. One might certainly criticize the practices themselves, but writing them off as ‘foreign’ simply dismisses them without attending to their very real cultural significance.

Bishal has studied and worked in Thailand, the United States, and Hong Kong. Whenever he visits his family in Kathmandu, he returns to Thamel. He reminisced about his childhood, when he and his friends would ditch school in Lalitpur and come up to Thamel to smoke pot: “I mean, Thamel in many ways, back then especially, was like anything goes. Just walk into a restaurant and roll a spliff and start smoking. Nobody cares, you know? You can drink.” Thamel was a liberating space for him and his friends. It was a neighborhood that, for better or worse, allowed them to temporarily evade—and transgress—the social mores of broader Kathmandu and its older generations. Bishal and his friends are indisputably Nepali. They simply articulated their identities differently. New contexts breed new subjectivities, and it is largely the inadequate conceptual tools of anthropology that render such emergent practices illegible.

I then asked Bishal whether he felt that tourists at that time affected the way he acted in the neighborhood:

I don’t really remember any kind of play around expectations. I didn’t really know what they expected.

I didn’t really care, let’s say. I was always just myself and enjoying my time and hanging out with whoever was around. [...] I don’t really think I thought too much about expectations that they had around me.

Here again, Bishal’s experience in Thamel had little to do with tourism. He neither resented tourists nor craved their recognition. Foreigners were simply peripheral to his subjective life as a cosmopolitan teenager in Kathmandu. This is a common narrative among Thamel-going youth. Even while many of them call Thamel the ‘tourist area,’ they do not see themselves as being ‘inauthentic’ or ‘not Nepali’ when they come—indeed, why should they? Furthermore, they do not see themselves as mimicking and copying the West, no matter how much older Nepalis (and many Western scholars) assume that to be the case.

Bishal’s generation came up in the media-liberated environment of post-1990 democratic Nepal, which bled into the age of widespread internet accessibility within a couple of decades. This period also saw the production of a consumer middle class in Kathmandu (Liechty 2003). Such factors produced the very possibility of ‘going out’ and the new temporality of the ‘weekend’ among younger generations. Ayush remembers waiting all week as a teenager to listen to the Sunday Pop radio show, one of the few outlets to hear new Western music at that time. He recalls being drawn to the music of Bon Jovi in particular. He and his friends used to come to Thamel to hear these songs played in the bars and clubs, which further reinforced his emerging identity as a rock music fan. None of this made him any ‘less Nepali’ in his own eyes. These days, he brings his son (age 6) to the restaurants and coffee shops in Thamel, even as he worries about his son’s lack of proficiency in Newari. The relevant question is not about ‘degrees of foreign influence.’ Framing the issue that way simply reiterates the problematic essentialism which imagines bounded, static units that subsequently confront one another—the so-called ‘billiard ball’ approach to culture critiqued long ago by Eric Wolf (1982). Furthermore, many Nepali cosmopolitans explicitly root their Thamel practices within recognizably Nepali idioms. Numerous people have mentioned to me that alcohol consumption—from Newari *bhattis* (traditional restaurant-bars) to village *rakshi* (distilled alcohol)—has a long history in Nepal. When I ask about the common hyper-masculine posturing in Thamel, the trope of brave, courageous Gurkha soldiers often comes up.

While masculinity still dominates Thamel’s nightlife and public culture, the increasing presence of Nepali women indicates yet another dimension of the neighborhood’s complex cultural contestations. Suman is a fashionable



Figure 2. The bar Purple Haze, popular among cosmopolitan Nepali youth, is packed for a Bon Jovi tribute concert in the afternoon. Of the 150-300 people in attendance, less than 10 (myself included) were foreign.

(Linder, 2016)

event planner in Kathmandu. She works with a company of Nepali women who organize and promote parties in Thamel and elsewhere. She also experiences Thamel as a place of freedom, particularly so as a Nepali woman. When she was growing up, she was not allowed to come to Thamel at night:

In the context of Nepal, women are not allowed to go out. Still now that culture exists, and during the night women are supposed to stay inside their homes. But it is mainly due to society more than the family.

