

2018

Developed Toast, Modern Laundry: Nepali Household Appliance Discourses

Maureen J. McCord

Wellesley College, mmccord@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection>

Recommended Citation

McCord, Maureen J., "Developed Toast, Modern Laundry: Nepali Household Appliance Discourses" (2018). *Honors Thesis Collection*. 548.

<https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/548>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.

Developed Toast, Modern Laundry: Nepali Household Appliance Discourses

Maureen McCord
Advisor: Susan H. Ellison, Ph.D.

Wellesley College
Wellesley, MA

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for departmental honors, Department of Anthropology, Wellesley College

27 April, 2018



Maybe the real anthropology is the anxiety we experienced along the way

Acknowledgements:

My greatest obligation is to the ten smart, caring, welcoming, and altogether remarkable women in Kathmandu who graciously collaborated with me on this project. This work is, above all, a collection of their experiences and opinions, and I cannot thank them enough for bringing me into their homes and sharing their everyday lives with me.

To all my mentors, thank you. My life would be very different without your guidance. Special thanks is due to the amazing Wellesley faculty I have had the great good fortune to learn from over the last four years, particularly my advisors in the anthropology and history departments, Susan H. Ellison and Nikhil Rao. The many (too many!) hours I have spent in your classes and offices have provoked, inspired, challenged, and buoyed me more than you can ever know. I'd also be remiss without thanking the many members of the History department who took me under their wings in my senior year, with Nikhil on leave; Ryan Quintana and Lidwien Kapteijns were especially generous in this respect.

To my families *aaphno*, Nepali, and Wellesley: I love you, I miss you, I couldn't have done it without you.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dan-ji, the language gurus, and everyone at SIT for their teaching and support throughout my semester abroad in Kathmandu.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
<i>Struggles with Reflexivity and Positionality</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Theoretical Background.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Historical Overview.....</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Methodology and Ethics.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>Outline.....</i>	<i>42</i>
Wellness, Infrastructure, and Suspicion: The Deeply Felt Experience of Change.....	45
<i>Wellness, Ayurveda, and the Anthropology of Infrastructure</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Returning to the Story</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>The Other Side of Emotion: Suspicion</i>	<i>69</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>74</i>
The Role of Appliance Discourse in Construction of Class and Socioeconomic Identity.....	77
<i>Commodities and Socioeconomic Expression</i>	<i>79</i>
<i>Back to Vidhya.....</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>99</i>
Private Consumption and Public Culture: A Journey into the Partially Known	107
<i>Approach to the Chapter</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Discussing the Public Culture of Private Consumption</i>	<i>115</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>124</i>
Conclusion.....	127
Citations.....	130

Chapter One

Introduction

It's a pretty good-sized apartment, a flat that covers the third floor of a three-story low-rise apartment building in the middle-class Kathmandu neighborhood of Handigaun. The building is made of concrete, a peachy-orangey-red color, with balconies lining the front and large windows of the kind so common in Nepal—a big pane of glass in the middle which doesn't open, with a transom above and two smaller panes on the sides that open and are protected by a utilitarian grille.

Coming up the stairs and into the apartment, it's basically a railroad-style, with a narrow hallway stretching from the balcony past the three main rooms and to the bathroom. The kitchen and stairwell flank the hallway on the other side. The front room has been partitioned off from the hallway with a flimsy-seeming plywood wall and door, covered in a child's scratchy handwriting. It's English homework, looks like, copied straight onto the wall like so many naughty kids do: "list the Nepali months...give any three meat-providing animals." Next to it hangs an enormous, laminated poster of the Hindu god Krishna and his consort, Radha. There's all-weather indoor-outdoor carpeting on the floor, or in some places tacked-down plastic sheeting made to look like wood parquet, and oriental rugs, patchy in pieces. Every single room has a bed in it, sometimes two, and it's not clear which room is used for what; one room has a small bed, sideboard and empty bookshelf, several couches and armchairs, and what strikes me as a creepy collection of somewhat-worse-for-wear stuffed animals. Another has an enormous bed, two *almirah* cabinets (one wood, one classic avocado-green Godrej steel), a loveseat, a TV, and a collection of silver serving ware. The last has two beds, one large, one small, two *almirahs*, a desktop computer, and a vanity table.

The kitchen is even stranger to me—recognizable in some ways, utterly foreign in others. There’s a sink with two taps, one somewhat crudely chiseled out of the wall. A table pushed up against the wall to the left of the sink and surrounded by four chairs, a smallish mauve fridge opposite the table, a tabletop gas stove at the front-facing end of the room, and loads of open shelving and storage holding all matter of unfamiliar dry foods round out the space. Not to mention the dish rack, an imposing stainless-steel contraption mounted to the wall above the sink with “FAMOUS NEPAL” stamped into the lip of the middle shelf and containing only a large collection of stainless steel vessels, utensils, and partitioned dishes that look like a *very* durable version of the Styrofoam trays I ate hot lunch off of in primary school. Where I expect a pantry to be, opening off the back wall, there’s a room with a small household shrine and collection of Hindu religious objects. It’s late January, and this is my Nepali host family’s decidedly middle-class apartment: my new home for the next three and half months.



The Kitchen of my Kathmandu Apartment

My family's apartment is in many ways representative of the varied middle- and upper-middle class homes crowding the streets of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, and other neighborhoods in the heart of this city. It reflects both typical "Nepali" values and priorities and a recognizable "Western modernism," with a floor plan similar to any number of postwar apartments in cities across the America (in stark contrast to "Nepali-style" homes such as Deepika's, introduced in Chapter Two). As I was welcomed into countless Kathmandu homes—those of my friends, my extended Nepali family, and their friends—I noticed dozens of near-universal similarities (the household prayer room or shrine, often in the kitchen, as in the Indian homes I'd visited; the steel Godrej-brand *almirahs*) and something which struck me as unique: loads of homes had a significant collection of household appliances, many of which, I was proudly informed, were new. It made me curious; these rapidly multiplying collections of household appliances had to be changing people's lives and everyday experiences. I started contemplating questions: what are prevailing practices and attitudes towards household appliances in Kathmandu? Where are home appliances situated in the discourses of modernity, urbanization, and class identity prevalent in the city today? In what ways does the aspirational purchase and usage of household appliances interact with Nepalis' self-perception when it comes to class identity, development, and modernity?

To engage with these questions, I conducted ethnographic research, collaborating intensely with ten women who made their homes in a narrow plot of Kathmandu: the neighborhoods of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, Chandol, Kalopul, Baluwatar, and Gairidhara. These small communities are closely intertwined, relatively old neighborhoods right in the heart of the city; taken together, the area is only between one and two square kilometers. They blend together, these neighborhoods; almost everyone I interviewed said at one point or another (often

when trying to give me directions to their homes) that they, too, lived in Handigaun, the most recognizable of the neighborhoods, before amending their statement to say they actually lived in Gairidhara or Kalopul. Like so many middle-class neighborhoods in South Asia, Handigaun and Kalopul are warrens of unpaved or minimally paved streets and *gallis*, tiny shops, tinier temples, low rise apartment blocks crowded together, street vendors, pedestrians, cows, stray dogs, children, young men on motorbikes. As Handigaun blends into Bishalnagar, there are fewer blocky apartment buildings, more single-family homes and homes converted into flats. The roads are wider, more often paved, with sidewalks. Gairidhara, Chandol, and Baluwatar are also more high-class (the prime minister's home is in Baluwatar, along with a number of INGO offices), noticeably less claustrophobic, and cleaner.

As I visited the homes of the women who graciously agreed to work with me on the project, the subtle shifts and delicate differences these neighborhoods evinced were reflected by my collaborators' ideas and practices surrounding home appliances. Our conversations encompassed discussions of class, social change, and navigating the complex intersections of Nepali and non-Nepali culture while remaining grounded in the everyday experiences of Nepali women, making this project both ethnographically rich and academically grounded.

I lived in Nepal for four months. For three and a half I was in Kathmandu studying with the School for International Training (SIT) in their undergrad study abroad program focused on "development and social change." The program had been running in, essentially, its current form since the mid-1970s, making it the oldest study abroad program in the country. The 16 students in the program for the Spring 2017 semester were from different institutions all over the U.S., from Yale to the University of Colorado at Boulder, with majors running the gamut from computer science and physics to gender studies and history. We were nonetheless a closely-knit

group; the type of person who ends up on a study abroad program in Kathmandu as opposed to Paris or Sydney is typically pretty self-selecting, and we found much more in common than that divided us. The nature of the program encouraged this closeness as well; we all spent two months doing full-time coursework in Kathmandu in Nepali language, development studies, and research methods, since there were no prerequisites that students have any exposure to these topics prior to joining the program. By the end of March, all our coursework and group traveling was done, and we parted ways for four weeks of research time. SIT is special because nearly all their study abroad programs mandate a quarter of coursework consist of an independent research project, to be written up and published in their archives. This was the broader context in which my study of household appliances was conceived and carried out.

Struggles with Reflexivity and Positionality

I approached the research design process very carefully as I knew from the beginning that my project could be an excellent opportunity to garner ethnographic data that could be transformed into a thesis here at Wellesley. I knew I wanted a project where I could examine the topics which had most interested me in my anthropology coursework on campus, and I knew that four weeks was very little time to conduct and write an entire research project that would also have enough material for a senior thesis. More discussion of the design and methodology, taking these concerns into consideration, can be found below. After finishing the research in Kathmandu and producing a 45-page monograph for SIT, I took a break from the project over the summer of 2017. Upon my return to campus, I brought my original monograph to Dr. Susan Ellison, my thesis advisor, and began to think about how it could best be expanded to a thesis. I was content with my broad analytical strokes and conclusions identified at the time, so together we decided that the best way to build on the earlier work was to incorporate more of the

ethnographic material I had left out of the original, contained in my fieldwork journal and transcripts of conversations with collaborators, and to bring in the more detailed analysis informed by theory that a lack of access to libraries in Nepal prevented the original monograph from having.

I found the process of going analytically deeper with my material to be one of the most challenging tasks of my academic career so far. I struggled throughout the past year with balancing the need of the ethnographer to build an argument from their data with the deeply felt empathy I had for my collaborators. Of course, feeling respect and empathy for one's friends and research interlocutors is not mutually exclusive with the need to build argument, but for months, whenever I sat down to engage critically with my data, I was paralyzed by the sense of imposter syndrome. Who was I to take what were everyday statements, in the context of casual conversation among friends and acquaintances, and turn them into some kind of *evidence*? Surely that would be disingenuous, some kind of betrayal of trust. And how could I, a 21-year-old blond-haired, blue-eyed Midwesterner, even know what to make of the experiences of adult Nepali women with real experiences and real responsibilities, no matter how many hundreds of pages of theory and ethnography I read? My interlocutors consistently treated me as a member of the family, a young and harmless bumbling girl who was fun to talk to and who took everything *so seriously*. I constantly felt, both in Nepal and here at Wellesley, as though what I was doing *was* really serious, and that there was virtually no way for me to accurately represent the people I worked with. Somehow, some way, I was going to let everyone down—myself, my collaborators, all the faculty here and in Nepal who had believed in me and supported me. I was so frozen by paroxysms of responsibility and fear that there were many times it seemed I might not be able to finish my thesis. Susan and I had more than one “come to Jesus” talk.

In the end, what really got me over the hump (and I tried a whole lot of things—locking myself in independent study rooms in Clapp library with software on my computer to keep myself from accessing the internet and my phone turned off was the most extreme attempt at getting words on a page, and I did that more than once with little to show for it) was reviewing my collaborators' assent statements. I'll cover these in more detail in the ethics and methodology section below, but every time a collaborator told me they understood what I was doing and that they didn't particularly *care* (in the sense that they didn't want a copy of or summary of the research and would just as soon see me use their real name in my research than any pseudonym), I was able to put my project in some perspective. Yeah, I might misunderstand or misrepresent someone in some way, but many of my collaborators told me it just wouldn't mean much to them if I did. They had their own lives, full and complete as they were, and for them, having an odd little American girl come to their homes every once in a while to watch them boil eggs on an induction cooktop was going to be a fun party anecdote, not the defining moment in an undergraduate academic career. This was a lot more important for me than it was for them, and I wasn't exactly special. Ridiculously, this made me feel better—kind of like the reassurance I take from knowing the universe is too large to ever understand even one miniscule part, so if you feel confused, it's not exactly as big a deal as it feels at the time. That being said, I hope that I convey my sense of representation anxiety as a thread throughout the rest of this work. It was one of the biggest lessons I took away from this experience, and just because I've made my peace with it doesn't mean I don't want to make the experience of that positionality clear to the reader. Sure, some of the conclusions I drew are interesting and meaningful, but overall my research was shaped by my learning the complexity and emotionally trying reality of *doing* anthropology, a lesson each anthropologist learns and carries with them in their own way.

The rest of this introduction will introduce my theoretical concerns, provide a brief but contextualizing history of Nepal, describe the role of ethics in my project and the methodology I designed and followed, and outline the remainder of the work.

Theoretical Background

I've always believed that students don't declare anthropology majors if they don't love social theory, at least a little bit. I know it was one of the things that drew me to the discipline, and the stimulation I found in theory while at Wellesley prior to my time in Nepal brought a heavy hand to bear on how I conceptualized my project in Kathmandu and how I went about framing my key research interests. One of the main reasons I settled on examining the experience and narrative of appliances in the everyday lives of Nepalis was because I knew the topic would help me zero-in on a manageably human-scale lens through which to explore the broad issues of globalization, transnational flows between immensely disparate spaces, the experience of "development," and non-Western modernity which so captivated me from my first forays into anthropology and South Asian studies. All of these theoretical concerns are deeply interrelated, and it's hard to know exactly where to start parsing out who said or wrote what that clearly influenced my own work. Throughout the thesis process, I've gone back and forth wrestling with how to understand where my own ethnographically grounded analysis ends and theoretically informed higher-order interpretation begins. In many ways, my theoretically inflected anthropological training has scaffolded the way I approach the ethnographic experience just as ethnographic experience shapes the way we approach theory. With that in mind, I frame this section with a discussion of the theory which had most impacted me prior to reaching Nepal on such issues as I've touched on already, followed by the most influential (to my project, anyway) thinking on topics which became especially important throughout the course of the

ethnographic project, and end with a brief discussion of some of the most significant paradigms in recent studies on Nepal itself.

Before arriving in Nepal, I was deeply interested by anthropological, historical, and broadly social theorizing on issues of globalization and how to think critically about the intersections of extraordinarily disparate cultures, lifeways, and people that I knew were an increasingly evident part of 21st century life. Even before Wellesley, I was persistently mind-boggled by trying to think critically about the kinds of interactions and rhetoric present surrounding “globalization.” It was especially evident when I began to gravitate towards South Asian studies and had to grapple myself with what exactly it meant to have so many opportunities to encounter a place so different, and yet so accessible, to that which I considered home.

The first thinking I encountered which really impacted how I approached this epistemological and ontological minefield was the work of David Harvey (1990). I liked how he started with a clear and grounded exposition of “modernity.” So many thinkers we’ll encounter later *use* the idea of modernity but never clearly explain what they mean. Harvey traces the development of modernity over time, and eventually shows us, with frequent hat-tips to Habermas, the Frankfurt School, Max Weber, and others, that modernity becomes at its apogee an idea that privileges

belief “in linear progress, absolute truths, and rational planning of ideal social orders” under standardized conditions of knowledge and production...the modernism that resulted was, as a result, “positivistic, technocentric, and rationalistic” at the same time as it was imposed as the work of an elite avant-garde of planners, artists, architects, critics, and other guardians of high taste. The “modernization” of European economies proceeded apace [in the 20th century], while the whole thrust of international politics and trade was justified as bringing a benevolent and progressive “modernization process” to a backward Third World.¹

¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 35.

Modernity is a conceptual child of the European Enlightenment; perhaps it was never meant to exist outside the experience of an episteme deeply impacted by those ideas, but today it *does*-- and that reality is critically produced by modernity itself. Harvey explains that the world of modernity is one where teleological progress happens across time and pushes the constraint of space out of the way; anticipating the global and transnational issues that underlie my entire project. However, in so doing, space and time as boundaries on experience, on the processes of capitalist economics, social change, and politics, become enormously compressed. Where space and time used to limit and slow change, or the dissemination of new ideas, technologies, and things, they have over time become less and less able to do so in the face of modernity's onslaught, producing the disjointed experience of appliances in Kathmandu which I encountered during fieldwork. And this time-space compression has brought the varied products of modernity into spaces, like Nepali kitchens, closets, and bathrooms, which are not the epistemological inheritors of the Enlightenment-valued positivism, rationality, and teleology and whose inhabitants, like Nepali women, now must engage modernity on a unique, if difficult to understand, footing.

I turned then to other theorists who, interacting with the useful notion of "space-time compression," began to sketch out frameworks for comprehending this zone in which anthropologists grapple with the radical alterity space-time compression produces. Arjun Appadurai (1990) was one of the earliest thinkers to wrestle with the application of compressed space time, recognizing "the central problem of today's global interactions [as] the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization."² As vastly different cultures

² Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990), 5.

come into contact so rapidly and easily through space-time compression, the issue becomes whether they will become more similar, homogenizing, or more different, heterogenizing. He recognizes the complexity and “fundamental disjunctures” inherent in this reality and sees, ultimately, the “deterritorialization” of that which once was spatially bound. Money, commodities, and people are now moving all over the world much more rapidly than was ever before possible. For Appadurai, this means that “our very models of cultural shape will have to alter, as configurations of people, place, and heritage lose all sense of isomorphism...[we must] begin to think of the configuration of cultural forms in today’s world as fundamentally...possessing no Euclidean boundaries, structures, or regularities...[they] are also overlapping.”³ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) were inspired by close conversation with Appadurai to take this unbounded, everywhere-and-nowhere understanding of the “shape” of cultures one step further by suggesting that anthropologists go “Beyond ‘Culture’” altogether. “Culture,” in its original anthropological sense, was deeply spatially constrained--anthropology was about the culture of the Nuer in Nuerland, or the Thai in Thailand. Gupta and Ferguson remind us, however, that “if one begins with the premise that spaces [are] hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of rethinking difference *through* connection.”⁴ As a result, it’s important to refocus not on the cataloguing of differences between the stable categories of “us” and “them” but on the “*production* of difference in a world of culturally,

³ Ibid, 20.

⁴ Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 8.

socially, and economically interdependent spaces.”⁵ Less useful for my purposes are Appadurai and Gupta and Ferguson’s meditations on the breakdown of space with the movement of peoples, as my project *is* spatially bounded in Kathmandu; rather, the broader implications of *how* we think about the meeting and connection and continual differentiation of identity within these reinterpreted, increasingly connected spaces is the key. Instead of creating a binary opposition between “Nepali” and “not-Nepali,” it makes more sense to think of *how* in the context of Nepali people and appliances, as objects which are part of a modernity not indigenous to Nepal, are renegotiating their own experiences and definitions in this mutable reality.

When I settled on working with women in my neighborhood of Kathmandu and looking at how they used and talked about their household appliances as a possible opportunity to get at these big, unmoored ideas in an accessible way, I was able to take stock of what other kinds of thinking I might need floating around in my brain to do a good job and be as thoughtful and genuine in my analysis of my ethnographic reality as possible. There was a lot to determine my positioning on, starting with commodities and consumption. I knew that choosing appliances as my “lens” for accessing unmoored theoretical positions was a good idea, but I needed to uncover the reasoning behind that in the genealogy of previous anthropological thinking on commodities and their consumption.