As Suman got older, she began coming to Thamel at night to experience the bars, live music, and clubbing. It was a “new place” where she could “find new things, meet new people, and experience new foods.” She did not become less Nepali, or more Western. Even when she was a child, she had always wanted to experience new places and explore other lifestyles, the signature of a cosmopolitan disposition.

Geographers have long theorized the interface between gender and space (Massey 1994), and a dialectical logic binds the two together. On the one hand, gender norms express themselves spatially, whereby the organization of geographic binaries (e.g. public/private, inside/outside, etc.) reflects gendered divisions. At the same time, these coded geographies re-inscribe and naturalize the gender hierarchies that produced them in the first place. Moreover, it follows that women’s spatial transgressions can simultaneously represent social transgressions. Recent scholarship from Nepal supports this contention (Grossman-Thompson 2013,

2016; Brunson 2014). New modes of mobility—and the access they afford to traditionally masculine spaces—enable Nepali women to challenge both the spatial order and the gender norms they reinforce. Female trekking guides achieve this sort of resistance to gender norms (Grossman-Thompson 2013, 2016). Similarly, the increased prevalence of female-driven scooters on the streets of Kathmandu presents its own form of liberation, particularly in offering access to marginal spaces that afford women previously unavailable degrees of privacy and intimacy (Brunson 2014). Of course, these spatial tactics also come with their own gendered threats to women’s bodies and reputations. Nevertheless, such research indicates that new engagements with space—particularly mobility and transgression into masculine arenas—have the effect of contesting women’s proverbial (and literal) ‘place’ in Nepali society.

Entrance into Thamel represents precisely this sort of gendered transgression, with both its liberating potential and its moral-reputational dangers. According to Suman, middle-class Nepali women have two basic options: to go abroad for “freedom” or to remain in Nepal, get married, and have children. Suman sees herself as straddling these two options, and Thamel is pivotal in this navigation. It enables her freedom without having to leave Nepal. She can smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and dance without facing the judgment that would befall her if she engaged in these activities elsewhere. If she had not come to Thamel and had her mentality transformed/reinforced, she believes that she would already be married with two children. For her, Thamel is a place of “no culture”—neither “Western” nor

“Nepali.”<sup>8</sup> She describes it simply as a place with “no restrictions, no rules.” For her, coming to Thamel lays claim to a cosmopolitanism, one which she refuses to accept as solely the domain of men.

The space of Thamel allows for myriad and divergent articulations of cultural practice. The ambiguity of Thamel’s meaning and experiential effects muddles the “social field” (Bourdieu 1998), such that the neighborhood can encompass countless imaginaries that are difficult to fit into the static, bounded categories of culture theory. As another informant described, Thamel is not ‘like’ anything else; it is another planet entirely. Suman does not aspire to be ‘like’ Westerners, and in fact has no significant desire to leave Nepal, despite opportunities to do so. I have met many Nepalis with similar attitudes. People like Ayush and Suman were forged in the crucible of Kathmandu’s post-1990 mediascape, opening new possibilities for imagination and identity performance (Appadurai 1996). Yet, they do not only imagine and perform lifestyles; they embody and live them as well. Thamel’s permissive attitude facilitates this. What gets practiced is not ‘traditionally Nepali,’ but neither is it ‘foreign/Western.’ It is simply new and emergent, based on the dialectic interplay of (shifting) subjectivities, geographies, and histories. The ontologies of Western anthropology derive from a ‘sedentary metaphysics’ (Malkki 1997; Cresswell 2006) and tend to ‘root’ cultures in history/place (Appadurai 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Clifford 1997). These tools are ill equipped to deal with the substantial and continual transformations of culture, place, and subjectivity underway in Thamel.

The remainder of this paper will now turn to what is at stake—conceptually and theoretically—in the perpetuation of the ‘tourist place’ trope. There are two facets to this discussion. First, there are the various interests at play for reiterating the discourse itself. In other words, given the evidence presented above, what drives tourists, scholars, and Nepalis to continually reproduce the characterization of Thamel as a tourist place? Second, why does it matter whether or not one calls Thamel a tourist place?

### The Causes and Cultural Politics of Reiteration

If Nepalis, as I have argued, constitute the dominant presence in Thamel—culturally, demographically, economically—then the varied interests that perpetuate the discourse must be addressed. There are two easy answers to this question, which partially explain the persistence of the discourse across all three demographics: tourists, scholars, and Nepalis. First, it might be carried over from Thamel’s historical development, which was largely about international

tourism. Nepalis have always come to Thamel, but it seems a crucial shift began to occur around the late 1990s. Perhaps, then, the trope can be read as a relic that has outlived its descriptive accuracy. Second, the ‘tourist place’ narrative is fairly simple and elegant. It makes sense of the nightlife, drugs, and foreign foods. The cosmopolitanism of Thamel is easily explained away as the imposition of a foreign culture catering to foreign tourists. The problem, as we have already seen, is that this does not adequately explain the experiences of Nepalis.<sup>9</sup> Even if these businesses originally catered to tourists, the contemporary dominance of Nepali consumers (and tourism not being a dominant motivator among many of them) requires new conceptual tools to understand the space and its contestations.

Among tourists, the discourse can be attributed in part to a simple matter of focus. Tourists are primarily interested in what Thamel offers to them. Therefore, it is not surprising that guidebooks, travelogues, and tourists themselves describe Thamel in terms of its tourist accommodations and infrastructure. Furthermore, tourism in Nepal does not center on nightlife. Tourists overwhelmingly come to Nepal for culture, wildlife, mountains, religio-philosophical teachings, and architecture. I have never met a tourist that came to Nepal primarily to party. Given the country’s particular attractions as imagined by media-infused tourists, Thamel would appear not to offer that which they came to experience. It is in this context that we can then understand Thamel’s reputation among this group as inauthentic, a tourist haven, and a liminal space (Grossman-Thompson and Linder 2014). As one tour guide told me, “[Tourists] don’t think there’s anything in Thamel. They think it’s just roads and guesthouses.”

Scholars, especially anthropologists, are a bit more complicated. Most have their particular communities, often located outside of Kathmandu, with whom they work. Even anthropological scholarship about Kathmandu itself tends to focus on ritual and caste dynamics among the Newars. Studies of globalization in Kathmandu and the cultural changes it has engendered have been relatively underrepresented, some notable exceptions being the work of Mark Liechty (2003, 2010), Katharine Rankin (2004), and Heather Hindman (2013; Hindman and Oppenheim 2014). None of this is to criticize other scholars, but rather to suggest that, from their position of dealing with ‘traditional’ communities, Thamel’s very real cultural significance among Nepalis would seem anomalous. Because these sorts of cultural transformations fall outside the purview of their particular interests, and because of the ubiquity and at-hand accessibility of the trope described above, ‘Thamel as tourist place’ becomes a convenient heuristic.

Then there is the broader disciplinary bias that transcends scholarship on Nepal. As noted above, anthropology has a long and troubled history of associating space and culture, as rooting communities in place (Appadurai 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). While this has been roundly criticized in recent decades, it seems operative in the ‘Thamel as tourist place’ narrative. Thamel effectively becomes a foreign place in Kathmandu—the “Thamel Autonomous Region,” as one tongue-in-cheek satirist referred to it in the *Nepali Times* (Issue #784: November 27–December 3, 2015). This reifies ‘traditional’ Nepal through contradistinction, bounding Nepali culture such that the field is preserved. By this discourse, what goes on in Thamel among Nepalis can be easily explained away as Western cultural imperialism, mimicry, or incorporation into global markets. Of course, there are aspects of truth in this way of thinking. But to focus solely on these strips the cultural agency from Nepali youth in Thamel, who perform identities that are as subjectively real as anyone else’s.