As Daniel Miller (1995a), one of the clearest thinkers on commodities and consumption, states in the most recent review article on the topic, anthropology’s origin story positions it in opposition to the mass commodities and mass consumption that characterized the “modern” universe in which early anthropologists circulated.⁶ It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that

⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁶ Daniel Miller, “Consumption and Commodities,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 24 (1995): 142.

commodities and consumption first emerged as a key space for anthropologists to work within. Arjun Appadurai's (1986) very influential introduction to the edited volume *The Social Life of Things* went a long way to recasting the role of "things" in the anthropological realm. He defines commodity as "any thing intended for exchange...[which] gets us away from the exclusive preoccupation with the 'product,' 'production,' and the original or dominant intention of the 'producer' and allows us to focus on the dynamics of exchange."⁷ This is important because Appadurai reminds us that things do not have absolute value intrinsically; rather, the demand for them among people endows them with value, which then constitutes a "regime of value" which changes across space and time.⁸ Appadurai's definition of commodity is actually a lot broader than I need, though it's helpful to accept a definition a little more divorced from production since so many of the objects discussed in the following pages are imported from far outside Nepal and therefore are quite divorced from their production context. This alienation from production plays an important role in my collaborators' experience of appliances. Regimes of value are also useful for my project because they help me think about the changeability, sociality, relations and agentive choices that go into consuming commodities—it allows me to see the relationships between choices about consumption and valuation on an interpersonal level and the large, institutional level that also plays out in this project's connection to theoretical interests surrounding modernity and globalization.⁹ Miller (1995b) works with defining consumption

⁷ Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid*, 31.

himself, noting that “from economics the term [consumption] retains as a primary connotation a debate about the role of goods and services.” But the anthropological focus for him is different. Miller sees experiencing consumption as symptomatic of the rupture and instability inherent in the modernity of Harvey.¹⁰ Following from this, “consumption then may not be about choice, but rather the sense that we have no choice but to attempt to overcome the experience of rupture using those very same goods and images which create for many the sense of modernity as rupture.”¹¹ In this, Miller links consumption directly to another of my key theoretical interests, modernity—and while his sense of “lack of choice” implies also a lack of agency, as we will see in subsequent chapters, many of my interlocutors and other ethnographers in Kathmandu working on similar issues find some resonance in the idea that consumption of commodities is one of the key ways Nepali people position themselves in the changeable world created by modernity and globalization. Miller comments on transnational movement and globalization writ broadly as well, using the notion of “*a posteriori* diversity” to describe “the sense of quite unprecedented diversity created by the differential consumption of what had once been thought to be global and homogenizing institutions.”¹² “*A posteriori* diversity” privileges “new forms of difference” produced by this differential consumption. It doesn’t always happen spatially, in a nod to the dislocations theorized by Appadurai and Gupta and Ferguson, but these “novel forms” are productive of novel possibilities and novel experiences of novel institutions—exactly what I recognized during my research, like in Chapter Two’s discussion of the role of state

¹⁰ Daniel Miller, “Introduction: Anthropology, Modernity, and Consumption,” in *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

infrastructure in shaping appliance discourse and practices, or Chapter Three's unpacking of appliances as a variable marker of symbolic capital.¹³

So, taking from Appadurai the idea that a commodity is any thing which exists to be exchanged, existing within a changeable regime of value, and from Miller that consumption of commodities is a way to work through the extreme refractions of "modernity" produced by the experience of globalization, I turn to the role of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) idea of symbolic capital in this entire zone of commodity consumption. The notion of symbolic capital is a key way to link the economic realities of consumption of commodities to the regimes of value that spring up around them and are typically measured in many ways. These regimes of value extend beyond the monetary or exchange value of commodities into the ways those involved in their consumption can gain or lose non-monetary forms of symbolic capital. Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* defines symbolic capital as all the "relations imposed by kinship, neighborhood, or work, into elective relations of reciprocity...the work of reproducing established relations—through feast, ceremonies, exchanges of gifts, visits or courtesies...which [are] no less vital to the existence of the group than the reproduction of the economic bases of its existence."¹⁴ By extension, Bourdieu identifies economies of practice, which allow these symbolic forms of capital, like honor, information, and the like, to circulate within their own regimes of value.¹⁵ As Katherine Rankin (2004) writes in her own ethnography of "markets" in the Kathmandu Valley, Bourdieu's approach is valuable because it helps us trace power in these

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 171.

¹⁵ Ibid, 180-181.

shifting differentiated practices surrounding commodities and consumption, outside of pure economic disparity.¹⁶ Bourdieu (1984) himself elaborates on this in *Distinction*, a work more directly interested in interrogating the networks of power present in the symbolic capitals introduced in the earlier *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. In it, Bourdieu links symbolic capital to systems used to distinguish different socioeconomic groups in France, explaining that “the manner of using symbolic goods [goods which are closely linked to the development of symbolic capital], especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of ‘class’ and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction.”¹⁷

Distinction also brings the idea of class into the mix. Based on my own experience in the U.S. I found myself describing my project as one where I would be engaging a middle-class community, and working with commodity consumption which felt naturally linked to class. I realized I needed to unpack some of what felt natural or intrinsic to my understanding of class. Bourdieu’s book deals largely with issues specific to the historical and social context of France, where his research was conducted; his definition of “social class” has as much to do with what class *isn’t* as what it is. He writes,

Social class is not defined by a property (not even the most determinant one, such as the volume and composition of capital) nor by a collection of properties (of sex, age, social origin, ethnic origin...income, educational level etc.) nor even by a chain of properties strung out from a fundamental property (position in the relations of production) in a relation of cause and effect, conditioner and conditioned, but by the structure of relations between all the pertinent properties which gives its specific value to each of them and to the effects they exert on practices. Constructing, as we have here, classes as homogenous as possible with respect to the fundamental determinants of the material conditions of existence and the conditionings they impose, therefore means that even in constructing the

¹⁶ Katherine Nelson Rankin, *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 33.

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 66.

classes and in interpreting the variations of the distribution of properties and practices in relation to these classes, one consciously takes into account the network of secondary characteristics which are more or less unconsciously manipulated whenever the classes are defined in terms of a single criterion, even one as pertinent as occupation. It also means grasping the principle of the objective divisions, i.e., divisions internalized or objectified in distinctive properties, on the basis of which the agents are most likely to divide and come together in reality in their ordinary practices, and also to mobilize themselves or be mobilized (in accordance with the specific logic, linked to a specific history, of the mobilizing organizations) by and for individual or collective action.¹⁸

Once we account for all the twisty-turny qualities of Bourdieu's style, this extensive quote is really quite useful. Bourdieu is saying it's impossible to assign certain defining characteristics to classes, because all the different characteristics (here he lists everything from income, sex, age, and race to Marxian relations of production) work together to produce classes. Class is carefully embedded in an entire system of important signifiers in social life, signifiers which change and change and change—an insight which *is* broadly generalizable to a Nepali context. Connected to his earlier work in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu also emphasizes that, practically, the “primary differences” which determine the different classes, “derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers—economic capital, cultural capital, and also social capital. The distribution of the different classes...thus runs from those who are best provided with both economic and cultural capital to those who are most deprived in both respects.”¹⁹ This is also a broadly generalizable idea to apply to the Nepali context; to figure out the differentiation of classes in Nepal, look not only to economic capital, but also to forms of symbolic capital embedded in Nepali culture.

I find Bourdieu's writing most valuable to think with when examining the position of class in my own project, but Mark Liechty (2003) in his work on the “middle class” and

¹⁸ Ibid, 106.

¹⁹ Ibid, 114.

modernity in 1990s Nepal provides a direct commentary on Nepali class and “middle-ness” which is necessary in my own understanding of my project as engaging with members of Nepal’s middle class. Similar to Bourdieu, he writes that “Class is never a ‘thing’ that exists by itself, prior to, or outside of, its actual performance in everyday life. Approaching class as *process* rather than *object* allows me to show how middle-class culture in Kathmandu grows out of cultural practices. . . .the practice of class in Kathmandu is tied to, but does not simply reflect, global patterns of capitalist promotion, distribution, and labor relations.”²⁰ Liechty also convincingly argues that there is something especially productive in focusing on the *middle* class, noting that its “extraordinarily complex culture—with its myriad forms of competing cultural capital, its ambiguous and anxiety-inducing relationship with the capitalist market, its intricate systems of dissimulation (whereby it hides its class privilege in everyday practice)—along with its increasingly dominant role in cultural process worldwide, that makes it an important and timely subject of anthropological enquiry.”²¹ Once again engaging in implicit conversation with Bourdieu, Liechty emphasizes again and again the role of “middle-classness” as a process, project, or practice, allowing for the fluidity of change and flexibility necessary for my project and other projects like it, and avoiding the ineffectual and limiting rigid categories of a positivist or classically structuralist approach to the topics at hand.²²

Turning away from the broadest of theoretical concerns needed to interpret my research, I will use this space to finally comment on some of the most influential anthropological works in

²⁰ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 37-38.

²¹ *Ibid*, 10-11.

²² *Ibid*, 21.

Nepal studies; the field, especially outside of Himalayan studies and Tibetan studies, is remarkably small, so a short summary of influential and applicable pieces will suffice. Nanda R. Shrestha, a somewhat influential leftist development economist born and raised in genteel poverty in Nepal's second city of Pokhara, offers our first taste of a popular analytic in Nepal studies with his (a bit odd) memoir-cum-anti-international-development-screed, *In the Name of Development* (1997), writing that “*bikas* was generally associated with objects such as roads, airplanes, dams, hospitals, fancy buildings, etc. Also viewed as a key component of *bikas* was education, for it was proclaimed to be essential to building human capital...but education had to be modern, emphasizing science, technology, and English, the language of *bikas*.”²³ This statement is more fully fleshed out in some of the earliest still-useful and heavily cited Nepal studies texts, Stacey Pigg's lengthy ethnographic articles from the 1990s, “The Credible and the Credulous” (1996) and “Inventing Social Categories Through Place” (1992). Though her fieldsites are uniformly rural Nepal, Pigg's background as a development anthropologist and her succinct conclusions have proved particularly useful to many of the later ethnographic students of the country, and will crop up again in later chapters of this work. Her most influential contribution lies in her excavation of how *bikās*, or “development” in Nepali, becomes reified by her interlocutors, attached to objects, places, and kinds of people. She writes, “[in Nepal,] there are places of much *bikās* (*dherai bikās*), little *bikās* (*thorai bikās*), and no *bikās* (*bikās chhaina*). *Bikas* is quantifiable in this way because in common usage it connotes things: new breeds of goats and chickens, water pipes, electricity, videos, schools, commercial fertilizer, roads,

²³ Nanda R. Shrestha, *In the Name of Development: A Reflection on Nepal* (New York: University Press of America, 1997), 45.

airplanes, health posts, and medicines.”²⁴ She summarizes this succinctly in an oft-quoted sentence from “The Credible and the Credulous:” “For Nepalis, modernity is not an abstraction. It is an idea rendered meaningful and concrete through their involvement with the ideologies and institutional practices of development.”²⁵

The latter quote of Pigg’s forms the epigraph to part of Mark Liechty’s *Suitably Modern* (2003), certainly the single most influential ethnography to come out of Nepal in this millennium, and one which had significant influence on my own project. I even emailed Mark at one point in Nepal, asking if he had any Nepali contacts I could reach out to for local academic perspectives (he said there was “no one”). The single most important concept espoused by Liechty was that of the *ijjat*, or “honor,” economy, a form of symbolic capital in Bourdieu’s sense unique to late 20th and early 21st century middle class urban Nepalis. *Ijjat* is a Nepali word directly translating to honor which was quite common among Liechty’s interlocutors, though he often uses it interchangeably with morality, a phrasing I find more palatable as my collaborators never used the word *ijjat* that I can think of. He describes the morality economy as a “challenge:” “the challenge for an emergent middle class is to construct a *between space* that both adopts modernity as a means of distinguishing itself from those below and morally critiques modernity as a means of separating itself from the national elite [*italics in original*].”²⁶ In fact, “morality tales are among the key narratives of middle-classness [in Nepal]...many other people

²⁴ Stacy Leigh Pigg, “Inventing Social Categories Through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal,” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (1992), 499.

²⁵ Stacy Leigh Pigg, “The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of ‘Villagers’ Beliefs’ in Nepal,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (1996): 172.

²⁶ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 67.

in Kathmandu create themselves as middle-class subjects through stories that characterize those above and below as essentially immoral.”²⁷

Liechty’s *ijjat* economy concept was influential almost immediately; the final piece I’ll review here, Katherine Rankin’s *The Cultural Politics of Markets* (2004), published only a year later, was already utilizing it to great effect. Her book revolves around the experience of Newari people in the Kathmandu Valley in the 1990s, adapting to “markets” writ large as they changed with the increasing transnational interconnectedness present in post-1990 Nepal. She writes, following both Bourdieu generally and Liechty more specifically,

the “markets” to which the title of this book refers encompass transactions not only in land, money, labor and commodities, but also in honor and other forms of “social investment.” The focus is not so much on the mechanics of supply, demand, and the flow of information—though these are also worthy and important areas of ethnographic investigations—but on the cultural meanings that surround markets as a form of social production, on the ways in which social institutions and economies of practice interact.²⁸

Her book was particularly valuable to me in demonstrating ways to utilize Bourdieu and Appadurai’s notions of symbolic capital and regimes of value, respectively, in a Nepali context, but it also fills something of a gap left by Liechty’s book by devoting considerable examination to caste and gender in the very much tradition-bound Newar community, which came to be quite useful to me in Chapter Three of this work.²⁹ Her work also drives home the importance of Liechty’s formulation of symbolic capital as an honor or morality economy, which was not directly evident in my own research, as when Rankin writes “Within a commoditized regime of

²⁷ Ibid, 70.

²⁸ Katherin Neilson Rankin, *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 33.

²⁹ Ibid, 129.

value, the material aspects of honor (deriving from displays of wealth, not only *matter more*, but also require displays of ever more modern, fashionable, and valuable commodities.”³⁰

Historical Overview

Here I intend to provide a brief overview of Nepal’s modern history, which, perhaps more than any theoretical positioning, best demonstrates why it is such a unique place to examine issues of modernity, globalization, and transnational change within. The concept of time-space compression, where the “progress” of modernity jostles elbows with still-medieval sensibilities, seems splattered across every facet of Nepal’s past three hundred or so years; the folk musician Cat Stevens described the experience of this reality as Kathmandu’s “strange, bewildering time” in 1970’s “Katmandu,” written in a “smoky teahouse off Asan Tol,” in one of Kathmandu’s oldest neighborhoods. The fact remains that a country where, as recently as 1951, fewer than five out of every hundred people could read is now a place where one of my interlocutors identified a television and mobile phone as the most important “electric things” for a family to own, and that fact provokes questions in all but the least curious among us.³¹

Nepal’s modern era is widely taken to have begun in 1769, when the Gorkha prince Prithvi Narayan Shah conquered all three Malla kings of the Kathmandu Valley and, essentially, unified Nepal.³² It was Prithvi Narayan who famously described Nepal as “a yam squeezed between two rocks”³³ of China and India, setting the stage for a history marred by domestic

³⁰ Ibid, 177.

³¹ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 169.

³² Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 40; Nanda R. Shrestha and Keshav Bhattarai, *Historical Dictionary of Nepal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), xxxix; John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37.

³³ Ibid.

instability and marked by rapidly shifting relations with powers north, south, and eventually far afield of the tiny, landlocked and geographically wildly diverse country (“about the size of Florida”) nestled among the world’s tallest mountains.³⁴ The Shah dynasty ruled absolutely as Hindu monarchs for the following 80 years, a time during which they expanded Nepal’s territory to the east, south, and west, reaching eventual control over a space roughly twice as big as today’s Nepal. This brought them to the attention of the British East India Company (EIC) which was simultaneously extending its own reach in today’s India; to prevent the Shahs from encroaching on their territories, the EIC provoked then-de facto-monarch Bhimsen Thapa to the Anglo-Nepali War of 1814-1816, the end of which brought defeat to the Nepalis and a reduction in territory to a space approximately contiguous with the state’s current international borders.³⁵ More importantly, the War’s end brought the establishment of the EIC’s “permanent resident” to the Shah court in Kathmandu and officially established diplomatic relations between Nepal and the outside world (excepting ongoing unofficial trading relationships with Tibetan merchants in Lhasa). John Whelpton in his definitive history of Nepal describes the post-1816 Shah years as a masterclass in managing international meddling, writing that “[Bhimsen Thapa] for many years successfully played both [Nepali elites and EIC officials] against the middle. He scrupulously obeyed the terms of the 1816 agreement and encouraged the British to see him as their guarantee

³⁴ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 39.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41; Nanda R. Shrestha and Keshav Bhattarai, *Historical Dictionary of Nepal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 21; John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

of peace. He also maintained a large standing army and presented himself to his own countrymen as their bulwark against further British intervention.”³⁶

However, Shah autocracy (the first time around, at least) was short-lived, with the first of several infamous “court massacres” occurring in 1846. Jung Bahadur Rana, a minor courtier at the Shah court, plotted a way to consolidate power in a system otherwise riven by factionalism. His co-conspirators lured the then-Queen Regent’s most trusted advisor into an ambush in his own home late one evening, and after the Queen called all her remaining advisors to the palace to determine a course of action, Jung Bahadur’s family, stationed around the Queen’s *Kot*, or courtyard, opened fire. “Jung had achieved a feat that no previous [court] clan (ruling political faction) leader had: to render all competing factions of the ruling class hapless in one bloody palace massacre. As a result, the Ranas became the sole axis of social, economic, and political power in Nepal.”³⁷

The Rana system, though politically convoluted in its own right, ruled Nepal autocratically for a hundred years, from 1846 to 1951. While the Shahs are largely important for unifying Nepal, the Ranas are the key to much of the historical conditions still affecting Nepali life in the 20th and 21st centuries. They were far more pro-British, for example, than any Shah ever was, and strengthened Nepal-India relations enormously from 1885 forward. Shrestha and Bhattarai go so far as to claim the Ranas “openly allowed Nepal to be a semi-colony,” but John Whelpton has a more nuanced take.³⁸ He notes that “all [Ranas] had been educated to some level

³⁶ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

³⁷ Nanda R. Shrestha and Keshav Bhattarai, *Historical Dictionary of Nepal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 22.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

in English and, while still a little wary of British intentions, they did not feel the deep suspicion of *firangis*... The new attitude was also helped by a major change in British policy in India after the Mutiny crisis of 1857... greater caution now ruled, and the British were anxious to sustain rather than supplant what remained of traditional political structures.”³⁹ Liechty brings the focus back to commodities in his assessment of the Rana period, writing that “the Ranas established a ‘foreign goods department’ in Kathmandu and a ‘buying agency’ in Calcutta that mail-ordered goods from European department stores and supply houses for the ‘domestic requirements’ of the elite class. Porters continued to carry huge items, like massive luxury vehicles and multiton equestrian statues, over the treacherous trails that the Ranas ‘maintained’ in a state of disrepair as a matter of national defense.”⁴⁰ Interestingly, despite the autocracy and extractive nature of much of Rana rule, during this time the use of Nepali “Gurkha” soldiers in British World War I and World War II regiments brought a taste for consumption to the masses upon their return as well; in response, great quantities of imported consumer goods from agricultural and home implements to shoes flowed in, largely from Japan, while a market in European cloth and luxury goods begun by the Rana elite continued to thrive.⁴¹

Eventually, the overthrowing of colonial regimes across Asia in the post-WWII period and the widening inequalities produced within Nepal by Rana rule resulted in the foment of powerful anti-Rana sentiment, and in 1951 the last Rana relinquished power to the (until then

³⁹ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 61.