To some extent, older Nepalis have a similar interest in maintaining the ‘tourist place’ characterization. In his work on middle-class culture, Liechty (2005b) describes narratives about fashion prostitutes, women who supposedly prostitute themselves to buy commodities. Unable to substantiate these claims, Liechty convincingly argues that we must read these narratives as a moral discourse, one betraying the anxieties among many Nepalis regarding the increasing consumer culture in Kathmandu. Similarly, Andrew Nelson (2013) draws on this approach to interpret disparaging narratives of land brokers in Kirtipur. For him, such stories display local anxieties regarding changing valuations (i.e. commercialization) of land. It is through this lens that I interpret narrations of Thamel as a ‘tourist place’ among Nepalis. It effectively demarcates the boundaries of Nepali culture from the perceived moral dangers of Thamel. It deflects attribution of such practices away from Nepalis and onto tourists, such that even when Nepalis participate as well, they are simply ‘acting foreign.’ In some ways, this also works in favor of Thamel’s cosmopolitan youth. They simply ‘experiment’ without losing their Nepaliness, travel ‘elsewhere’ without relinquishing tradition or leaving home.

Many Nepalis, even some who work in Thamel, express concern that the Nepali consumers are losing their culture. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this fact better than one shopkeeper’s anxiety that, on the day of the Gai Jatra festival, the streets of Thamel displayed a different sort of parade: a gay pride demonstration. One elderly Newari man in Thamel said, “Due to the tourism now you see all the bad things happening in the massage centers [and] drug dealing. Even the lesbians and gays have their own group and do illegal

business.” As noted above, tourists do not typically buy sex in Thamel, and Nepalis frequent these establishments far more. But by attributing such illicit activities to the effects of tourism, this quote sweepingly preserves an image of what Nepali culture is—or, more to the point, what it ought to be. Quite literally, it displaces Thamel to an imagined ‘elsewhere.’ Another shopkeeper, when asked about Nepali youth in Thamel, said, “I don’t like it, as this is not our culture. It’s good to taste but to continue it is not good.”

I argue that these narratives do not indicate a clash of spatially distinct cultures, but rather a generational rift within Kathmandu. These are obviously related issues that cannot be fully separated, but conceptualizing it in this way makes the cosmopolitan youth of Thamel appear less as victims of Western hegemony. They constitute a youth culture purposefully appropriating new practices, not unlike youth cultures elsewhere, from flappers to hippies, beatniks to punks.

## Conclusion

Why does it matter how different groups talk about—and, therefore, think about—Thamel? The first problem with conceptualizing Thamel solely as a ‘tourist place’ is that it inherently renders Nepalis “out of place” or “anachoristic” (Cresswell 1996, 2004) in their own hometown. As one Belgian tourist said of the street children in Thamel, “Really, they shouldn’t be in the tourist area. It is annoying, and I’m sure it is adverse for them too” (quoted in Ryckmans 2012: 248). By appealing to Thamel as the “tourist area,” this tourist argues that Nepalis have *less* claim to the neighborhood, less reason or right to be there. Obviously, this is problematic. It betrays the exclusionary spatial politics implicit in the trope. This problem also appears in literature on tourist spaces more generally. In his study of tourist circuits in India, Tim Edensor (1998) introduces his notions of “enclavic” and “heterogeneous” tourist spaces. Edensor’s framework focuses more on the degree of proximity and interaction between tourists and locals than it does on the experiential meanings (or places) contained within such spaces.

Dennis Judd’s (1999) notion of the “tourist bubble” relates closely to Edensor’s “enclavic” space. In general, Edensor and Judd focus their studies on tourism and tourist experiences. In doing so, they arrive at useful and interesting contributions, and I am not arguing that applying these labels to Thamel is wholly misguided. However, by framing issues in terms of ‘tourist spaces,’ the tourist inevitably becomes the primary object of concern. The consequence of this is that it implicitly designates these spaces as primarily for tourists, which denies a certain agency and voice to local claims and

people. There are many other ways of assigning meaning to Thamel. The foregoing discussion of Nepali cosmopolitanism offers one way of highlighting this semiotic diversity.

This returns us to the epigraphs with which we began this article. The quote from the *Lonely Planet* offers the most salient expression of a discourse that continues to limit our understanding of Thamel. In the discussion of cosmopolitan youth above, we saw that many people have varied and complex motivations, experiences, and imaginaries related to Thamel. These cannot be easily reduced to common theoretical concepts like capitalist incorporation, Western hegemony, or local essentialism. Reacting to the epigraphic *Lonely Planet* quote, Bishal continued:

I don't know what 'real' Nepal is. There's so many 'real' Nepals. Thamel is as real of Nepal as any other real Nepal, so I think it's ridiculous. I don't know what they should say, though. They should be like, "Thamel's awesome. You should enjoy it. And if you want to experience something different from Thamel, then go the fuck out of Thamel and experience it."

At this point in our interview, Bishal's American wife jumped in:

[Thamel] is just as real. Actually, it seems sort of, like, more real—this part of, you know, hanging out in Thamel with, like, his generation. That's kind of more his reality than going to the temple and praying and seeing all the shrines and the gods—like, this is more real Nepal.

Bishal nodded in agreement as his wife spoke. In other words, the Thamel experienced by some Nepalis—disproportionately elite, to be sure—is authentic. As he said after our interview, "People think Nepalis just get absorbed by the flashing lights or whatever. It's just not true." Bishal is proudly Nepali, and he enjoyed going to Thamel in his youth, not caring much about the tourism there.

The Nepali cosmopolitans in Thamel were raised within a cultural-historical context radically different from the previous generation. Now as adults, they are expected to embody an imagined *Nepalipān* (Nepaliness) that, for better or worse, is no longer coterminous with their tastes, experiences, and ambitions. The 'Thamel as tourist place' narrative is symptomatic and indicative of this cultural contestation. This is precisely the cultural politics referred to throughout this article. The project here runs deeper than simply noting 'alternative experiences' of a single space, however interesting and worthwhile that may be in its own right. Narrations of Thamel also demarcate the fault lines in a contested,

multivalent, and ongoing struggle to (re)define the boundaries of Nepali culture. If young Nepalis feel freer and 'more like themselves' when they come to Thamel, then on whose authority do other groups dismiss this as passive Westernization, foreign seduction, or mimicry? For better or worse, many of these young Nepalis enjoy Thamel for its own sake.

Rather than deeply theorizing Thamel's cosmopolitanism, this article focused on undermining the narration of Thamel as a 'tourist place.' The former project is unthinkable without the latter. Before engaging deeply with Nepali cosmopolitanism, there must first be a conceptual space in which such debates can take place. By challenging the dominant characterization and sketching other possible meanings, it suddenly becomes productive, interesting, and necessary to theorize the way in which Thamel works to create these unique imaginaries of place, self, and (trans)national culture. Conceptualizing Thamel as I have in this article refuses to assume that the area's cosmopolitanism is reducible to tourism. In fact, the Nepali youth in Thamel tend to be more cosmopolitan than the foreigners. It opens up a space for us to think about such youth being both Nepali and deeply cosmopolitan, without assuming that these are somehow contradictory. The 'tourist place' perspective makes it difficult to take these Nepali experiences in the neighborhood seriously. It inherently positions such experiences vis-à-vis tourism, obscuring more rich possibilities for anthropological theories of transnationalism and cultural change. The trope erects a foundation from which Nepali practices in Thamel are presumed to be foreign.