⁴⁰ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 44-45.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 45; John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77.

still-extant but nominal) Shah king, at that time King Tribhuvan.⁴² But the political parties, such as the Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), which had agitated against the Ranas, took the opportunity to cajole Tribhuvan's successor, King Mahendra, into holding national elections in 1959. These were Nepal's *first* elections, period. Ever. And the Parliament being elected still wouldn't hold much power; Nepal's constitution at the time still vested ultimate control of all branches of the government with the Shah monarch. But even with this quite narrow brief, the government formed by B.P. Koirala of the Nepali Congress in 1959 displeased King Mahendra greatly; within a year, he had executed another (though this time thankfully bloodless) "palace coup" and deposed the elected government in favor of "partyless Panchayat democracy," a sham form of village-based governance that existed to rubber-stamp the Shah monarch's will.⁴³ This system continued until 1990, at which time further democratic reforms forced the Shahs to constitutionalize their direct monarchy and allow for a second set of genuine elections in 1991, again won by the Nepali Congress.⁴⁴

But again there were deadlocks among Nepal's elite politicians; an election called in 1994 resulted in a hung parliament, though the CPN won the greatest number of seats. The continuing instability throughout the 1990s led directly to one of the most influential aspects of recent Nepali history on my own experience of Nepal: the ten-year Nepali People's War, waged by CPN-Maoist cadres from the state's rural hinterlands between 1996 and 2006. When the insurgency broke out, it was largely confined to ethnic-minority dominated hill regions, but 2001

⁴² Nanda R. Shrestha and Keshav Bhattarai, *Historical Dictionary of Nepal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), xlv.

⁴³ *Ibid*, xlvi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, xlix.

marked a turning point.⁴⁵ On the night of June 1st, a final, and horrifically violent, palace massacre occurred at the modern Narayanhiti Palace in central Kathmandu. I'll let Whelpton narrate the events:

On the evening of 1 June, members of the royal family assembled at the Tribhuvan Sadan, a small complex of buildings just inside the west gate of the Narayanhiti Palace, for their regular monthly gathering. Towards 8:30 P.M. Crown Prince Dipendra, who had been drinking whisky, appeared intoxicated and was helped to his room by Paras, son of King Birendra's brother Gyanendra, and other relatives. Dipendra was there handed cigarettes laced with a 'black substance' (possibly cocaine), which he had instructed an orderly to bring before leaving the hall. A few minutes later, two servants went to his room, after a close friend, Devyani Rana, alarmed by his slurred speech on the telephone, alerted his aide-de-camp. They found Dipendra lying on the floor and helped him to the bathroom, but he then ordered them to leave. At around 9 P.M., Dipendra reappeared in the hall wearing combat dress and carrying an array of weapons including a submachine gun and an automatic rifle. After shooting his father, he withdrew but returned twice to open fire again. In the space of a couple of minutes he killed outright or fatally injured King Birendra himself, the king's daughter Shruti, brother Dhirendra, sisters Shanti and Sharada, and niece Jayanti, as well as Sharada's husband, Kumar Khadga. Also hit, though not fatally, were Gyanendra's wife Komal Shah, Shruti's husband, Gorakh Bikram Shah, another of Birendra's nieces, Ketaki Chester, and his youngest sister, Princess Shoba. Paras Shah was present in the hall throughout but escaped unhurt, having pleaded with Dipendra not to shoot, and assisted some of the family to hide behind a sofa... The crown prince had been followed out into the garden by his mother, Queen Aishwarya, and his brother, Nirajan; he apparently shot both of them before turning a handgun on himself.⁴⁶

The 2001 palace massacre has taken on a sensational narrative allure in tourist (and some Nepali) quarters--I remember visiting the Narayanhiti Palace, now a museum, in late March of last year; the tour of the palace is organized so that visitors approach the Tribhuvan Sadan last. While the furniture has all been removed from the halls (unlike in the rest of the museum) and most traces scrubbed away fully sixteen years later, the walls and bricks of the garden are pockmarked with

⁴⁵ Michael Hutt, "Introduction," in *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, Michael Hutt, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 5-6.

⁴⁶ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 211-212.

carefully labeled bullet holes; “here is the place where Crown Prince Dipendra shot Queen Aishwarya,” one was labeled in Nepali and English. Uniformed Nepali soldiers carefully guarded every entry and exit to the area, guiding the steady stream of visitors through coolly.

But I do not devote such space to the massacre here because of its sensational nature. Rather, I address the massacre because it played such a dynamic role in the acceleration of the Maoist movement. The only members of the Shah family to survive were King Birendra’s brother, Gyanendra, his wife, and their son, Paras. Conspiracy theories swirled around the event, as an official inquiry was declared and little information was available to the public. The Shahs were still hugely popular among many Nepalis at the time, and given the history of court intrigue in the Shah palaces and the unpopular image of Gyanendra (who had at one point tried to usurp Mahendra’s throne in the 1950s during a previous time of instability), huge numbers of people believed the whole event to be an elaborate conspiracy rigged by Gyanendra to gain the crown.⁴⁷ The Maoists utilized this loss of faith in the Shahs to great effect; they painted Gyanendra as an imperialist stooge and, looking back on the events, 2001 was the year when the tide truly turned in the Maoists’ favor. Five years later, Gyanendra was forced to abdicate in disgrace, and the CPN, CPN-Maoist, and Congress worked together over the following years to draft a fresh constitution and hold elections once again. Maoism in Nepal still maintains a strong hold on consciousness and has affected the experience of Kathmandu’s residence in everyday life in both extreme and subtle ways that will be explored further in later chapters, but their role in fueling conspiracy theories post-massacre highlights one key effect: the CPN-M produced a marked environment of suspicion for decades in Nepal, one which only further destabilized the rapid

⁴⁷ Ibid, 215; Michael Hutt, “Introduction,” in *Himalayan People’s War: Nepal’s Maoist Rebellion*, Michael Hutt, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 7.

sociopolitical shifting and compression brought by a historically defined encounter with modernity.⁴⁸

Moving away from high political domestic history (marked by cataclysmic instability which has not abated), the other key aspect of Nepal's recent history for the purposes of this project is its relationship to foreign aid and "development"—particularly in the realms of transportation infrastructure and media. By the end of the last century, about U.S. \$5.2 billion had been transferred to Nepali coffers as grants and "soft" loans from both bilateral and multilateral (country-to-country and international organization) sources since 1951.⁴⁹ The vast majority of early efforts attempted to efficiently improve rural agriculture, but for a variety of reasons, from landlordism to Panchayat inertia, made these pretty much entirely unsuccessful.⁵⁰ As a result, "the most visible achievement of development efforts after 1951 was in infrastructure. The expansion of the road network was particularly dramatic: from only 276 kilometers at the end of the Rana period, this had expanded to 7330 by 1990. Although twenty-four of seventy-five district headquarters were still without a road link and had to be supplied by porters or by air, it was now possible to drive between all the main centers of population."⁵¹ On top of this, communication methods were significantly expanded through international

⁴⁸ See Judith Pettigrew, *Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday Life in Nepal's Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) for a book-length analysis of suspicion and conspiracy among villagers during the People's War.

⁴⁹ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 48; John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 128.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 135-136.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 137.

development projects. Given Nepal's low literacy rates (from the less than five percent in 1951 previously mentioned to still only 39 percent in 1990), radio is hugely important and Radio Nepal has been broadcasting since 1951, though originally only state news, Rana/Shah propaganda and Nepali music was broadcast.⁵² Nepal Television began in 1985 and took another few years to reach major population centers in Nepal; filling the gaps were many Hindi-language media from India.⁵³ It was these developments that allowed the increasing penetration of imported consumer goods in the urban Nepali market. Again, one must remember that for hundreds of years before the Tribhuvan Rajpath was constructed between India and Kathmandu in the 1950s, all goods had to be transported on the backs of "porters," trekking up to over 4,000 feet in elevation pulling things as heavy as cars with only their own human strength, or occasionally a "ropeway."

I will summarize this brief historical overview with a quote from Mark Liechty, who acknowledges exactly this point but notes that it is both more and less liberating than one might assume:

Submersion in this cash economy by no means implies financial liberation for Kathmandu's middle class. An aura of cash/consumer abundance may permeate every street corner, magazine, and movie, but realizing that abundance always seems to lie just beyond arm's reach. Between the wealthy elite and the urban poor are those people who must constantly renegotiate their positions in a consumer market that both offers them access to the middle class and threatens to drag them into poverty...faced with mounting consumer demands, fixed incomes, and spiraling inflation, many middle-class families coped by pooling several incomes, (with heads of family often holding down several jobs), renting inherited family property (either locally or in their rural home villages), or engaging in illegal activities (taking bribes, falsifying trade documents, smuggling, etc). Middle-class families in Kathmandu are, almost by definition, those people caught between state- and business-promulgated images and ideologies of

⁵² For detailed discussion of radio's role in Nepali culture and politics, please see the work of Laura Kunreuther.

⁵³ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138-139.

abundance and progress and the reality of fixed (often declining) incomes and an ever more competitive local prestige economy.⁵⁴

Liechty's point here relates directly to the topics explored in my own project; as Liechty notes, the changes advanced over Nepal's modern era did not produce a straightforward socioeconomic or sociopolitical narrative. Nepal's recent history demonstrates the extent to which consumption and commodities represent such a strong lens for exploring the complex relationships between globalization, the state, and the transnational local as my project attempts to do.

Methodology and Ethics

All of my research was conducted in Kathmandu, and all the women I collaborated with lived within the neighborhoods of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, Kalopul, Chandol, Baluwatar, and Gairidhara. Combined, these neighborhoods cover significantly less than two square kilometers, and are closely interconnected. Kathmandu itself is often perceived as “fascinating,” “strange,” “bewildering.” One set of authors wrote that it had “one of its legs stuck in the medieval times and another floating in the 21st century.”⁵⁵ Another, an American leftist journalist traveling the country to write about the Maoist uprising, wrote, with a lack of nuance, that “there is a weird mix [in Kathmandu] of overwhelming poverty and lack of infrastructure, dotted with spots of high-tech development that have been brought in to cater to tourists and foreign business. Most of the [Nepali] people in Kathmandu are forced to live hand-to-mouth in impoverished conditions. Meanwhile a rooftop sign on a luxury hotel, perched next to a big satellite dish,

⁵⁴ Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle Class Identity in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 52.

⁵⁵ Nanda R. Shrestha and Keshav Bhattarai, *Historical Dictionary of Nepal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 185.

advertises ‘sauna, massage, restaurant and bar.’⁵⁶ All this is true of some parts of Kathmandu, but not exactly my experience of the spots I conducted my research in. When I got out of those touristy neighborhoods and went deeper into the warrens of streets in the city’s older, originally Newari neighborhoods like the ones in which my project was focused, I found a different picture. These neighborhoods are typically characterized by Kathmandu residents as middle class and upper middle class, though slightly old-fashioned and dilapidated in comparison to Kathmandu’s new suburbs, and a focal point for all in my study is the Bhatbhateni supermarket, central to the homes of everyone worked with and on the main street that cuts through the center of the area studied. This supermarket is directly across the street from the Bhatbhateni temple built by Newar families hundreds of years ago; the Newars are Kathmandu’s indigenous population, and their tradition of “identifying strongly with their immediate neighborhood, still often seen as centered around a particular religious shrine,” has spread to the non-Newar folks in these areas, and neighborhood religious landmarks like the “tree temple,” Bhatbhateni temple, Tangal temple, or Gahana Pokhari man-made pond were the language of space in my neighborhood of Kathmandu.⁵⁷

I very intentionally use the words “collaborated” and “collaborator,” because this project is highly qualitative in nature and my largely unstructured research methodology makes my data as much about what these women chose to share with me after learning about my project as it is about what I decided I wanted to know. The primary theoretical referents for my research design lie in the work of Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault. De Certeau’s work in *The Practice of Everyday Life* demonstrates how interrogating the broad theoretical questions broached above in

⁵⁶ Li Onesto, *Dispatches from the People’s War in Nepal* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004), 49.

⁵⁷ John Whelpton, *A History of Nepal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 181.

the context of the home can be valid; he traces an argument where “[consumption] is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order [italics in original].”⁵⁸ The key for doing this is through language, and by examining the “ways of using” and how “users” discuss the “ways of using,” the researcher can get at broader, more theoretical or sometimes grounded, structural concerns. De Certeau describes it thusly: “a *way of using* imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal points of reference. This is where the opacity of a ‘popular’ culture could be said to manifest itself—a dark rock that resists all assimilation.”⁵⁹ While my project is not overtly political in the sense that I rarely discussed politics as such with my collaborators and I am not entirely interested in household appliances and collaborators’ relationships to them as some form of resistance, I do believe de Certeau’s formulation is valuable for validating the importance of the everyday experience, the popular culture as it were, of appliance purchase and usage in Kathmandu for examining the relationships of my interlocutors to ideas of modernity, development, class, consumption, or globalization and transnational meeting—relationships which may not always be contestatory or resistant but are complex and rarely fit into relationship models I as an American researcher am familiar with.

⁵⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xii-xiii.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 18.

Building on this understanding, I think with Foucault's elaborations on discourse when working with my data. Foucault assumes that discourse—our thoughts, words, conversations governed by rules, systems, and procedures—is primarily limited or constituted by our “will to knowledge.”⁶⁰ He illuminates that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.”⁶¹ Importantly, the will to knowledge as a boundary on discourse is “renewed, no doubt...profoundly, by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorized, distributed, and in a sense attributed, in a society.”⁶² In the context of my project, this can be applied to the conversations I had with collaborators. If I examine their words and actions critically as an example of a discourse surrounding their household appliances, I can piece together a more generalized understanding of Nepali perceptions of broad theoretical issues. I can zero-in on the data and follow Foucault's suggestions to look for what these discourses I'm observing are limiting and narrowing, and try to see them as discontinuous and comparable, products of specific conditions rather than rarefied outgrowths of an unlimited discourse. Through specifying what *is* a discourse in Nepali experiences of household appliances, I can uncover a discourse as a regular, specific practice rather than assuming its self-evidence—this then privileges the key aspect of my project, looking *from* the discourse without to what it interacts with externally (i.e. how Nepalis interact with external objects and topics like

⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: a Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 48.

⁶¹ Ibid, 52.

⁶² Ibid, 55.

globalization, transnational interaction, and development) rather than looking within it to find some kind of nucleus.⁶³

To pursue this Foucauldian discourse analysis to get at the generalized frameworks guiding the relationship between my collaborators, appliances, and broader theoretical concerns, I conducted mostly unstructured but somewhat guided interviews (refer to Appendix A for the guide used) with 10 different women in Kathmandu, and conducted participant observation in their homes. All research took place in Nepali; having obtained an “advanced-low” ACTFL score immediately before starting fieldwork I was confident in my language skills and found that conducting research in Nepali contributed significantly to the project, as it allowed me to communicate with Nepalis who maybe didn’t speak English well enough for me to feel comfortable conducting this sort of project with Nepali collaborators in English. However, Nepali is my fourth non-native language (after German, Hindi, and Urdu) and I’d only been studying it for two and a half months prior to starting the research period; lack of genuine fluency was one of the reasons I did require a guide for my interviews—I felt much more confident in my ability to touch on all the topics I considered important if I had a few questions translated into Nepali for each topic readily at hand.

Ethics were central to my project, as it mostly consisted of entering private citizens’ homes, often for extended periods of time, and liberally citing these individuals’ words and practices in the service of my argument. As such, I foregrounded verbal assent, not mere consent, and obtained clear verbal agreement from all collaborators before using their experiences as data. As I navigated a crisis of representation that was truly torturous at times, returning to these assent statements was hugely valuable for my process as well as ethically

⁶³ Ibid, 67.

responsible; I understand that many anthropologists are unable to take formal consent/assent statements and it doesn't always make sense, so I was planning on collecting them merely as a matter of IRB approval and ethics. However, I was surprised by the value of these assent statements in my research process overall. I made judicious use of recordings in my data collection, so I also made sure to obtain verbal assent to record prior to beginning participant observation with any collaborator. To combat power differentials inherent in the researcher/researched and foreign/local dynamics, I utilized common South Asian fictive kinship terms such as "*didī*" (older sister) and "aunty," as well as respectful verb conjugations in conversations with collaborators, to put them in positions of authority over me. I also offered to provide English language copies and/or summaries of my final research project, but as none of my collaborators were fluent in English this offer was roundly rejected. Collaborators were informed that, regardless of personal preference (many were perfectly fine with my using their real name), I would be assigning all of them pseudonyms in my final product; women were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym, but this option was also uniformly rejected. As everyone interviewed had a South Asian name of Hindu origin, I randomly assigned all ten collaborators common South Asian Hindu names which would not be out of place in any Indian or Nepali context.

While the majority of collaborators (eight) were upper-caste Nepali Hindus, a significant number came from outside the dominant "middle hills" districts of Nepal (where Kathmandu is located) and two self-identified as indigenous, belonging to the uniquely syncretic Buddhist Newar community, which originally inhabited the city of Kathmandu and controlled the Kathmandu Valley political unit prior to the ascendancy of the still-dominant *pahariya* ("hill-dwelling") *Brahmin-Chhetri*, or upper-caste Hindus (deriving caste origin from the two highest

varna, known in India as *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya*). Given the somewhat more heterogeneous than expected caste, regional, and ethnic backgrounds of collaborators I struggled with the assignation of pseudonyms, which felt violent, but was required by my IRB. Another heterogeneous data set was employment; one worked from home, five worked outside the home, and four did not work. Other identity markers among my collaborators were largely homogenous; all but one was married (though one was widowed), all but that same unmarried one had children, varying in age from adult (in their twenties, moved out of the house and sometimes married themselves) to quite young (Mallika's youngest child is a five-year-old son).

My original plan was to blindly source collaborators from stores which sold appliances, like Bhatbhateni supermarket and their competitor, CG Electronics. However, given limitations including length of project (a mere four weeks) and personal discomfort approaching strangers, especially for a project which requires somewhat intimate research in the collaborators' homes, I instead opted to utilize the built-in network of family, family friends, and friends of friends accessible to me through my Nepali homestay family. While I sacrificed the randomization identifying participants through cold approaches at the store would have provided, I ultimately believe my approach benefitted the project. Being able to focus intensely on a small geographic area cut down on potential uncontrollable variables and utilizing a network of people already connected through social and kinship ties assured the general comparability of class and life experience which lent itself best to my research goals. All this helped shape a project that produced conclusions I am able to substantiate despite a relatively small participant sample and short time frame for ethnographic work. Randomization is not key to a qualitative and interpretive study such as mine, as long as I can successfully characterize and acknowledge the influence of my collaborator acquisition method. Lastly, this approach allowed me to cast my

relationship with collaborators as that of a family friend, fictive family member, or friend of friend, which allowed me greater access and helped produce equity between myself and my collaborators as described above.