It is my contention that Nepali experiences in Thamel deserve to be understood and analyzed on their own terms, without a priori appeals to touristic influence. It may well be that many experiences in Thamel are best understood in the context of tourism (though I suspect more are not). However, this requires investigation rather than assertion, ethnographic evidence rather than discursive presumption. Suspending this trope enables new research agendas to enter the frame. Such agendas could include the urban spatialization of transnational mobilities, the role of place-making in social contestation, the emplacement of cultural transformation, etc. Without being able to rely on models of cultural imperialism, subaltern resistance, and/or local essentialism, such an agenda raises challenging and potentially productive questions about the intersection of cosmopolitan identity formation, globalization, and urban space/place in the Global South.

**Benjamin Linder** is a PhD student in the Department of Anthropology & Geography at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His primary research explores the relationship between transnational mobilities, cultural transformation, and the (re)production of urban space in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The author wishes to thank the Fulbright Program for funding this research. He is also thankful to Andrew Nelson for initiating the conference panel that led to this special issue, and to Mark Liechty for his continued support of this research project. Furthermore, the author is grateful to Heather Hindman, Bryony Whitmarsh, Andrew Nelson, and the anonymous peer reviewers for strengthening this article with their extensive comments on earlier drafts. Nevertheless, the author is solely responsible for any remaining shortcomings and/or errors.

## Endnotes

1. In 1975, 92,440 foreigners visited Nepal (Government of Nepal 2015). By 1990, this number of annual visitors had risen to 254,885 (*ibid.*), an increase of nearly 176%. Aside from several years of anomalous setbacks, tourist arrivals continued to steadily increase in subsequent years.
2. In 2001 and 2002, the annual ‘growth’ rates for tourist arrivals were -22.1% and -23.7%, respectively (Government of Nepal 2015).
3. Readers should also remain skeptical of rigid distinctions between ‘tourists,’ ‘Nepalis,’ and ‘scholars.’ These boundaries are hazy and frequently overlap. When I deploy such categorical language in this article, I do not mean to imply static, definable, ontologically existing groups. Rather, such language merely signifies clusters of related imaginaries and subject-positions.
4. There are several possible reasons for this sort of dissonance between Nepali youth experiences and their verbal characterizations of Thamel. First, as a Western and white scholar, my own positionality in Thamel certainly impacts the way in which Nepalis respond to my questions. Often, it is the Nepali youth with whom I am closest (*i.e.*, those who best understand my position as curious scholar rather than transient tourist) that describe Thamel as a “Nepali place.” This implies that other Nepalis may perceive me as a tourist and, therefore, respond to my questions about the neighborhood in terms of tourism. Second, it is also the case that longer, in-depth interviews yield more complicated or alternative narrations of Thamel that do not rely on tourism as the sole/central referent. By my reading, this implies that Nepali youth in Thamel simply have not been offered a discursive space in which to critically reflect on their experiences in the neighborhood, many of which do not easily fall within the ‘tourist place’ characterization.
5. In fact, I have never witnessed tourists as the majority at these bars, and only very rarely as a substantial minority. This is true of most of the bars I have visited. However, given the decline in tourism following the earthquakes of April-May 2015, I cannot say definitively that this is always the case; hence, my more qualified language (*i.e.* ‘usually’). Nevertheless, I strongly suspect that this would be the case regardless of 2015’s decline in tourist arrivals.
6. In general, this article considers Indians as a demographic category distinct from tourists. There are many Indian-owned and -operated businesses in Thamel, and Indian visitors often display different motivations from Western or East Asian tourists. A full discussion is impossible and unnecessary here, but the historical-cultural connections and open border between India and Nepal justify this analytical choice. Even the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation makes this distinction in its annual reports, sometimes adding additional tables that specifically disaggregate data about Indian tourists from the larger dataset (*e.g.*, Government of Nepal 2015).
7. This quote also highlights the class dimension to this discussion. Obviously, not all Nepali youth “have a budget to go out,” and many cannot afford Thamel’s higher prices. Thamel’s venues of cosmopolitan performance—bars, discos, restaurants, etc.—are not cheap. This creates barriers to entry for lower-class Nepalis, but such barriers are not flatly exclusionary. Non-elite Nepalis still go to such establishments less frequently, and they experience the cosmopolitan streetscapes of Thamel for free. Furthermore, there are many other ways in which poorer Nepalis inhabit the space. On the other end of the socio-economic hierarchy, super-elite Nepalis often view Thamel as a step down from their usual haunts in places like Durbar Marg. In this formulation, they come to Thamel to have a ‘normal’ night out, when they do not feel like spending lavishly in more upscale neighborhoods.
8. I would certainly take issue with the idea that Thamel has “no culture,” and I would actually argue the opposite. My future work will discuss this in more depth, but I glean two important insights from Suman’s comments. First, calling it a place of “no culture” again implies that common conceptual tools do not offer a space for Suman to critically consider her own experiences in Thamel, which are (obviously) cultural. Second, Suman’s comments also suggest that Thamel’s ambiguity of meaning is precisely what allows different subjects to invest the space with their own fantasies. For her, “no culture” is a way of explaining this dynamic. My own conclusion is similar, though I would argue that it is the utter density of divergent cultural imaginaries—rather than a lack of culture—that produces Thamel’s ambiguity, which in turn allows it to serve as a projector screen for any number of fantasies and imaginaries.