A typical collaborator visit consisted of the “interview” described above and a much looser period of participant observation. I recorded the “interview,” which usually lasted for about a half hour, to make sure I had recorded material to base discursive analysis on, as my original research design privileged discourse analysis. I also asked each woman to give me a formal tour of her home following this recorded conversation. The rest of the participant observation varied greatly from woman to woman; I really hit it off with some of them, and if they weren’t too busy I’d stay in their house, hanging out or playing with their kids, for several hours after the interview had taken place. Others had commitments, but said I was welcome back anytime, so occasionally I’d drop in for a cup of tea to collect a little more data. Some I only met with once. I did my best to ensure I drank a cup of tea and/or had a snack or meal at every house, since this was typically a great opportunity to observe and participate in the everyday practices surrounding home appliances, and made the whole situation feel more comfortable and informal for everyone involved. Nepali cultural practices highly privilege guests (a common proverb literally translates to “guest is god”), so visiting someone’s home for the first time could feel quite stiff and intimidating, but after taking a cup of tea and making a few language mistakes, typically we were all much more at ease.

I took detailed notes on these visits and transcribed and translated the recorded material myself. Analysis of the data attempts to identify primary sociocultural discourses surrounding appliances and uncovers contemporary discourses of modernity, globalization, class, consumption, and change as mediated through appliance practices.

In addition to these ten primary collaborative relationships, observational research was conducted in visits to the New Road shopping area, Bhatbhateni, and the flagship appliance showrooms on Durbar Marg, which my collaborators informed me were some of the most common purchase points in the city. My original intention was to take interviews with retailers at these locations, but these never materialized, so instead I took the position of a potential consumer, observing the discourses of sales and the ways these discourses do and do not match up with the discourses I found at home. This inquiry into sales was supplemented with analysis of women's magazines, commercials, and print ads in Kathmandu's malls, stores, magazines, and newspapers to get a feel for contemporary advertising discourses.

Outline

The remainder of this work consists of three argumentative chapters and a brief conclusion. Chapter Two covers discourses of health and wellness. It looks at the system-level changes development, globalization, and modernity can bring to things like infrastructure and how that can seriously impact individuals, both practically and in terms of their beliefs and discourses. Additionally, it engages briefly with the anthropology of suspicion and conspiracy that crops up when great transnational changes in the experience of everyday life become apparent on a personal level. Chapter Three engages directly with data on class and socioeconomic status. It explores my collaborators' discourse within the narrative of recent Nepali history and the role of Maoism, as well as gesturing towards the importance of gender—a topic which lurks consistently in the background of so much of the work I did in Nepal, though it is difficult to confront directly on the basis of my current body of data. Chapter Four presents a meditation on the role of “public culture,” drawing on the work of Arjun Appadurai, among

others, in shaping the practices and ways of using appliances. It is in many ways the least concrete of the chapters, as so many of my ideas on this topic stem from data made up of carefully embedded practices which came naturally to my collaborators; I observed them regularly, but rarely found a way to discuss them fruitfully with my interlocutors and never felt fully confident in my understanding of them. These half-formed but compelling thoughts of mine are supplemented by detailed analysis of secondary data sources, like advertisements, which I approach from a material culture perspective. I avoid entering fully into a visual anthropology realm of analysis as I would truly be biting off more than I could chew if I did so—but I do engage briefly with visual anthropology projects set in other parts of the world.

The thread which links each of these chapters is less an overarching thesis about the anthropology of appliance usage in contemporary urban Nepal and more a memoir-like reflection on my own experience as researcher, writer, and fledgling ethnographer. The epigraph to this thesis is a quote from the Twitter account belonging to Deathnography, an anonymous trained anthropologist who uses memes and online discourse to comment on anthropology: “maybe the real anthropology is the anxiety we experienced along the way.” What this means to me is really quite simple. The data and analysis contained herein are unique and previously unexplored, and I’m proud of how much I grew as a scholar over the course of the 15 months I spent between Day One in Nepal and the final day of my thesis year. I did gain a valuable, person-scaled lens on the theoretical issues I’ve been so passionate about since I was first exposed to the kind of social theory that makes up the backbone of anthropology. That’s true. But to be honest, I learned much, much more about myself, and the process of *doing* anthropology. I’ve already alluded to the torturous moments I experienced in my own crisis of representation and ethical considerations when designing this project, but those are just some of the most deeply felt

moments of *personal* growth this project enabled for me. In addition, I experienced so many of the growing pains of the social scientist, from finding a way to manage all the dead time spent alone by your phone, cold-calling potential collaborators, to swallowing your shyness and social anxiety to actually show up to the first meeting with a new interlocutor, to experiencing the violence of transcription (and translation!) for the first time. In the future, I may not have as many opportunities to examine these experiences in concert with the more traditional data my research produces, so I'm grateful for the chance to do so here. I can only hope my readers find it somewhat illuminating, as opposed to merely overt navel-gazing.

Chapter Two

Wellness, Infrastructure, and Suspicion: The Deeply Felt Experience of Change

April 15th, 2017, Handigaun, Kathmandu; 10:00 AM

The dusty, flat turnoff from the main road was a lot wider and smoother than mine, a ten-minute walk up the hill towards the Tangal *mandir*⁶⁴ bus stop. The houses were a lot bigger, and they looked like standalone, single-family homes. My *galli*⁶⁵ was apartments, big rectangular apartments with front balconies and skinny little alleys between the buildings, just wide enough to let light into the windows of each floor. Typically, there were neighborhood shops on the ground floors. I had been down this *galli* before since three other American students lived with families here. We had last congregated here on Holi, a month ago now, “playing colors” with local kids as we traipsed down to the neighborhood Holi party at a private pool-cum-Astroturf-soccer-training-ground. Now, in mid-April, the three who had lived here were gone on their own research projects. I stopped where the *galli* dead-ended at three large corrugated-sheet metal gates and slipped through the red one on my left, ascending the creaky spiraling metal staircase outside to the second floor. The last time I’d been at Sushmita aunty’s house, the school behind it had been hosting a weekend dance competition, and tinny, low-fidelity Nepali classical music had boomed across the wide courtyard to filter through the open windows. Today, at the slowest time of the morning in Kathmandu, the house was much quieter. There were the typical noises of neighborhood kids, stray dogs, and motorcycle horns, but I didn’t even notice these anymore. The TV still blared from the sitting room, where I made a polite greeting to Sushmita’s lawyer husband, who regularly worked from home. Raju, Sushmita’s “helping son,” was perched on the

⁶⁴ Nepali for “temple.”

⁶⁵ Nepali for “alley;” also connotes a closely-knit neighborhood of a few buildings.

couch next to a pile of different sections of the local paper, his eight-year-old eyes wide as saucers as he watched whatever was on.

“Raju!” Sushmita called from the kitchen. “Is that Mausami *didi*? Bring her here!” Raju tore his eyes away from the TV and grinned at me as we made our way back past the house’s entry and bathroom on the right, bedrooms on the left, straight into Sushmita aunty’s large kitchen. “Are you hungry?” Sushmita asked. “Can I make you some *chiyaa*?” I politely accepted the tea and refused the food. “Raju,” Sushmita continued, “You know you can’t watch TV until after you’ve done the dishes!” Raju nodded, grabbed a stepstool from the corner and started in on the pile of dishes Sushmita had just cleared from the table. Most Nepalis eat two meals a day—one around nine or ten in the morning and one around seven or eight at night, and Sushmita’s family had just finished their morning meal. She briskly wiped down a couple of *tamatarko achaar* stains from the welcoming kitchen table, gestured at the chair she had pulled out for me, and started to gather the ingredients for the richly milky, sickly sweet tea all Nepalis drink. Her flyaway hairs, escaped from their clasp at the nape of her neck, stood out in stark relief against the household shrine to her right in the kitchen’s corner, decked out as it was with tinsel ribbons and multicolored string lights.

Sushmita defied my expectations of a Nepali housewife, as every one of my collaborators did in their own way. It turned out she had taken a degree in Nepali literature from Tribhuvan University and parlayed it into a business career, owning for years what she described as a “boutique” in the neighborhood, which she had sold two years previously. At fifty years old, she was suffering back problems and had retired, with both her children out of the house (her daughter was studying for a nursing degree while caring for Sushmita’s newborn grandson and her son near to completing his bachelor’s in computer engineering). A few months before, her

husband's rural relatives had sent Raju to live with the empty nesters as a "helping son."

Sushmita explained, "[he is my] young son. I give him education, and he goes to school; this is my little one." In exchange, Raju supported Sushmita around the house, especially when her back was acting up, though even then she typically had to send out some of the family's laundry about once a month.

I soon realized that, of all the women I had talked to so far, Sushmita was an appliance fiend. I asked her how many she had, and she glanced around the room, pointing to each corner and saying, "uhhh...I'm not sure. One...two...three...four..." From the table, the two of us could see the induction cooktop on which the tea was boiling, the rice cooker and immersion blender nestled atop the fridge, the gas stove, and, mounted on the wall above Raju's head as he noisily clanged pots and pans together in the sink, the EuroGard-brand water purification tank. It turned out she had even more in other rooms of the house, from a toaster, water pump, computer, party-size rice cooker and boombox stored in the spare bedroom to the "gas geyser" water heater in the bathroom and a vacuum and broken microwave in the living room by the door. Sushmita pointed to the toaster and smiled mockingly. "We don't use it every day," she explained, looking askance at the item so out of place in a bedroom decorated with the standard platform bed and *almirah*. "Only when we want toast. And there aren't enough outlets to keep it plugged in in the kitchen!" Sushmita was very attached to all her appliances, explaining how much they had become a part of her daily routine: "I get up at five in the morning and I shower in the morning, so I like the gas geyser. I shower at five in the morning and then I pray at the house [she nodded to the home shrine in the corner]. Then I feel it's generally cold in the morning, so I can put the gas geyser on and shower, and I come in here, and after doing my *puja* I make tea on the induction...these are really good habits!"

Sushmita's response was both exemplary of her welcoming and exuberant personality and in keeping with what I grew to discover over the weeks of my research. Every one of my collaborators had a deeply felt relationship to her appliances, whether her final assessment of the role those appliances played in her life was ultimately positive or negative. But even among those who were not as pro-appliance as Sushmita was, all ten collaborators impressed upon me one thing: that owning appliances had significantly impacted their practices with and relationship to everyday health and wellness. Discussing this relationship became a constant of my fieldwork experience—accompanied by my own surprise at the extent of its prevalence in my interlocutors' discourse. It challenged my positionality in a way I hadn't considered before I began fieldwork. The everyday impact of appliances on my life—especially my health—is something incredibly easy for me to take for granted. My travels in Asia had made it simple to recognize that many of the appliances in my life were unusual or inaccessible to the people in my orbit, from my blow dryer which fascinated my eight-year-old Nepali host sister to no end, to my Fitbit (which also fascinated my Nepali host sister to no end). But it had been a long time since I had had to question the role of something like my refrigerator. In fact, I often pushed back against the idea that this kind of appliance was inaccessible in South Asia because it felt like a perpetuation of false, romanticized narratives of dire poverty and holy simplicity which so many at home extrapolated from George Harrison's "Concert for Bangladesh"-era visuals and transposed directly onto contemporary South Asia. And to a certain extent, I still believe I'm right to do so. After all, many people in South Asia, including most of my collaborators, do own refrigerators, induction cooktops, and water purifiers. But they still have to navigate the existence and everyday usage of these appliances in a fragile or unstable urban environment. One of the first things on my mind when I leave dairy out for hours on end, or an aging fridge finally gives up

the ghost, or unexpected severe weather produces a long-term, substantial power outage, is what an enormous hassle it is to go through all the frozen foods, raw meat, dairy, and other perishables in the fridge, trying my hardest to ascertain what is still safe to eat, bemoaning all the while the waste of food and money inherent in everything I have to throw away. It's frustrating, but it happens so rarely I (and my family) can afford to pitch out anything we're even the least bit worried might make us sick—and it's not even something I think about as an inherent risk in appliance ownership. But in resource- and infrastructure-poor Nepal, foodborne illness is an experience-near fact of life. As I learned, middle- and even upper-class people in Kathmandu have only started purchasing refrigerators as a matter of course in the last ten or fifteen years, as state- and international development-funded projects have brought reasonably regular electricity and water supply to the city.

Wellness, Ayurveda, and the Anthropology of Infrastructure

This chapter will explore my interlocutors' emotional ties to their appliances, largely through their discourses on health and wellness which, for many, seemed to create that emphatically emotional bond. In reflecting on these ties, I will also explore the role of “traditional” Ayurvedic understandings of health and wellness among my interlocutors, as well as the impact of changing infrastructure in a developing city on consumption and discourses related to appliances. My interlocutors' deeply felt, though significantly varied, reactions to how appliances and their infrastructure had impacted their experience of everyday concerns, in particular health, provide a valuable example of one commonplace discourse on the change brought by the 21st century's greater transnational connections and the growing “modernity” in Nepal. In order to proceed with an examination of the relevant ethnographic data, I need to first give a general overview of *Ayurveda* in South Asia as a powerful discourse of wellness in

conversation with allopathic medicine, and provide a general overview of the anthropology of infrastructure, which will serve as an important lens for interpreting some of the related ideas my interlocutors wove into their discourse of wellness.

Ayurveda is the name given to “traditional” ideas of health and wellness in South Asia which stem from the Hindu religious tradition, and can be traced back to an ancient Hindu text known as the *Atharvaveda*.⁶⁶ The primary difference between “Western,” or allopathic, medicine and Ayurveda is that Ayurveda is by nature holistic, to me almost impenetrably so; Sudhir Kakar writes that

gods and spirits, community and family, food and drink, personal habits and character, all seem to be somehow intimately involved in the maintenance of health [in Ayurveda]. Yet these and other factors such as biological infection, social pollution, and cosmic displeasure, all of which Hindus would also acknowledge as causes of ill health, only point to the recognition of a person’s simultaneous existence in different orders of being...[a person’s] experience of his illness may appear alien to non-Hindus only because of the fact that the body, the self, and the [social being] do not possess fixed, immutable meanings across cultures. The concept of the body and the understanding of its processes are not quite the same in [South Asia] as they are in the West.⁶⁷

Noted Indian public intellectual and psychologist Ashis Nandy describes the same holism in a slightly different way, and with a considerably more direct comparison to the “West,” when he writes that “while modern western theory has generally looked at disease in terms of the diverse objective agents that invade the body, Ayurveda has looked at disease in terms of internal

⁶⁶ David M. Knipe, “Hinduism and the Tradition of Ayurveda,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 101.

⁶⁷ Sudhir Kakar, “Health and Medicine in the Living Traditions of Hinduism,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 113.

processes, triggered by external factors.”⁶⁸ Nandy’s pointed comparison of externality vs. internality is actually a great way of thinking about the system behind Ayurveda overall—how Ayurveda “works.” Basically, in Ayurveda, the body is made of three humors: wind, bile, and phlegm. These three have to exist in the body in equilibrium for the body to be healthy, and they themselves correspond to several other sets of three key to Hindu philosophy, like the three “twice-born” caste *varnas* (*Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, and *Vaishya*) or the three worlds. The five elements, in Hinduism earth, water, fire, air, and space, make up the three humors. On a more practical level, *rasa* (nutrient fluid from food), blood, flesh, fat, bone, marrow, and semen are parts of the system of the body Ayurveda can manipulate to keep the humors in equilibrium, so they are the things people actually try to balance to stay well, through a variety of methods.⁶⁹ In Nepal, as in many other parts of South Asia, this balancing act is manifest most commonly through diet. Kakar explains: “according to the prevalent belief, eating the wrong kind of food is the most common cause of disease [in Ayurveda]...hot and cold foods are to be chosen judiciously, especially in certain physiological states.”⁷⁰ It was this particular concern, regarding “hot” and “cold” foods, that my interlocutors saw appliances most strenuously affecting.

⁶⁸ Ashis Nandy, “Modern Medicine and its Nonmodern Critics: A Study in Discourse,” in *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 189.

⁶⁹ David M. Knipe, “Hinduism and the Tradition of Ayurveda,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 107-108; Sudhir Kakar, “Health and Medicine in the Living Traditions of Hinduism,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 115.

⁷⁰ Sudhir Kakar, “Health and Medicine in the Living Traditions of Hinduism,” in *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World’s Religious Traditions*, ed. Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 117.

However, appliances played a role in a changing relationship to wellness for my collaborators in a number of different ways, all of which were made possible by infrastructure. For many of my urban female collaborators, appliances were their single most common way to engage public infrastructure in Nepal, like the city's water, sewage, and electricity systems. (And, notably, the *lack* of a government-sponsored gas system; while almost every collaborator's home contained two appliances which ran on gas, the "gas geyser" water heater and gas portable stove, gas is purchased by the individual propane canister, delivered by a man on a bicycle with special canister-holding panniers as needed, who also collects the used canister and cycles away with it.) But what exactly *is* infrastructure in anthropology? Brian Larkin writes that "infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. As physical forms they shape the nature of a network, the speed and direction of its movement, its temporalities, and its vulnerability to breakdown."⁷¹ For many anthropologists working with the idea of infrastructure over the last decade or fifteen years, it is the first part of this definition that has been the most carefully explored. Infrastructure allows for a uniquely dynamic approach to political anthropology, using the idea of infrastructure-as-network to concretize Foucauldian notions of political rationality and governmentality.⁷² Take, for example, Nikhil Anand's influential recent studies of water access in Mumbai's informal settlements. Anand examines ethnographically both the literal infrastructure of pipes in Premnagar, a primarily Muslim informal settlement in Mumbai's mid-distance northern suburbs (essentially part of the city), accompanying interlocutors on daily trips to the taps and

⁷¹ Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 328.

⁷² Ibid.

interviewing the plumbers who install them without support from the city, and the metaphorical infrastructure of BMC (municipal government) bureaucracy whose civil engineers control which regions of the city are graced with BMC-approved water delivery.⁷³ His focus, ultimately, lies more on the metaphorical side of infrastructure—what it can tell him about politics—as on the ontological, experiential side. Similarly, Naveeda Khan’s “Flaws in the Flow,” while containing entertaining and at times frightening detail on the use of Pakistan’s first “American-style highway,” her article ultimately sees the Motorway as a symbol for examining Pakistani state-making, explaining that equally important to the *new road* connect Lahore and Islamabad was the “experiment by the Pakistani state to rise above its past and present as a corrupt and ineffective entity to birth a new rationalized mode of governance...[the Motorway] was saturated by the state’s presence, even as the state went into partial eclipse with the failure of its circuitry...to my mind, it was this unexpected correspondence between Motorway travelers and the sentient body of the state that explains the Pakistanis’ discomfort with the Motorway.”⁷⁴

This focus on infrastructure-as-metaphor is far from useful for my own project. While I do appreciate that engaging with infrastructure results in an implicit engagement with the state (which plenty of my interlocutors made explicit at times), my own experience of infrastructure during my ethnographic work examines infrastructure much more experientially, as this chapter will demonstrate. Luckily, there are plenty of sources out there which push back against infrastructure-as-merely-metaphor, such as Casper Jensen’s entertaining examination of sewage

⁷³ Nikhil Anand, “PRESSURE: The PoliTechnics of Water Supply in Mumbai,” in *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011); “Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and its Urban Infrastructures,” in *Ethnography* 13, no. 4 (2012).

⁷⁴ Naveeda Khan, “Flaws in the Flow: Roads and their Modernity in Pakistan,” in *Social Text* 89, no. 4 (2006): 105.

systems in Phnom Penh, “Pipe Dreams.” Jensen states outright that “material devices [like infrastructures] can be given their due only if they are seen neither as reflections of predefined sociopolitical structures, nor as determining the social...infrastructures are certainly made by the ‘different forms of action, investment, or involvement of many people and organizations. Yet they consist of metal and machines as much as by meanings and discourse.’”⁷⁵ Usefully, Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox’s examination of road-building in Peru shows how a use of both these understandings can demonstrate important experiences of change in developing places, writing

a focus on infrastructures as both virtual and actualized relational spaces...allows us to trace the habits, understandings, and entrenched assumptions...[that are part of] a social and historical analysis of material relations. in development settings infrastructures are aspirational and carry great promise; yet they also carry threats of unwelcome change, of destabilization and increased vulnerability. They combine social memory and future imaginaries in complex ways that have to be worked out, as these temporal dimensions of infrastructural forms are not always heterogenous.⁷⁶

Harvey and Knox’s quote above is also valuable for alluding to some of the key ideas infrastructure, both in its materiality and its discourse, can help anthropologists examine. In addition to the state-individual relations gestured toward by Anand and Khan, infrastructure carries with it quintessential concepts of modernity and change, key referents I hoped to examine when beginning this project. As Kregg Hetherington notes in his work on land reform and the infrastructure of surveyors in Paraguay, infrastructure implies progress; “it divides the built landscape into temporal priorities to be slotted into a promising narrative of progress. In such a narrative, infrastructure often serves as that which holds nature and culture apart, making a

⁷⁵ Casper Bruun Jensen, “Pipe Dreams: Sewage Infrastructure and Activity Trails in Phnom Penh,” in *Ethnos* 82, no. 4 (2017): 629.

⁷⁶ Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox, *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 6.

temporal break between chaos and order. As such it is also a promise, signaling the presence of some higher power.”⁷⁷ Laura Bear, in her historical ethnography of railway colonies (company towns) in eastern India, advances Hetherington’s implied critique with the explicit writing historical perspective allows: “seen from the perspective of quotidian practices of the bureaucracy, the promised form of modernity that the railways were supposed to have brought with them to India is shown to have never existed.”⁷⁸ Larkin devotes an entire chapter of his book to showing how the British colonial officials in early 20th century northern Nigeria advanced infrastructure projects as a way of concretizing the modernity brought to the Nigerian public by colonialism.⁷⁹ This “unbearable modernity of infrastructure” is what embeds it historically, leading to the deep emotional attachments to objects this chapter will demonstrate; Larkin says that the processes of infrastructures “bring about change, and through change they enact progress, and through progress we gain freedom.”⁸⁰ Hannah Knox agrees, writing “an attention to the embodied, affective relationship that people experience with material forms provides us with a better starting point from which to interrogate the political implications of the material entanglements that engagements with infrastructures entail.”⁸¹ It was my experience

⁷⁷ Kregg Hetherington, “Waiting for the Surveyor: Development Promises and the Temporality of Infrastructure,” in *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (2014): 196.

⁷⁸ Laura Bear, *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 3.

⁷⁹ Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 16-47.

⁸⁰ Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 332.

⁸¹ Hannah Knox, “Affective Infrastructures and the Political Imagination,” in *Public Culture* 29, no. 2 (2017): 368.

exploring discourses of wellness and appliances in Kathmandu, beginning with my host sister-in-law, which emphasized this point for me.

Returning to the Story

Sarjana, the Nepali sister-in-law in question, was 34 at the time I lived in Kathmandu, married, and the proud mother of an eight-year-old daughter, my host sister. We lived together with her husband and his mother in our third floor flat in Handigaun. Sarjana, my host sister-in-law, ran a professional sewing and fabric-cutting instruction business from the lean-to hut on the roof of our apartment building, with its three treadle sewing machines and a giant pile of fabric scraps. She made all my Nepali clothes while I lived there, and never let me pay her a cent. Sarjana probably had the fewest appliances of all my collaborators, listing only her fridge, electric kettle, and pump to bring water from the city main to the family storage tank on the roof. She'd owned all of them for years, with the four-year-old fridge being her most recent purchase. When we sat in the flat's living room (which doubled as "my" room while I lived with them; most Nepali houses have a bed in every room but the kitchen, and this was no exception. I stored my clothes in a decorative hutch in the corner.) on a warm afternoon in early April, sun streaming through the floral net curtains, Sarjana emotionally described the importance of her habits surrounding the fridge, and how it made her feel safe. "[I know] that if I put the food in the fridge it's safe, because it's cold." She could feed her daughter the food from the fridge without worrying about her getting sick, and said that since owning the fridge and an electric water boiler for the past three to four years, the family had been markedly less ill, her daughter had missed fewer days of school, and was generally healthier. In fact, in the nearly four months I lived with Sarjana, the only members of the family who ever got sick were me and her—and I

don't count, being *videshi*.⁸² Unlike my later collaborators, Sarjana's response here emphasizes an allopathic understanding of health and wellness, where storing food in the fridge prevents the growth of the germs which cause the common bouts of "travelers' diarrhea" experienced in Asia. In this focus, Sarjana interacts directly with the idea that appliances relying on infrastructure like a fridge, which requires regular electricity, are part of a progressing, teleological modernity. Her discourse here engages the thinking of Larkin, Knox, and Bear through her deeply felt appreciation of her fridge.

Sushmita, with whom I opened this chapter, proffered vocal descriptions of *why* she owned so many appliances—all of which ran in a similar vein to Sarjana's. After giving me the grand tour of the house and pointing out each of the appliances, we settled back down in her kitchen, striking up a conversation about her induction cooktop. I'd seen them around Kathmandu and they seemed to be growing in popularity. "I don't know anyone at home who has an induction stove," I told Sushmita. "Most Americans don't really know how to use them." She laughed again and said, "really? It's very easy. Let me show you!" We stood and walked to the induction cooker, perched on a bit a shelving by one of the kitchen windows, near the household shrine and across the room from the refrigerator. "It came with instructions and everything, but I just figured out how to use it," Sushmita explained, pulling an aluminum pot down from a shelf and snagging a couple eggs from the counter. "You like hard-boiled eggs? With salt and *masala*?" I nodded. There was no way I was getting out of eating a snack now. Setting the pot, now filled with water and eggs, onto the burner, Sushmita showed me how to turn the thing on and set it to a desired temperature—the display was all electric and showed degrees Celsius digitally. As the water heated we kept chatting. Like Sarjana, the role

⁸² Nepali for "foreign."

appliances played in Sushmita’s life was significant, and largely practical. Sushmita talked me through the changes using the example of *tamatarko achaar*, the spicy tomato-and-chili “pickle”-cum-salsa served with many Nepali meals. “My habits, my life, it’s really different with the machines,” she said, going on:

If I’m making tomato *achaar*—tomato pickle—now, I put everything in that machine [pointing to blender] and I do *gr-gr-gr* [makes blender noises] for one minute. But without that, I have to boil the tomatoes, take them up with my hand this way [demonstrates peeling a boiled tomato, as if making tomato sauce], *aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiii* [makes the motion of grinding something with the traditional stone board and hand stone], I have to do this, and it’s really tiring. Without machines, life is really tiring for me.

These kinds of health issues were especially important to Sushmita, who struggled with chronic back problems. Out of all the collaborators I worked closely with, she was the only one who hired outside domestic help, and even then it was only once a month to do some of the heavier clothes-washing upstairs on the flat roof. “I do the laundry myself,” she told me, “and it’s really difficult for me. I can’t wash clothes usually, because I have back pain. I have to take a helper, monthly, for doing laundry. We pay her 1500 rupees a month [\$15.00].” It was a big financial burden for the family, and a hassle, but they couldn’t justify buying a washing machine yet. With the lack of regular water access in Kathmandu, a washing machine wasn’t a reliable purchase. “Machines are for my own improvement,” Sushmita said, again and again. “They’re for my health, right? They make really good habits.” Sushmita’s discourse doesn’t straightforwardly engage allopathic understandings of health in the way Sarjana’s does, but it interacts with notions of infrastructure, progress, and modernity quite directly. After all, she puts into words the notion that “machines” as many of my collaborators described their appliances, are for some nebulous concept of “improvement,” measured in the idea of healthy habits—working her tired body less. Additionally, Sushmita brought up water infrastructure of her own

accord, as did many of my interlocutors. During the time I worked in Kathmandu, the city was busy tearing up middle- and upper-class neighborhoods across the city, installing new concrete water mains as part of the supposed culmination of a 20-year-long development project to bring water from a mountain reservoir to the parched, dusty Kathmandu. “Melamchi,” the name of the project, was on everyone’s lips, but no one was holding their breath. The lines were being laid, but water still came to our neighborhoods irregularly, requiring the use of pumps to collect and store as much water as possible in tanks on top of our homes at odd hours of the day and night, to ensure we had water to wash with or purify for drinking at times when the taps ran dry.

Vidhya, another collaborator, echoed some of the beliefs advanced by Sarjana and Sushmita. She gave a lot of childcare to her two-year-old granddaughter, Jun, and found her most important household appliance to be her water purifier: “the EuroGard is really important, because the water is really clear now. Before I used to always use the [traditional Nepali ceramic] filter, and I didn’t typically have a lot of water. But now, with the EuroGard, the water is really filtered, and I use the EuroGard water a lot. I always have good water available for drinking.” I always asked my collaborators what their friends, neighbors, and family members had to say about machines in the hope that I could get a perspective on the conversations my collaborators were having surrounding these items, even if I wasn’t always privy to those conversations myself. It was also a way to get an idea of how my collaborators perceived the importance of the topic among their peer group. When I brought this up with Vidhya, she interpreted it as what she tended to say to her own friends about appliances (which is probably due to my imperfect Nepali skills). “Only one or two of my friends’ houses have EuroGards,” she explained. “I say to my friends, ‘please get EuroGard drinking water. Clean water comes, I really like it...the EuroGard is really rare...we say, ‘oh, it’s expensive. Cheap things are fine.’”

But after a little while, now they have a little more money they say, and I say ‘*la, la*, please get that. I’ve found it really easy. And I say it to my friends now. For drinking good water, get it, that EuroGard water, in my opinion. Don’t boil water. The filtered water is really good. I feel that way.’” Again, Vidhya brings ideas about the progressive, superior nature of allopathy, as made possible by the infrastructure that made EuroGard water purifiers widely available, to the fore. She contrasts it with earlier, “traditional” Nepali ways of water purification and says that today’s water is clearer—drawing on the popular discourse of EuroGards and the well-publicized knowledge that ceramic filters do not have small enough pores to prevent all microorganisms from getting into the finished water. Vidhya has even taken it upon herself to proselytize modernity and allopathic health to her friends.

However, I quickly learned that Vidhya may have gotten more pushback against her proselytizing than I originally could have guessed when I worked with collaborators who had more wary perspectives on the role appliances and urban infrastructure were playing in their families’ health and wellness. These women engaged with the difficulty of the rapidity of change “modernity” through infrastructure and globally available commodities brought into the intimate spaces of the home and the body. The responses of this group of collaborators reminded me of Jensen’s description of infrastructure as “chang[ing] forms of embodiment and modes of living...the resulting activity trails shape people.”⁸³ Without the now-commonplace appliances, many everyday activities, from bathing to laundry to cooking to dishes, are involved, time-consuming, and intensely physical acts of labor in Nepal (Sushmita alluded to this reality when she discussed appliances “improving” her). The shift from this routine of everyday life to the

⁸³ Casper Bruun Jensen, “Pipe Dreams: Sewage Infrastructure and Activity Trails in Phnom Penh,” in *Ethnos* 82, no. 4 (2017): 638.

new lifestyle enabled by household appliances was embraced by many, especially in the context of improved, allopathic health, as articulated by Sarjana, Sushmita, and Vidhya. But for others, appliances incited a mixed, or even sometimes negative, reaction in my collaborators—bringing me to the surprise I discussed above.

Usha, a fifty-year-old housewife and “social work” volunteer with a local Sai Baba International group of devotees, was the first person to express this opinion to me. She was small and thin, with wiry black hair clasped behind her head with a large, plastic butterfly-style clip. Quite religious, her second-story flat was close to mine, in the Handigaun neighborhood, but different in feel. It was neat and tidy, with many small rooms instead of the four large ones I was used to. Every morning, she took golden yellow turmeric and vibrantly red vermillion powder and drew holy *svastika* symbols on the front landing, where the outdoor staircase met the front door, to welcome visitors and protect the home. Photos of Sai Baba were everywhere. Answering my knock, Usha ushered me through the dim hallway to the first door on the right, into a brightly lit sitting room with a couch, two rattan easy chairs, and the ubiquitous platform bed (found in almost every room in a Nepali home). A TV sat in one corner, under a vase of silk flowers, shut off. Usha’s 13-year-old niece, her sister’s daughter and her own family’s helping relative, said hello politely before retreating, in her sweet, shy, and nervous manner, back into her own room.

Usha’s flat had three bedrooms—one occupied by Usha and her husband, a local government officer, another by the helping niece, and the third by a rotating cast of student tenants. Usha’s own adult children were out of the house; her son was pursuing an MBA in India and her daughter was working in Kathmandu. Usha gestured for me to take a seat in the sitting room before she disappeared into the kitchen in the back of the house, returning with a

steaming cup of *chiyaa* and a stainless steel saucer of diced apple. She settled in and turned a bright eye on me. “What exactly is this project about? Electric *saman* [things]? Why did you want to learn more about this?” Her tone was sharp but her questions merely inquiring. Usha was funny that way. She knew exactly what she thought was important, and even when asking innocuous questions could make me feel judged. I decided to sidestep her questions with one of my own. “What kinds of different appliances do you have?” I asked her. “For example, a fridge, or a gas geyser, or another different—“

“I don’t have lots of different ones,” Usha said declaratively. “I have a fridge, right now, though I didn’t used to. But there is a water problem, it’s sort of absolutely not possible to have a washing machine, because there’s a water problem, there’s a really a big problem, in Kathmandu. And I have a vacuum. Electric...hmm...that sort of electricity machine I don’t have a lot of. I have an induction cooker.” I nodded, writing down the list and reading it back to her, asking her when she bought the different appliances. “I bought the induction cooker two or three years ago, during the gas shortage—that’s why we have the induction,” Usha said. She continued on, unprompted: “There are very few electric things. It’s not good to use them, so we have very few. I use them very little.” I was immediately taken aback by these statements, and stumbled through some of the more straightforward questions I liked to ask—where did you purchase these, did you buy with cash, and so on. Eventually, I asked her what her favorite machine was. Again, she turned the question on its head. “Right now I don’t have a washing machine, but—“ she broke off her sentence mid-thought. “Of all the electric things I don’t use them a lot, myself. The microwave, that sort of thing...at least right now my family is small, just me, my helping daughter, and my husband. Right now at least, doing the work, the machines...it doesn’t do well. I can do the little work.”

“When your kids lived at home did you use the machines a lot?” I asked.

“It was the same. They use the fridge, for food, when their throats hurt they drink the cold water, no? But it’s like that now. That sort of electric thing is commonly used. I use the fridge and induction cooker daily, but the rest I don’t. I don’t need to.”

Usha’s negative perception of appliances and their effect on habits and wellness came through even more clearly when talking about the way her family and friends treated them.

“They use machines a lot,” she said.

They like to see the microwave, all are usually lazy-types...they usually use machines. We do things on our own, we only have the machines a little bit. My friends usually all use the washing machine, cook in the microwave, put these things always...all have, and all use them. But those that use them are quite lazy and a little sick, fat, this type of thing. For them eating is even difficult, no? Machines have some disadvantages.

Usha expressed being against the regular use of appliances, reiterating their bad effect on character as well as health throughout the rest of our interview. The only reason she would buy or use another, she finished by saying, would be if she became infirm as she aged and no longer was able to do the housework manually. Usha brought a moral dimension to the analysis and eventual criticism of household appliances (I once mentioned to Sushmita that I had met some other women who were of Usha’s opinion; Sushmita immediately dismissed them as merely miserly and cheap), but also kept her analysis largely within the realm of health. This hearkened back to a holistic, Ayurvedic perspective on wellness in keeping with her devout faith. Her focus on morality also brought me back to an article by Leo Coleman, who engaged the narrative of respectability and morality surrounding infrastructure changes in Delhi. For him, the similarly negative morality judgements his interlocutors made about new electricity infrastructure in India’s capital made important implicit statements about the ways materiality could enforce identity—class, caste, religious, and national: “each [electricity] connection in its material form

can come to emblemize such an identity—though this result is by no means certain. Read symbolically, that is, the work of material maintenance is also a process that involves constantly checking the meaning of the connections as they are made, reinforcing their discrimination or belonging, and marking new possibilities for renewed participation.”⁸⁴ The infrastructures of appliances in Kathmandu as Usha sees them are also analogous to Asher Ghertner’s concept of “Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property” in examining middle class support for informal housing clearance in Delhi. Usha sees her moral condemnation of, and overall frustration with, appliances as a marker of identity as a morally upright, faithful woman who devotes her extra time and energy to volunteerism with Sai Baba International. Similarly, Ghertner’s interlocutors reinforce their own identity as equally upstanding citizens of Delhi when they contrast their own well-kept property maintained through hard work and proper channels with the “nuisance” of informal settlements nearby, whose residents have taken what they wanted with no sense of propriety or respect for sewerage infrastructures and health.⁸⁵

Deepika echoed some of Usha’s ideas, though her criticism drew explicitly on the idea of “traditional” “Nepali culture.” She was an unmarried, 38-year-old worker in a finance office; the only one of my collaborators who was unmarried. Deepika lived in a low-slung, traditionally built Newari home in Kalopul, its red brick walls circling a courtyard. Motorbikes were parked haphazardly under the courtyard’s sacred *tulsi*, or basil, tree, and chickens scattered as I clanged open the tall corrugated-iron gate. The house was shared between Deepika, her brother, his wife, and one or two younger sisters (the cast of characters was constantly shifting as long as I knew

⁸⁴ Leo Coleman, “Infrastructure and Interpretation: Meters, Dams, and State Imagination in Scotland and India,” in *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 470.

⁸⁵ D. Asher Ghertner, “Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property: Middle-Class Discourses of a Slum-Free Delhi,” in *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (2012): 1161-1187.

her). I had met so many different women in Kathmandu with a number of nuanced perspectives on health, wellness, and appliances, so I decided one day to ask her straight out:

M: Do you think machines are good for people's health or not?

D: Both. It's both good and bad, right? Some things are good only, and some things are bad only.

M: why?

D: Because for us, if it's hot, oh, it's fine [to eat or drink straight from the fridge], but for sick people, that's not good, it's cold. For us the fridge is okay, but for the sick people it's absolutely not. The fridge is cold and if one has a cold, oh, don't take from the fridge! It's our—it's according to Nepali culture. You all [Americans, foreigners], need it, the fridge is really necessary and what food comes from the fridge it's okay to eat directly, but for us it's forbidden, it's absolutely against Nepalis' habits, for the sick to have a cold [anything] from the fridge—no! Absolutely, totally forbidden. So good things and bad things both. It's good for health and there are disadvantages too, both.

Deepika's own family demonstrated these beliefs in the everyday practices surrounding their fridge. They still shopped at a neighborhood vegetable market every day, placing a few leftovers or ingredients for the following day in the fridge but working hard to consume each day's food as they bought it. But at the same time, she expressed a desire to buy a washer-dryer one day, because then the family would limit their exposure to cold water and damp clothes when doing laundry in wintery weather; the more exposure to cold and damp, she told me, the less healthy one would be. Deepika, despite all her outward markings of modernity—buzzing mobile phone, love of fashion, white collar job—was the interlocutor most attached to Ayurvedic understandings of maintaining wellness, like managing one's exposure to heat and cold. For Deepika, then, the challenge wasn't necessarily how appliances would prove detrimental to health by encouraging laziness, but rather that they increased exposure to dangerous vectors of disease like cold and damp. It was a cost-benefit analysis for her: to what extent could her family reap health benefits from appliances while keeping their exposure to unhealthy or

dangerous factors minimized? She engaged with the change brought by appliances and their modernity by choosing to adapt her “Nepali culture” to their existence, and adapt the extent of their existence in her life to her “Nepali culture.”