9. There is another problem that cannot be fully addressed here. Namely, this perspective upholds a common, problematic conflation of 'global' with 'Global North' in particular, of 'cosmopolitan' with 'Western.' By definition, such confluents are unfounded. Every view of the "global" is a view from somewhere (Tsing 2005), and cosmopolitanism is not the exclusive domain of the West (Notar 2008). As I mention briefly below, Nepalis in Thamel tend to be far more cosmopolitan than the foreigners there.

---

## References

- Appadurai, Arjun. 1988. Putting Hierarchy in Its Place. *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1): 36-49.
- . 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2007. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: Norton.
- Bindloss, Joe; Trent Holden and Bradley Mayhew. 2009. *Nepal*. 8th edition. Footscray, Victoria: Lonely Planet Publications.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1998. *Practical Reason*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brown, Garrett W. and David Held (eds.). 2010. *The Cosmopolitanism Reader*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Brunson, Jan. 2014. 'Scooty Girls': Mobility and Intimacy at the Margins of Kathmandu. *Ethnos* 79 (5): 610-625.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Cresswell, Tim. 1996. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2004. *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- . 2006. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York: Routledge.
- de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven F. Randal. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dhoju, Rabindra. 2013. *Kathmandu Valley Guide Book*. Bhaktapur: Dhoju Publication House.
- Edensor, Tim. 1998. *Tourists at the Taj: Performance and Meaning at a Symbolic Site*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. Of Other Spaces. *Diacritics* 16 (1): 22-27.
- . 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd edition. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.
- Government of Nepal. 2015. *Nepal Tourism Statistics 2014*. Kathmandu: Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Aviation.
- Grennan, Conor. 2011. *Little Princes: One Man's Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Grossman-Thompson, Barbara. 2013. Entering Public Space and Claiming Modern Identities: Female Trekking Guides and Wage Labor in Urban Nepal. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 18 (2): 251-278.
- . 2016. Gendered Narratives of Mobility: Spatial Discourse and Social Change in Nepal. *Sociology of Development* 2 (4): 323-341.
- Grossman-Thompson, Barbara and Benjamin Linder. 2014. 'A Few Days Here Is Plenty': The Value and Implications of Popular Sources for Tourism Development in Kathmandu, Nepal. *International Journal of Leisure and Tourism Marketing* 4 (2): 117-134.
- Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson (eds.). 1997. *Culture Power Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hindman, Heather. 2013. *Mediating the Global: Expatria's Forms and Consequences in Kathmandu*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hindman, Heather and Robert Oppenheim. 2014. Lines of Labor and Desire: 'Korean Quality' in Contemporary Kathmandu. *Anthropological Quarterly* 87 (2): 465-495.
- Hutt, Michael (ed.). 1994. *Nepal in the Nineties: Versions of the Past, Visions of the Future*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Judd, Dennis. 1999. Constructing the Tourist Bubble. In *The Tourist City*, edited by Dennis Judd and Susan S. Fainstein, 35-53. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991 [1977]. *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lew, Alan A. 1991. Place representation in tourist guidebooks: an example from Singapore. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 12 (2): 124-137.

- Liechty, Mark. 1996. Kathmandu as Translocality: Multiple Places in a Nepali Space. In *The Geography of Identity*, edited by Patricia Yaeger, 35-53. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- . 2002. 'Out Here in Kathmandu': Youth and the Contradictions of Modernity in Urban Nepal. In *Everyday Life in South Asia*, edited by Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, 37-47. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 2003. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2005a. Building the Road to Kathmandu: Notes on the History of Tourism in Nepal. *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 25 (1): 19-28.
- . 2005b. Carnal Economies: The Commodification of Food and Sex in Kathmandu. *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (1): 1-38.
- . 2010. *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.
- . 2017. *Far Out: Countercultural Seekers and the Tourist Encounter in Nepal*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MacCannell, Dean. 1976. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken.
- Malkki, Liisa H. 1997. National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees. In *Culture Power Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, edited by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 52-74. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mansfeld, Yoel. 1992. From motivation to actual travel. *Annals of Tourism Research* 19 (3): 399-419.
- McGregor, Andrew. 2000. Dynamic texts and tourist gaze. *Annals of Tourism Research* 27 (1): 27-50.
- Morimoto, Izumi. 2007. The Development of Local Entrepreneurship: A Case Study of a Tourist Area, Thamel in Kathmandu. In *Nepalis Inside and Outside Nepal*, edited by Hiroshi Ishii, David N. Gellner, and Katsuo Nawa, 351-382. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors.
- . 2015. Tourism, Consumption and the Transformation of Thamel, Kathmandu. In *Cities in South Asia*, edited by Crispin Bates and Minoru Mio, 309-325. Routledge: New York.
- Nelson, Andrew. 2013. *Four Ana and One Modern House: A Spatial Ethnography of Kathmandu's Urbanizing Periphery*. PhD Dissertation: University of Virginia.
- Nishimura, Sachiko; Robert Waryszak, and Brian King. 2006. Guidebook use by Japanese tourists: a qualitative study of Australia inbound travellers. *International Journal of Tourism Research* 8 (1): 13-26.
- Notar, Beth E. 2008. Cosmopolitanism at the Borderlands: Lonely Planetters and 'Local' Cosmopolitans in Southwest China. *Anthropological Quarterly* 81 (3): 615-650.
- Onta, Pratyoush. 2006. *Mass Media in Post-1990 Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.
- Rankin, Katharine. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Ryckmans, Jean-Christophe. 2012. *The Street Children of Nepal*. Kathmandu: CPCS International.
- Sakya, Karna. 2009. *Paradise in Our Own Backyard*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Siegenthaler, Peter. 2002. Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese guidebooks. *Annals of Tourism Research* 29 (4): 1111-1137.
- Soja, Edward. 1989. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso.
- Sorensen, Anders. 2003. Backpacker Ethnography. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30 (4): 847-867.
- Szszynski, Bronislaw and John Urry. 2002. Cultures of Cosmopolitanism. *The Sociological Review* 50 (4): 461-481.
- Tsing, Anna. 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Urry, John. 1990. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Wolf, Eric. 1982. *Europe and the People Without History*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zillinger, Malin. 2006. The Importance of Guidebooks for the Choice of Tourist Sites: A Study of German Tourists in Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism* 6 (3): 229-247.