Nikita’s view was closer to Usha’s than Deepika’s. She was an elderly woman who had immigrated to Nepal from Darjeeling in eastern India. Her husband was originally from the semi-autonomous Buddhist mountain kingdom of Sikkim, and she now lived alone in the middle story flat of a three-flat building they had purchased together in Kathmandu’s Bishalnagar neighborhood before he passed away. The two other flats in the building were rented to her son and daughter, along with their spouses and families, and Nikita gave me a tour of all three one day. She wore large-framed, 80s-style glasses throughout our interview, much of which took place while chasing her toddler grandson and preteen granddaughters around the flat. Behind the glasses and proudly successful demeanor, Nikita was one of the most genuinely welcoming women I had the pleasure of working with in Nepal. She treated me like just another grandchild, and her stories about her family, her past in Kathmandu, and her triumphs in business were animated and captivating.

Nikita told me she liked the novelty of electric ovens and stovetops, giddily displaying her daughter’s enormous collection of all the latest gadgets, from recessed lighting in the kitchen to a bunkbed for the grandkids to a washer-dryer. Nikita’s daughter even had a dishwasher—the only one I ever saw in Nepal. “I only use it for parties,” she said, in flawless conversational English. “I like to entertain, but I hate cleaning up.” Nikita chided her in a friendly way, teasing her for being lazier than a 70-year-old. The whole exchange felt unreal, more wholesome than an episode of *Leave it to Beaver*. Despite the entertainment value of things like dishwashers, Nikita prided herself on staying healthy, fit, and active into older age. She no longer had the

responsibility of supporting and caring for her by all accounts driven and enormously ambitious spouse, but she happily volunteered childcare, and got up at five in the morning every day, regardless of whether she had the kids or not. She tried to do at least ten hours of work a day, taking only one hour of free time, at two in the afternoon, for a nap. She cooked, cleaned, and busied herself otherwise all day long. She still washed her own laundry and occasionally that of other family members, and happily. Smiling and laughing, she told me that she neither needed nor wanted the kinds of machines her daughter collected, if only because her health (and an implied morality) came first.

Opinions on health and appliances clearly varied widely. Again, it surprised me to realize what a widespread thematic health was; even more unexpected was the deeply emotional dynamic surrounding appliances that I found present among my collaborators. Often this came out in discussions of health and wellness, like in Deepika and Usha's deeply felt, expressive declarations. But even among women who didn't deal with this thematic in the same straightforward way, it was difficult to keep emotional ties from creeping into our conversations. If it wasn't specifically about health and wellness, this emotional connection often came out in discussion how home appliances saved them time around the house. As I mentioned above, Sushmita was my only collaborator who paid domestic help, and then it was rare. Few Nepali women, even among the comfortable social strata my collaborators found themselves in, hire household workers; unlike India, its dominating neighbor to the south, Nepal's service cultures and economies are far less clearly visible. Not every elevator has an attendant, not everyone with their own car has their own driver to go along with it, and few people send their laundry out to a washerman or have their *chapati* made by a maid. This makes the deeply felt tie to appliances clear when discussing domestic labor.

Pushpa, a forty-year-old housewife and coop employee, was a prime example of this relationship. She lived in the upscale Baluwatar neighborhood, in a detached, multistory home nestled among the INGO offices and one or two embassies. She kept a pet songbird. Her husband was a high-level government IT employee, and she supported their twelve-year-old daughter and elderly mother in law. Her older daughter was in college in the U.S. Pushpa demonstrated her emotional attachment to her appliances by comparing the differences between her pre- and post-appliance lives:

It's different with and without the machines, really different! With the machines I save time. Without them I had to do all the work using my own man power. Like with washing clothes, I had to do it with my own hands, right? In that I typically lost a lot of time. And the same with when I didn't have the oven, I had to cook everything on my own, you know? There was absolutely no help in doing anything! Had to do everything man only. With the machines I can have everything ready by leaving it in the oven. After that it cooks by itself. Like with the rice cooker. I put the dry rice and the water in the rice cooker, and after turning it on it cooks by itself. So time is spent really differently with and without machines. Like, with machines I save time, and without them I have to *feel* all the time myself.

Pushpa's word choice here is so striking, because she directly brings her experience with time saving machines back to her emotions. For her, there is a hyperawareness of the bodily experience of labor, even more so than in the conversations I had had with Sushmita, Usha, and Nikita; machines provide Pushpa with a deep sense of physical relief. In the earlier sentences, Pushpa mostly uses the verb *garnu*, to do. While I am not a native Nepali speaker, I would say based on my experience that this is normal, the most conversational way to express these ideas of hard work using one's own effort. But in her final sentence, Pushpa uses the phrase "*machine nahuudaako samaya sabai aaphai laagnu parchha*," which directly translates to "without machines one *must feel* all the time [and by implication, effort] oneself." These imperative passive constructions are typically used to expressed compulsion; it was against Pushpa's will to

feel worn out by the bodily, physical experience of household labor without machines. Perhaps there is no clearer expression of an emotional relationship to appliances than this discourse.

But it was Sushmita who brought her felt ties to her appliances to the fore for me in a much more positive expression. Reviewing my jottings and notes from a visit to her house, I found a single pithy statement, best rendered in Nepali: “*machineharu mero saathi ho* [machines are my friends],” she said, with a characteristic laugh and twinkling eyes. “*ekdam milnesaathi ho* [really, best friends]!”

The Other Side of Emotion: Suspicion

So far, my ethnographic engagement with appliances in discourses of wellness and infrastructure has demonstrated my interlocutors trying a variety of discursive methods for coming to terms with the change modernity and global consumption, in the forms of infrastructure and appliances, have brought to their experience-near, everyday lives. I’ve focused a great deal on my collaborators’ valuations of the role of appliances in their perception of wellness; some, like Sushmita, Vidhya, and Sarjana, evinced almost entirely positive perspective, but others, like Usha, Nikita, and Deepika, had greater reservations. In the final pages of this chapter, I’d like to explore the underbelly of these more negative emotions, examining the role emotionally laden relationships with objects can play in fueling suspicion, and even conspiracy theory, in the everyday discourse of appliances in Kathmandu.

Suspicion was never far from the surface in the discussion of appliances and infrastructure. In terms of commodities and appliances, there was often discourse of authenticity and false advertising; this topic will crop up again in Chapter Four, but many of my interlocutors placed great importance on the authenticity and backed-up claims of appliances, especially when it came to wellness. If ceramic filters had garnered a bad name in Nepal because health

professionals had set out to educate families that they did not sufficiently purify water, it was especially important for consumers to be assured that the newfangled water purifier *did* provide the safest possible drinking water. In fact, in the case of water purifiers, almost all advertising discourse focused on this very element of the appliance. Cable television in the months I lived in Kathmandu regularly ran ads for Kent brand purifiers, much more popular in India (most cable packages in Nepal disseminate Hindi-language Indian cable channels). In one, a famous actress typecast as a middle-aged mother demonstrated the new Kent purified-water fruits and vegetables washer. Kent water purifiers purified the water we drank; it only made sense to then purchase this appliance, which would purify the foods we ate. After all, fruits and vegetables are coated in pernicious chemicals and just cleaning them the normal way in tap water before cooking them would not only fail to remove the chemicals in question, but would introduce all those bad things water purifiers were supposed to eliminate (never mind that almost all fruit in India and Nepal is peeled before eating, and almost all vegetables are eaten cooked). As such, a special, purified-water produce bath was needed.

This fear of the unknown, unseen danger was rife among people suspicious of commodities. Even my host family, which I generally perceived as adopting many of the “modern,” global conventions of appliances and infrastructure, as evidenced by Sarjana’s discussion of her fridge above, bought into a popular conspiracy theory floating around the subcontinent at the time. Like most people in South Asia, we ate a lot of rice. *A lot* of rice. We regularly had several enormous 50 kilogram bags of white rice delivered to the house and hauled up the two flights of stairs before my sister-in-law, host grandma, and I had to hustle them into the kitchen dry foods storage. One day, Sarjana and my host grandma (technically Sarjana’s mother-in-law; my host brother, Sarjana’s husband, was one of her youngest children, so she was

in her seventies when I met her. It felt weird calling her “mom,” even though I called her son “brother,” so I typically used “grandma”) asked me if I had noticed any crunchy grains of rice in my daily mounds of it recently. I said everything had tasted normal to me; as usual, the rice Sarjana prepared in a manual aluminum pressure cooker was fluffy, warm, and perfectly separated. Why? Was there something wrong with one of the pressure cookers?

“Oh no,” they replied. “It’s much more serious.” It turned out that local media had been reporting that Chinese companies which exported rice to Nepal had been mixing in plastic, fake grains of rice. These grains were supposedly so identical to normal rice grains that you’d never know just from looking, or touching the raw rice. The only way to know was if you bit down on one after it had been cooked. Apparently, even then it might be impossible to know—it was supposed to be much easier with cold, leftover rice than fresh rice. Everyone in my host family’s social circle was anxious and felt themselves to be at risk. Later that summer, when living in India, I found a similar rumor making the rounds there.

This sense of suspicion and fear surrounding consumption of commodities has been explicitly linked to some of the key themes of my project, perhaps most notably by Jean and John Comaroff in their influential “Millennial Capitalism.” They mark suspicion and distrust of consumption as evidence that “more and more ordinary people see arcane forces intervening in the production of value, diverting it toward a new elect: those masters of the market who comprehend and control the production of wealth under contemporary conditions.”⁸⁶ The implication here, of course, is that the people who feel the arcane economy, the sense of suspicion and conspiracy theory, the “plastic rice” plot, are therefore *not* masters of the new

⁸⁶ Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” in *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 316.

capitalism. They are responding to the bewildering sense of “disruption” produced by globalization and transnational flows of goods by glossing it in the context of the occult, the shady, the unreal. And, Comaroff and Comaroff argue, this disruption is also an explanation for the moralism explored above, in the statements of Usha or Nikita. “The ethical dimensions of occult economies are so prominent,” they state, because “occult economies frequently...are a response to a world gone awry, yet again: a world in which the only way to create real wealth seems to lie in forms of power/knowledge that transgress the conventional, the rational, the moral—thus to multiply available techniques of producing value, fair or foul.”⁸⁷

Suspicion and distrust in the context of infrastructure operates slightly differently. The discourse is typically more targeted at charges of corruption, which is similarly morally condemnable as a form of producing “foul” value, but is also more of a Taussig-like “public secret,” something known to all and yet unarticulated, inarticulable, as it were.⁸⁸ For example, the most commonly discussed infrastructure when I lived in Kathmandu (and probably still) was the Melamchi Water Supply Project, “the most viable long-term alternative to ease the chronic water shortage situation within the Kathmandu Valley.” It has been ongoing for 20 years now, between collecting the money for the project from multiple development agencies (and then losing a bunch of it and having to refinance), building a reservoir and water treatment plant in the Melamchi Valley, and then constructing the piping to carry the water to Kathmandu and distribute it.⁸⁹ As of just two weeks ago (April 11, 2018), the final 7.5 kilometers of tunnel were

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ See Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

⁸⁹ “Project Description,” Melamchi Water Supply Project, accessed 23 April 2018, <http://www.melamchiwater.gov.np/about-us/melamchi-ws-project/project-description/>

dug, though officials are unsure when the tunnel will be concreted or when water will actually begin to flow to Kathmandu.⁹⁰ When I stayed in Kathmandu, the project was widely criticized by many of my friends and acquaintances—from faculty in my study abroad program to neighbors--for taking far too long, for being totally non-transparent, for losing the faith of the original investors, for ripping up the streets throughout Kathmandu and worsening pollution...you name it, probably someone complained about it. Plenty often, discussions of Melamchi and infrastructure more broadly tiptoed around the notion that officials were corrupt; corruption is a topic to be discussed generally as opposed to very specifically, adding to the levels of mistrust, suspicion, and rumor surround it. There are many ethnographically grounded investigations into the anthropology of corruption, especially in the developing world, and most of the ones I've read describe analogous phenomena. For example, Akhil Gupta describes discourses of corruption in rural Northern India as a way that villagers construct a unitary understanding of “the state” out of their everyday encounters with it. Everyday experiences of the Indian state are varied and occasionally contradictory, but often involve corruption. Similarly, most of the public discussion of “states” in the press and translocally portrays the Indian state as corrupt. Therefore, the unitary understanding of the inaccessible state in rural India is as something largely impenetrable, clouded, and corrupt.⁹¹ Similarly, in my understanding, my collaborators' discourse of the Melamchi project as largely failed (see: dry taps, 20 years later, and no water delivery date in sight) due to the government's issues (though

⁹⁰ Chandan Kumar Mandal, “Melamchi Project Set for Breakthrough,” *Kathmandu Post*, Apr. 10, 2018, <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2018-04-10/melamchi-project-set-for-breakthrough.html>

⁹¹ Akhil Gupta, “Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,” in *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995).

the government changed regularly and shifted ideology wildly during the Melamchi project's timeframe) produced an understanding of infrastructure and the state more broadly as something suspect, which couldn't be trusted and couldn't be changed by the neighborhood community. Instead, the community invested in water storage tanks and pumps like my host family's, and occasionally (like my host family) even chiseled their own new taps out of their kitchen walls to try and access more water.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've explored my collaborators' deeply felt discourse connecting their home appliances to health and wellness in particular, and infrastructure and suspicion more broadly. These discourses span a wide range of opinions, from a positive belief that appliances and infrastructures are improving the wellness and health of families (as expressed by Sushmita, Vidhya, and Sarjana) to a moralizing negative opinion that they are in conflict with Nepali culture and are making Nepali people "lazy" (most strongly put forth by Usha and Deepika). Even among my collaborators who didn't emphasize health or wellness, like Pushpa, emotion was quick to bubble to the surface when discussing appliances. People were committed to their opinion, whatever it was. The underside of this deep emotional reaction is the element of suspicion and mistrust that accompanies much of the discourse on appliances and infrastructure in Kathmandu, from plastic Chinese rice to corrupt and failed water distribution projects.

Taken together, this demonstrates the way in which appliances can be a powerful conduit for managing the change that comes with globalization, transnational exchange, and development. Following the theorists of the anthropology of infrastructure, who emphasize the way the materiality of infrastructure can reify the metaphorical relationship interlocutors have with the big theoretical ideas of globalization and development, as well as the thinking of the

Comaroffs and others on suspicion and conspiracy theory as a way of integrating the inexplicable disruption and rapid change (space-time compression) of globalization into one's life, it makes sense to interpret my collaborators' surprisingly deeply felt responses as a way of processing the change to their everyday lives that globalization had brought. Most of my collaborators were old enough to remember the Shah/panchayat autocracy of the 1980s, and many had also grown up in rural parts of Nepal where it took even longer for appliances and infrastructure to make inroads (in many places, they still haven't). As such, they knew personally the effect of change in this arena and were able to express the confusion, frustration, positivity, and overall emotion surrounding change through their relationships to appliances and infrastructure.

As will also be true with other chapters in this work, I am not ascribing any one universal response to these changes to my collaborators. After all, they expressed some largely divergent opinions. And I'm not sure that asking "how are women in urban Nepal processing the changes associated with globalization, modernity, and development in the 21st century?" and then answering it with some one-size-fits-all conclusion would be all that productive anyway. As I discussed in the introduction, I struggled significantly with how to approach the representation and interpretation of my collaborators and the ethnographic data they so graciously provided me with, and one of the most holistic and genuine ways I can think to do so, especially in the context of this chapter, is to leave some loose ends loose. The point is that urban women in Kathmandu are reacting to globalization, modernity, and development's changes that are affecting their everyday lives emotionally. It's a serious part of their reality, and one way they process it is through the discourse of health, infrastructure, and suspicion. This is a process that is happening every minute of every day of their lives, much as it is for everyone. But for them, it appears a little more sudden, a little more rapid, a little more jarring. And so they're working through it in

ways that I recognize and acknowledge, in ways that nonetheless surprise me. That is a valuable takeaway in itself.

Chapter Three

The Role of Appliance Discourse in Construction of Class and Socioeconomic Identity

April 5th, 2017, Bishalnagar, Kathmandu; 5:00 PM

I ducked through the floral pink curtain strung across the gray cement doorway and blinked a couple times, trying to adjust to the sudden darkness of the hallway. I had passed the building's ground floor storefront, which was just a room missing its front and open to the outside (a metal garage door-type contraption, hand painted with an advertisement for Ambuja cement, or sometimes the Nepal Dairy Development Corporation, swung down from the ceiling at closing time), innumerable times on my rambles around the network of central Kathmandu neighborhoods I had learned to call home. I had even stopped in once or twice to visit with my friend's host family, who ran this little neighborhood shop, making a small profit off eggs, packaged snacks, and South Asia's ubiquitous "cold drink," which was kept in the small magenta fridge I could still hear humming from the other side of the curtain. On Holi, as my friends and I had cavorted through the neighborhood getting drenched in colored water by roving packs of Nepali kids, Amit uncle's wife, Vidhya aunty, had sternly called us all into the shadow of shop's front to dispense artificially tropical, sickly sweet litchi juice boxes and admonish us for getting soaked on the streets; after all, it would make us cold, which would make us sick.

That memory fresh in my mind, I headed down the hallway to the far end, deeper into the recesses of the long and narrow building. There was another room behind the storefront; it appeared to be rented out. I knew Amit and Vidhya habitually rented out the spare rooms in the building since their adult daughters had left, which is why they became engaged in hosting American students as well. Up a flight of stairs at the back of the house, and I emerged onto a

small back balcony on the second floor, home to a pile of *chappals*⁹² and a cabinet. The stairs to the top floor, half built up as rooms and half as a *chhat*, or traditional flat roof, were to my left. To my right were two separate doors to the apartment—one which opened directly to the kitchen, and one to a small vestibule off the bathroom.

Vidhya aunty hears me approach and opens the kitchen door wide, asking me if I want a snack, or some tea, showing me some enormously oversized guests' house *chappals* to exchange my Tevas for and swiftly depositing me in her living room to play with her granddaughter for a few minutes while she boils black Tokla tea leaves together with water, milk, spices, and a truly huge amount of sugar, rivaling even Sushmita's tea for sweetness. Her three-year-old granddaughter, laid up for much of this year's preschool season with a variety of what I thought were threatening tropical illnesses, most recently typhoid, is hilarious, bright, and inquisitive. We sit on the floor and I glance around. I'd seen a fridge, an electric kettle, and a rice cooker on my brief traipse through the kitchen—the propane tank powering a gas shower heater, or geyser, was visible in the bathroom vestibule. And—I nearly did a double-take—was that a *vacuum* behind the TV in the living room, propped up nonchalantly by the door to the flat's front balcony?

I was confused. This was only the second time a collaborator had invited me over for the formal interview that made up an important component of my ethnographic research design, and my brain was working overtime, churning together each facet of Vidhya's house's layout, each gleaming of information about her appliances, trying to figure out what, if anything, it said about the topics I thought Nepalis were engaging around their appliances. Vidhya's house was remarkably similar to my own Nepali homestay. But my family didn't have nearly as many appliances as Vidhya did. I entered into my ethnographic project anticipating that class and

⁹² Nepali for “sandal.”

socioeconomic identity would be one of the clearest, most natural themes to emerge from my research, and that it would play out analogously to the introduction of appliances like dishwashers, vacuums, and eventually microwaves in 20th Century America. Owning appliances would be seen as a marker of middle class identity, and as the desire to advance along a socioeconomic ladder increased, that desire would be reflected by an increase in owning and using appliances. But Vidhya appeared to be both on an equal financial and social footing to my own family (if not less well-off) and significantly more interested in owning household appliances, judging by a 15-second inventory of what I could see in one small living room and the sliver of hallway beyond her granddaughter's head.

Commodities and Socioeconomic Expression

My expectations for the important role appliances would play in the expression and discursive construction of socioeconomic identity or class were based largely on historical narrative here in the States and my understanding of urban Indian history from my classes at Wellesley. Here in the U.S., our understanding of appliances is tied up in postwar increases in income. American media and the government worked actively to promote the family as the center of this new middle class life. In a postwar middle class American family, couples and their kids moved to the suburbs (usually into a ranch house) as soon as possible, and filled that house with the newest of modern appliances. As Clifford Clark writes, "happiness came from raising happy, independent kids, decorating the home to one's own taste, and sitting back in the evening with other family members and relaxing in front of the new TV set."⁹³ As part of this aspirational lifestyle, appliances exist to save the middle class housewife (or working wife, 25%

⁹³ Clifford E Clark, Jr., "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 172.

of American women in the postwar world worked) time so she can do all that relaxing and being a good, interactive mom.⁹⁴ A huge part of most of the historical and cultural studies perception of this consumptive turn in postwar American culture also focuses on their role in the Cold War soft power struggle between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Work from Wendy Kozol, Elaine Tyler May, and Greg Castillo discusses at length the way *LIFE* magazine or Whirlpool brand appliances construct, through media and participation in international trade fairs and pavilions, the way Americans are supposed to be (and in particular middle-class Americans) in direct contrast to people in the Soviet Union. This discursive construction is mostly discussed in terms of how it affected audiences at these behind-the-Iron-Curtain displays, but some writing, in particular Kozol and Castillo's projects, provides a unique perspective on how it reinforced for Americans how they should be. Obviously, this American perspective is not directly applicable to the Nepali context, but I certainly walked into my ethnographic research period with the understanding described in detail by Shelley Nickles, Clifford Clark, and Lizabeth Cohen coloring my expectations. I assumed that as the middle class formed, it was somehow natural to purchase appliances that would increase the family's leisure time.

However, my expectations were also influenced significantly by my understanding of the development of urban architecture and housing in colonial South Asia. This is a large part of my advisor from the history department's academic focus, and in his coursework I had encountered a number of well-thought-out arguments about how South Asian urbanity adapted to capitalist class construction and changing home spaces in the colonial and postcolonial era. The key

⁹⁴ Ibid, 180; Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 159; Shelley Nickles, "More is Better: More Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2002): 600; Wendy Kozol, *LIFE's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 70.

argument here, as advanced by authors like my advisor, Nikhil Rao, Swati Chattopadhyaya, Amar Farooqui, William Glover, Veena Oldenburg, and Sandip Hazareesingh, mainly revolves around the interaction between pre-colonial practices and colonial modernist expectations. Often, this is represented by a “black town” indigenous practice and a “white town” colonial practice segregation, or an “integration” discourse, emphasizing what the two ended up integrating. In reality, it’s never that simple; there are situations in which indigenous and non-indigenous practices are segregated and situations where they’re integrated, but there are also plenty of situations where these paradigms are far too simplistic for the actual interplay between colonizers and indigenous people in South Asia.⁹⁵ One example that provides a really unique perspective on how this interplay of cultural practices in architecture and home design comes from Rao’s book on the growth of Bombay (now Mumbai)’s suburbs in the early 20th century. He devotes an entire chapter of *House, but No Garden* to the rise of the “self-contained flat” and the integration of the in-home toilet in Bombay’s housing stock. A number of factors, notably a volatile land market and colonial obsession with “healthy” sewage infrastructure, conspired to make the “self-contained” apartment—i.e., an apartment containing all necessary functions within it, most importantly the toilet—the primary form of housing available to middle and

⁹⁵ For examples of the argument I’m synthesizing here, see Nikhil Rao, *House, but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay’s Suburbs, 1898-1964* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Swati Chattopadhyaya, “The Limits of ‘White Town’ in Colonial Calcutta” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 2 (2000); Amar Farooqui, *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay* (Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006); William Glover, *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Sandip Hazareesingh, *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity: Urban Hegemonies and Civic Contestations in Bombay City 1900-1925* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007).

lower-middle classes in the city of Bombay in the interwar period.⁹⁶ This arrangement illustrated the difficulties of everyday life in the colonial encounter. Significantly, the integrated toilet came to reflect the belief the new urban indigenous middle class that the British were right about toilets; they were a key part of a new and modern “discourse of public health and sanitation.”⁹⁷ To adopt British-style waste elimination practices was to adopt proper middle class sensibilities.⁹⁸ However, placing the toilet inside the home, which assumes a central place in the Hindu cosmology of self and other, defiled one of the safest and most comfortable places for devout, upper caste Hindus with ritually polluting bodily waste.⁹⁹ To live in Bombay, to be middle class, to earn a living, Indians in the late colonial period found themselves forced into a mold where seemingly incompatible “modern” practices and “traditional” beliefs coexisted within the very spatial arrangement of the only home they could afford. This delicately navigated spatial arrangement extended into the social practices of the home as well, as Rao demonstrates through a detailed analysis of representative apartment plans and ethnographic work conducted among early adopters of the “self-contained” Bombay flat. As Rao writes, the majority of self-contained flats had two doors to the hallway, one which accessed living spaces and one which accessed the toilet/washroom and *nahani* through a small anteroom. This allowed ritually unclean sweepers (toilet cleaners) to maintain the traditional practice of cleaning their

⁹⁶ Nikhil Rao, *House, But No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 109, 121.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 131.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 132.

⁹⁹ Sudipta Kaviraj, “Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta,” *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997): 93; Nikhil Rao, *House, But No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 130.

employer's toilet at least once everyday, but also forced them to access only the toilet and *nahani* and not defile the rest of the home.¹⁰⁰ Apartment residents and builders Rao worked with repeatedly emphasized this intentional feature of flat spaces and socialities, driving home for indigenous communities the constant presence of tension between colonially introduced middle class concerns and longstanding cultural prescriptions.

Okay, so I can recognize my frame of mind when thinking about how appliances will play into dynamics of class and globalization, based on what I'd learned in college and how I'd been enculturated here in the U.S. But—and I've alluded to this already—I ran into a lot of the same problems this entire research project investigates as I appraised my background knowledge. Namely, it doesn't really make sense to walk into an ethnographic context in Nepal armed only with information from America and colonial India. Nepal is not a postcolonial place, and my background knowledge doesn't really reflect the role of globalization in the developing world, especially one inflected by the flexible accumulation and neoliberal policies discussed at length by key theorists which informed this project as a whole, like David Harvey, Jim Ferguson, and Akhil Gupta. One of the key challenges in investigating the discourses of class and socioeconomic identity in this chapter is going to be balancing my solidly contextualized background information with an understanding that it is far from fully reflective of the context in which my research is happening.

Back to Vidhya

Returning with two steaming, opaquely milky cups of *chiyaa*, Vidhya invited me to join her on her sofa to chat. She eyed me appraisingly, as if to ask why I was so interested in her and her house. From my first question—"what is your full name?" Vidhya's neighborhood-famous

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 129.

nature as a commanding conversationalist was immediately apparent. I quickly learned that she moved to Kathmandu from Nepal's eastern Terai district of Jhapa, along the country's southern border with India, about thirty years earlier. She informed me quite matter-of-factly that neither she nor her husband had completed their secondary education; she considered herself "simple, medium people" especially because she was not highly educated (*paDhe-lekheko* in Nepali, literally, Vidhya was "not a read-and-written person"). But as an outsider, operating under all the layers of learning discussed above, I found Vidhya to be decidedly upwardly mobile. All four of her daughters had advanced professional degrees and were working in the city. Several had studied abroad. Halfway through our interview she brought out an iPad, the first I had seen anywhere in Nepal. But her deeply held sense of herself as "simple, medium" closely influenced her complex relationship to appliances.

It became clear through our talks that Vidhya felt strongly that in order to be a middle-class Nepali, one must live a *sahaj*, "simple" life, use one's own effort around the house. "We are simple, we do our own housework ourselves, we don't have these washing machines, these electric-type things. We do [everything the] simple-simple-simple way, we do our own work ourselves, we don't keep other people [domestic help]...we are middle-class people only, [and our] life is okay right now—easy in the house," she told me. She drove this point home in our conversation about her vacuum cleaner. I brought it up because I'd been so surprised to see it out in the living room. I was used to the habit, common among many Nepalis, of covering up or tucking away household appliances whenever possible. Vidhya had been describing her morning routine to me, emphasizing how much of the work she did herself: "now I do most of the work on my own. I get up in the morning, cook our food, do the sweeping, wash the clothes, all by

myself. I don't do it with the machines." She gestured around the room and mimed sweeping with a traditional Nepali handle-less bundle broom.

I was surprised, and pointed to the vacuum cleaner by the door. "Isn't it a little quicker with the vacuum?" I asked.

"No! It's absolutely not quicker with the vacuum!" She practically shouted. She went on to explain that machines could not make the lives of middle class people easier. "For people with a little education, it might be easy with machines. [But] we're not educated, so for us machines aren't easy, because we don't know how to use machines." The vacuum agitated more dust from the carpet in the house, and it took ages for Vidhya to siphon it all away. When using her bundle broom, on the other hand, she felt that decades of muscle memory allowed her to tidy the whole flat by sweeping for five minutes. Our conversation here points back to the discourses unpacked in Chapter Two; despite being represented in that chapter as positive towards the role of appliances within the context of health, adopting an allopathic perspective on the effect water purifiers had had on her family, in this instance she sounds more like Usha, offering a moralizing take on how appliances are compromising the *sahaj*, middle class identity in Nepal. Middle class Nepalis, according to Vidhya's perspective, were simple men and women who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty, applying their own elbow grease in their homes and businesses. They perhaps weren't supposed to aspire to great upward mobility, or at least not outwardly; for though she was "simple," "uneducated," and "[didn't] know what ha[d] to be done," Vidhya was also someone who owned a surprisingly large collection of appliances and had managed to send four daughters to obtain higher university degrees—and in Europe at that.

Usha, the 50-year-old housewife and volunteer "social worker" who lived in a nearby *galli* to mine in Handigaun navigated these complexly interacting discourses of class and status

in her own unique way. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of Usha's criticism of appliance purchase and usage centered on a discourse of health and incorporated a moralizing, suspicious discourse. However, our conversations also drew out an important *class* dynamic at play in her relationship to appliances. Similar to Vidhya's narrative, Usha found expending energy on housework to be one of the key markers of a morally upstanding person. When I asked her about her class identity directly, she said "[we're] medium [class]. We earn a little for ourselves [through our own work], we do a little, but the high class people are business people. We're middle class." Her husband had recently retired from an office job, her daughter was working, and her son was taking an MBA degree in India when I got to know her family. Like Vidhya, Usha had come to Kathmandu from the Terai, but the western part. While still living there, she had earned a BA and gotten married before moving to the city; compared to many of her relatives back home, Usha was also seen as upwardly mobile, with both of her children educated and in line for high-earning jobs. The evidence of this perspective lay in her 13-year-old niece, her sister's daughter, who had come to live with Usha and her husband after her children had left home. As briefly discussed in Chapter Two with Sushmita's "helping son" Raju, child circulation among rural and urban family members was quite common while I lived in Nepal; analogous to child circulation practices elsewhere, it typically involved one's rural relatives sending one or more of their kids to Kathmandu to live.¹⁰¹ In exchange for the upwardly mobile urban family member enrolling the child in Kathmandu's higher-quality schools and giving them the benefits of urban life, like semi-regular electricity and increased access to health care, these kids would typically help out around the house, washing dishes or

¹⁰¹ For an analogous discussion of child circulation in the Andes, see Jessica Leinaweaver's *The Circulation of Children: Kinship, Adoption, and Morality in Andean Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

helping with laundry, by far the most backbreaking and time-consuming chore in a Nepali home. While participating in research, I met a number of “helping brothers/sisters” as they’re known, ranging in age from eight to early 20s. Every house with a helping sibling is automatically cast in an upwardly mobile, socioeconomically distinct light, and Usha’s is no different.

Like mine and Vidhya’s, Usha’s second-story flat was a little small but well-furnished and neat. There were photos of Satya Sai Baba, one of South Asia’s most popular 20th century Hindu spiritual leaders, everywhere. It turned out that Usha’s “social work” was on behalf of his still-going-strong charity foundation, Sai Baba International. When I asked her what she liked to do in her free time, she explained, “I usually do social work...I do this type of work generally, service, things I [feel I] have to do, [for] those with difficulties, or those who are sick sometimes—I work with those types. We have a group.” This volunteering was very important to her; Usha saw herself as an upstanding, moral, and religious woman devoted to Sai Baba and his charity work.¹⁰² Similar to Vidhya, Usha placed a lot of emphasis on middle class people earning for themselves, living for themselves, and by extension, doing their housework for themselves. By disdainfully decrying people who overused machines as “lazy” as well as fat, Usha reinforced a moral universe that for her demarcated middle class identity—the hardworking independent people who manage for themselves by doing for themselves. But at the same time,

¹⁰² The Satya Sai movement is complicated and the academic take on it is quite a bit more critical than Usha’s; unfortunately, a deep dive into the history and beliefs of Sai Baba International is outside the scope of this piece. If you’re as interested as I was by the mysteriously smiling, big-haired saintlike figure, some excellent texts include the Sai Baba entries in George D. Chryssides, *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements* (Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 275; “Satya Sai Baba,” in *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* (Detroit: Gale, 2001); and the two fabulous booklength treatments I’ve read: Tulasi Srinivas’ *Winged Faith: Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Smriti Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Boston: Brill, 2008).

she mediated her faith and morality through her volunteering, which often included doing this kind of work for those less fortunate than herself. The phenomenon of middle class and upper-middle class women engaging in volunteering for the poor as part of their devotional activities to one spiritual leader or another has been an important part of class identity and sanctimoniousness in South Asia, from Pakistan to Sri Lanka to Nepal, for decades. It's a complicated discursive universe, then, that Usha is building. On the one hand, one ought always to do one's own work, without too much extra help, especially not from appliances, and not to do so is to be lazy—and unhealthy. But at the same time, by taking on that labor for others, Usha is improving her own moral, religious, and cultural capital, somehow reinforcing her desirable middle class identity.

It hearkens back to some of what Vidhya was saying when she discussed being a “simple, medium” person who wasn't supposed to aspire to great upward mobility. After all, in South Asia there are certainly cultural constraints on socioeconomic mobility; perhaps the most obvious one from an outsider's perspective is caste. While the unobservant or neocolonial perspective might attribute these sorts of restrictions to part of an Orientalizing discourse of unchanging, despotic village republics with a place for everyone and everyone in their place—where charity of the kind Usha does is some kind of opiate for the masses, keeping them downtrodden—postcolonial scholarship shows how in a lot of ways this was a construction of colonialism, at least in India.¹⁰³ Remembering the historical overview from the Introduction, this kind of colonial analysis isn't directly applicable to the Nepali context, as it was never a British colony. However, I feel confident ascribing a likely an influence of these kinds of narratives in Nepal, especially when Sai Baba International, a group which is certainly operating in the

¹⁰³ Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

postcolonial quagmire, has such an important hold on Kathmandu's middle class Hindu communities (I feel confident saying that; while Usha was the only woman who explicitly discussed Sai Baba with me, Satya Sai Baba's image cropped up in many an interlocutor's home). Additionally, the role played by the perception of the "magic of development" in Nepal since the 1950s strikes me as encouraging this Janus-faced discourse of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps and doing charity work at the same time. Remembering Stacy Pigg's work, also covered in the Introduction, "development" in Nepal has long been seen as a commodity to be consumed, while at the same time having a magic, random quality which makes a typical understanding of consumption based on capitalism impossible. In this context, the work of charities could take on an even more important role for people who are upwardly mobile, where they can distribute the kinds of goods and services typically attributed to magic, uncontrollable international development aid. Maybe it even could solidify, for someone like Usha, their morally upstanding middle class qualities of doing everything for themselves, by themselves, and still having a little left in the tank to give to others. It feels to me almost as if the student surpasses the master, while still maintaining the student's healthy respect and humility. The narrative of striving for middle classness, or of upward mobility itself, is perhaps new, in the sense that one can argue that it was only really possible since 1990 and the end of absolute monarchy in Nepal. But it's also difficult to map this kind of concept onto a socioeconomic space where the magic of development has worked with the autocratic governments of the Nepal of the absolute monarchy and *panchayati raj* years to produce a discourse of ideal Nepali identity that relies on modernity *and* simplicity, self-improvement *and* devotion to Nepal's unchanging qualities. On top of all this, as discussed above, both Maoist ideology as well as neoliberal changes to development policy, increasing urbanization, and increasing global market

penetration have served to create a jumble of competing narratives and discourses about simplicity, class identity, and volunteerism.

Another fascinating example of these narratives working together comes from my own host family, where my host *bhaauju* or sister-in-law Sarjana had adopted the perspective of flexible accumulation and neoliberal development policy (hearkening back to both Harvey of the introduction and the Gupta and Ferguson piece discussed above) by opening a tailoring school in our house. In addition to doing all our family's cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare, she took her knowledge from her commerce degree and her excellent sewing skills, acquired a license from the government, and put a small sign on our balcony advertising the school and listing her phone number. A few times a week, young women from around the neighborhood arrived at the house after Sarjana's daughter had headed off to school and went up to the *chhat*'s¹⁰⁴ small shed. Inside, they would sit on the floor and practice cutting from eye, with neither pattern nor even an iron to smooth out wrinkles in the fabric beforehand. There was no electricity up on the *chhat*, so the three sewing machines Sarjana had purchased for the business were all ancient foot-pedal powered pieces, made of single pieces of iron cast into shape. Often, the tension ribbons would snap and be repaired with spare scraps of fabric. Sarjana seemed to have a great time teaching and chatting with the women; as a going away present, the family wanted to give me a *sari*, complete with *choli*, or blouse, and petticoat. After purchasing the six yard unfinished polyester *sari* and another three yards of silk for the blouse and petticoat, she took great delight in having the students practice making the blouse and petticoat to my measurements and learning the delicate process of hemming the *sari* with an extra strip of

¹⁰⁴ Flat Nepali rooftop.

heavyweight fabric along much of the bottom seam, to insure good draping and prevent undesirable flare when moving about in it.

Every time I met the students or had a chance to watch Sarjana teach, I couldn't help but marvel at what felt absurd to me. The woman already worked harder than anyone I knew, and on top of it she had opened this business. Again, competing narratives around appliances and class seemed to encroach on this part of Sarjana's life. On the one hand, her small business, run out of her home in her spare time, was a fascinating example of the kind of flexible accumulation practices so popular among neoliberal development economists, and so biting critiqued by theorists and anthropologists of neoliberalism. She had very few appliances in the house, just an electric kettle, refrigerator, and a pump to draw water from the public line when it was available to the storage tank on the roof, and when I asked her if she wanted to buy any more, she did say that "especially I need an iron. It's important, the iron, yes. The clothes I make, I need to use an iron to give them back, so for that reason the iron is important and I really need it. I also need an iron to use on some stains, the iron does a lot." But at the same time, Sarjana's lifestyle pushed back against the narrative, so common in the 1990s and later, that equated this kind of upward mobility and neoliberal initiative with some kind of postmodern emphasis on leisure and free time. Sarjana worked all the time. The only time she ever had off was the five days every month when she wasn't allowed to cook food because she was menstruating. Even then, it wasn't much of a break. After all, she could still clean, do laundry, take care of her elderly mother-in-law and young daughter, and, because our family was considered progressive, sit in the kitchen and do prep work with raw food, as long as someone else cooked it. This is a great example of pushing back against the narrative around appliances and class I was acculturated with, based on Cold War-era consumerism. Those ads picked apart by so many historians of that period here at home

advanced a narrative of working less through owning more appliances and entering the middle class, and for some reason I thought this would be analogous to the Nepali context. But as the three narratives advanced by my experiences with Vidhya, Usha, and Sarjana demonstrate, thinking that is, well, patently ridiculous. The reality in Nepal, at least as advanced by these three collaborators, shows appliances fostering a middle class identity through creating opportunities to work *more* and *harder*, as when Usha uses her newly freed time to volunteer with Sai Baba International, or Sarjana starts a part-time business.

In contrast to Vidhya, Usha, and Sarjana's experiences, in which middle class identity was largely marked by hard work, whether more appliances made more work possible, or fewer appliances was simply better, a number of women I worked with emphasized the increased use of appliances as a marker of middle class identity. One person who felt especially strongly about this was Deepika, who readers may remember was unusual among my collaborators. 38 years old and unmarried, she lived with her family in their ancestral home in Kalopul, about ten minutes south of my host family's flat on foot. Deepika was the only woman in my project who had never been married, and therefore also wasn't a parent. Another unique aspect was her home: Deepika's family's house was built in the traditional Newari style of Kathmandu's local ethnic group, a single story of rooms arranged around a central courtyard, with a small break in the construction on one side for the house's gate, and opposite it separate outhouses, one with the toilet and one with for bathing. This unique setup allowed them to keep some chickens and a dog, which typically skittered about the courtyard, ducking past family members and around motorbikes propped up against the central *tulsi*, or sacred basil, tree. At first I met Deepika's eldest sister-in-law, whose husband had inherited the property from their father. She showed me into the family's living room, which featured three or four women relatives and a couple kids

crowded around an enormous TV. This room was connected to the kitchen by a side door in addition to the rooms' courtyard doors; unfortunately, I couldn't spend much time in there before Deepika arrived and smilingly ushered me into her own bedroom, kitty corner across the courtyard. After a flurry of compliments on my Nepali and pressing what felt like my fiftieth cup of *chiyaa* that day into my hands (it was ten in the morning), we settled onto the bench in her room.

Deepika had no reservations about discussing what she saw as the generalities of Kathmandu's social classes, and particularly noting the lack of appliances among the poor.

"Middle class people only are sometimes academic, really educated, and also do work, they have office jobs," she explained:

They can manage, if they go slowly with buying stuff, and if they have a small family. But *no* family, *no* work, *no* income...that's really hard, and living in the house...even with educated people's incomes, money, and can be really hard to have and use things, really difficult and expensive. Kathmandu is really expensive. Houses are small, and families are big. If only one [person] is working, then it's really tough. For that reason, we [all] have mobiles, cheap or expensive. For people, of the things now this one is the most necessary.

"[Even] if you come into a tiny, [rented] room," Deepika said, painting a picture of Kathmandu's urban poor, "the TV is really important, and so is the mobile...if you don't have a refrigerator or iron it's ok [if you're poor]." Class status, as Deepika explained it, could be generally pieced together from looking at the amount and types of appliances people had. "In Kathmandu a lot of people's houses don't have a lot of machines, a lot of things," she emphasized. "For many it's just TV and mobile. Only. Out of everything that's what most people have at home. Middle class people, some, have a refrigerator, vacuum. A little big, rich people's houses [only] have a lot of electric things." In contrast to what I had heard from Vidhya, Usha, and to a certain extent what I had observed in Sarjana's house, Deepika unequivocally saw appliance ownership and

usage as commensurate with socioeconomic status, more than values. She perceives a certain baseline—the ownership of a mobile phone and television—but hopping up a couple rungs on the social ladder entails a little more: a refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, or iron. Only the really rich have everything, from TV and cell phone through refrigerator and gas geyser to washing machine and microwave.

Deepika was the only person to emphasize the importance of communication media so strongly in our conversations. While my goal was to avoid diving too deeply into the world of mobile phones, televisions, and computers—since that opens up whole new realms of interpretation drawing on media anthropology (an issue which I will discuss more directly in Chapter Four)—I mostly left it up to my collaborators to decide what counted as household appliances to them, and the fact is that Deepika focused so closely on these types of appliances. Communications media was very important to her personally; of all the women I worked with she was the only one who kept her smartphone with her while we talked, and she had a computer in her room in the house. These were important parts of her life; she had a self-image as a modern and globalized single woman working in a white collar finance job. But she would also repeat during our conversations that she never had the nicest, newest, or most expensive model of anything. This may gesture to an underlying foundational ethic more in keeping with Vidhya, Usha, and Sarjana's than my initial impression suggested—after all, not only is Deepika a middle class woman, but she's increasingly taking on the role, in Nepali eyes, of a sort of “spinster aunt,” since she lives at home still and is unlikely to marry at this point. She is “cool,” with a certain amount of disposable income from her impressive job, but it would be unseemly for her to flaunt that around the house, where she lives at the pleasure of her brother and sister-in-law. It would be unseemly for her to flaunt much of anything around the house, regardless of her

personal opinions on appliances and technology and the role they play in one's socioeconomic status. The cultural restrictions on upward mobility play out in an unusual context here, where Deepika appears to have done everything "right" to advance up a socioeconomic ladder, but hasn't perhaps been able to take advantage of that advancement in the way one might expect while she is single and living in the family home.

Deepika's big-picture view was complemented by the personal anecdotes of women like Mallika and Pushpa. A forty-year-old housewife and finance coop employee, Mallika lived in a large detached house in Chandol, about fifteen minutes east of my neighborhood, with her husband, two children, a helping sister, and several other members of the extended family. Newari to their core, the family struck me as a bit kooky, with Mallika's mildly famous boxer husband, who now spent most of his days in their in-home boxing gym, teaching the pugilistic art to talented young men and women who often did well enough to represent Nepal at boxing meets across Asia. The boxing students could often be found lounging around the house, and were always infallibly friendly and polite. The same could not be said for Mallika's four-year-old son, who truly ruled the roost. He was eight years younger than his sister, and it was apparent to all that Mallika and her husband had been itching for a son. When they got their wish, he was pampered beyond a reasonable doubt, ordering the helping sister, the blood sister, the boxers, and even his neighborhood playmates around with impunity. Despite a typical Nepali hatred of cats, the family had adopted one at the son's insistence, and were even now keeping its kittens in the house, much to Mallika's disgust.¹⁰⁵ Her daughter was sweet but similarly strong-willed, often found training in the boxing gym with her dad. Even at 12, her

¹⁰⁵ Before you ask, I do *not* know why Nepalis dislike cats so strongly. But I can attest that they do.

build was sporty and she could hold her own. It was already a unique mix of traditional and non-traditional Nepali values and practices, and that was before they saw me coming and performed a classical Newari welcome ceremony for me, draping my neck in a white silk welcome scarf and marking a *tilak* on my forehead with a gritty paste of vermilion *sindoor*, yogurt, and uncooked whole grains of rice. In another unexpected twist, an apple, five or six Chinese-made toffees, and an ice-cold glass of Fanta were pressed into my hands as soon as we sat down in one of their two living rooms. Apparently I was staying for lunch—upon hearing I genuinely liked the ubiquitous Nepali *dal-bhaat*, Mallika sent the older, 20-something helping sister to the kitchen to begin whipping up a whole spread, with rice, lentils, vegetables, pickled vegetables, fried fish, and a fried egg.

Mallika had worked since she was 20 and spoke proudly of the familial support she had gotten as a full-time “housewife-plus,” explaining that “for me to be happy in life, I need to do this [work]...my husband supports me, my kids, my babies are well, so with all that I do it for myself.” Working her whole life, and with her husband running the successful boxing school, Mallika had been able to purchase a veritable menagerie of machines, from Deepika’s basic vacuum and fridge to a washing machine, multiple televisions, and even an induction cooktop which the family didn’t use (but had purchased during the gas shortage after the Indian embargo of Nepal a few years previous). She aspired, at that time, to buy a treadmill. Mallika explained that machines were both the product of and the key to her classically upwardly mobile lifestyle. “With the machines that we use we can do other work in different places,” she said. “From that we can take financial support also, making it easier for me. A lot of work can be done. After doing all this work we earn money...so for that reason it’s easy—usually financially supporting. So with that also we tend to add to our life.” However, she really identified with her middle

class roots—“[the middle class] tend to work hard. Really high society people don’t know difficulty,” she opined, after responding to my question about her class status with “if I had to say, [we’re] middle class.” All that hard work paid off; she noted that one reason why she *was* middle class, if she “had to say,” was because she “ha[d] the amenities...ha[d] the machines.” If she hadn’t had them, no matter how much money she had, she wasn’t sure she’d be middle class in the same way.

Pushpa similarly felt strongly that the benefit of having machines was to save time and money, but for her this would enable more leisure time, and a more carefree way to live her life. Perhaps more than any other person who worked with me on this project—including Mallika—readers may recall from Chapter Two that Pushpa was likely the most wealthy in real terms. Her husband had a job doing IT in the public sector, and her eldest daughter was in the United States for college. She kept songbirds on her roof as a hobby, and of everyone who participated in the project, she was the only one who had ever hired domestic help, albeit temporarily. Her first job after college was in a travel agency, but she later switched to a job with a finance cooperative like Mallika’s. She felt she had lots more free time since buying many appliances, and she had an accordingly long list of hobbies: “When I have free time and I don’t have to work, I like to read and watch TV. I like to entertain with that. I’ll do other work, if I want to play [a sport, for exercise], I’ll do that. If I want to read, I’ll read in that time. If I’m feeling tired, I’ll sleep.” When it came time to ask her if she had her eye on anything new for the house, she told me she wanted a higher wattage vacuum cleaner! Her lifestyle was quite different from many of the other women working with me. Even though her consumption habits were more similar to Mallika’s, she had a different perspective on them, feeling that consuming so many household appliances was a vital step on the road to increased leisure time, which was itself a marker of

increased socioeconomic status. Working hard was no longer a key part of Pushpa's agenda; though she had a 9-5 job, she had no qualms about taking off early to spend time with her daughter or sit for an interview with a young American researcher. She happily gave me a tour of the house, and unlike any other Nepali woman I had met, felt utterly fine with sleeping during the day. For her, appliances did improve her socioeconomic status, and an improved socioeconomic status came with different day to day habits.

Sushmita's experience was similar, though she was not so wealthy as Pushpa. Since selling her shop and becoming a full-time housewife, Sushmita found herself with quite a bit more free time, especially because of all her appliances. Her family's flat was just a few minutes down the main road in our neighborhood, almost directly across the street from Vidhya's, yet it was practically a different world entirely. I enjoyed helping my *bhaauju* out in the kitchen, and I had used our family's heavy traditional Nepali-style mortar and pestle to painstakingly grind the same ingredients for tomato pickle into a paste over the course of minutes, while Sushmita took seconds to throw hers together in a blender. It was like a war of the worlds, with memories of my own mother's kitchen, well stocked with things like blenders and food processors, fighting for supremacy with the Nepali kitchen I spent so much time in with my host family, which utilized hard-fought to acquire running water and electricity. Sushmita explained her philosophy surrounding household appliances and other kinds of development succinctly: "walk isn't good—run is good!" Her habit was to save up cash for an item, purchase it, and start saving for the next thing she wanted. Unlike many women I worked with, there was always something new Sushmita wanted. And in her free time, which she felt had greatly increased because of her collection of appliances, she went for walks, visited friends and relatives, did shopping, made appointments. "I watch TV," she said, grinning mischievously, "and use Facebook for a minute!"

And sometimes I knit a sweater.” Sushmita had in fact become the queen of the neighborhood gaggle of Facebook aunties, she showed me, taking photos of them together at neighborhood festival get-togethers and sharing them widely on social media. Though she didn’t have the means of someone like Pushpa, she agreed that being middle class and purchasing and using appliances meant increasing leisure time and leisure activities, and that this was a good and appropriate way for a middle class Nepali to be.

Conclusion

Pretty much everyone I worked with in Kathmandu agreed that their practices and opinions surrounding their appliances had a lot to do with their social class and socioeconomic identity. In comparison to the health discourse from Chapter Two, my interlocutors were less likely to feel comfortable discussing this without my prompting, but when asked directly it was clear that many women saw commodity purchase and usage—especially in the home—as a key marker of middle class and upper-middle class identity in Nepal. What kinds of appliance purchase and usage were middle class, however, varied wildly from woman to woman. The fluid nature of collaborators’ responses to issues of class and socioeconomic status was curious. Everyone I talked to considered themselves middle class, and in fact universally insisted on this identity. It seemed no one could quite agree on *what* defined middle class Nepalis, however much they tried.

On the one hand, I worked extensively with women like Vidhya, Usha, and Sarjana. They worked hard at strenuous and often physical labor in the home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for family members. For them, hard work with one’s own two hands seemed emblematic of middle class identity. Even Mallika fit this designation, though she owned and used more appliances than many I worked with. On the other, there were women like Pushpa, and Sushmita

who also identified as middle class but owned many more household appliances and felt that a middle class positionality was dependent on purchasing appliances and using them to gain more leisure time, which they filled with a fascinating mix of hobbies.

For me as an anthropologist and historian, the women's experiences can be seen as influenced by competing discourses of Nepali identity and socioeconomic class which have been brought to bear on the Nepali public since the 1950s. These narratives include the shifting ideologies of international development, from the 1950s to today, along with its magical, randomized dispersal on the ground; the autocratic Nepali chauvinism of the monarchy and the 1970s *panchayati raj*; the anti-development Maoist rhetoric of the 1990s to the present, which attempts to map a classical Marxist-Leninist class conflict onto the uniquely politically and economically situated Nepali context; and the globalized narratives of consumption, flexible accumulation, and postmodern capitalism which have flooded the region following the 1990 transition to representative democracy and more genuine improved access to the global market for everyday Nepalis.

Another interpretive thread which operated in the back of my mind when contemplating my interlocutors' relationship to class—especially when that relationship was being explored through the commodified context of household appliances—involved the my experience of South Asia's oft-important culturally specific bent to interpretations of manual and nonmanual labor; while it is simplistic to fully ascribe this to caste-based calculi, it is true that as caste hierarchies became codified throughout much of the region under colonial technologies like the census, the Hindu ontology which outsiders understood as positing that it is the lot of some castes to work with their hands and some to work with their minds became increasingly

prevalent.¹⁰⁶ That ontology is still enormously present in today's distributions of castes across educational opportunities and labor categories in India, for example; Ajanta Subramanian's provocative work on the access of lower-caste individuals to India's prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology shows how these kinds of caste privileges have persisted in the mutated form of "merit-based" discourses over time.¹⁰⁷ While of course Nepal is not a postcolonial state in the way that India is, as I discuss in the Introduction it is unique as the only South Asian state to have enacted a civil and criminal code which legally codified the caste hierarchy and caste-based discrimination in 1854 during the Rana regime—the infamous *Muluki Ain* that were only revised to remove casteist legislation in the 1960s. There is certainly a debate to be had surrounding the extent to which religious dogmas such as these permeate the everyday lives of individuals, especially in the 21st century, though I find it a uniquely compelling angle from which to think through some of the deeply felt opinions on manual labor, nonmanual labor, and leisure held by my collaborators—especially considering their demographics. Eight of the ten women are high-caste, after all, and the two that aren't occupy a unique social position in the Kathmandu Valley as Newaris, the local indigenous group which first established the three great kingdoms in the Valley that were later overtaken by *brahman-chhetri* kings from other parts of the Middle Hills. For women like Sushmita and Pushpa, then, this analytic framework may fit especially well, considering their attachment to appliances for decreasing their reliance on manual labor and increasing their leisure time. But how can we interpret the insistence by a number of *brahman-chhetri* women, like Usha and Vidhya, that hard work with one's own hands—repeatedly

¹⁰⁶ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁷ Ajantha Subramanian, "Making Merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 2 (2015): 291-322.

emphasized in conversation by the use of intensifying reflexive pronouns—was the marker of their class identity when it seems counterintuitive to the historical expression of their caste identity?

It's questions like these that continually confront me as I explore my ethnographic data and grapple with the interpretations I want to make. It's clear I learned a great deal from my collaborators, and not just about everyday experiences like how many of them used an induction cooktop to make tea in the morning compared to a gas stove. But every broader conclusion I come across is instantly refuted by another part of my brain, questioning and debating and poking holes. The kinds of historicist, teleological conclusions about class I wanted to make going in to the project—that decades of developmentalist and modernist discourse must have created an environment where appliances, and consumption more generally, have a privileged place in the discourse—make sense on one level, but on another are utterly inapplicable to the situation I found myself in. After all, in one of my earliest ethnographic experiences during the project my collaborator Vidhya made no bones about the fact that she thought appliances made her life more difficult and she preferred not to have or use them!

While this wasn't as big a part of my exploration of Usha, Deepika, and Nikita's discourse in Chapter Two, when reflecting on Vidhya's perspective here a good part of me also worried (I'm a worrier) at the underlying narratives of her repeatedly expressed beliefs. They felt essentializing, emphasizing the idea that South Asians were ignorant and reliant on traditional methods. But as this project has hopefully begun to make clear, so much of what is compelling about Nepali discourses surrounding consumer appliances centers on the complex interplay of the traditional and the non-traditional in everyday life, where women like Vidhya have to navigate a desire to embrace and perpetuate the construction of Nepali identity while at

the same time incorporate changes which are inevitable. Nepal's recent history comes to bear strongly on these calculi, especially where matters of class and Nepali identity are concerned. Nepal is a multiethnic state where many cultural differences are enhanced by geographic separation and unique terrain, as discussed above. In addition, for hundreds of years Nepal was considered a "forbidden kingdom" by outsiders, an idea romanticized and perpetuated by the British, who never brought the state under their colonial rule. A British colonial official was stationed in Kathmandu in an "advisory" role to the king from the early 19th century, but unlike many other absolute monarchies in South Asia, the British Resident was never able to extend British influence to any great extent. The modern absolute rule of the Shahs in the 20th century decided to attempt to produce greater ethnic homogeneity in the country to encourage unity among diverse groups, especially as radical Marxist-Leninists from India's east had begun to foment unrest in parts of Nepal's countryside at that time (the very early ancestors of today's Maoists). At that time, Nepali was made the only official language of state education and the government. Official Nepali dress was determined, featuring a curious amalgam of symbols from the ubiquitous "Gandhi *topi*," or two-pointed hat (similar to that of a midcentury American soda jerk, but in cloth; part of the official uniform of anti-colonial agitation, and later political figures as a whole, in neighboring India) rendered in traditionally woven Nepali fabrics, to the national weapon, the *khukri* or dagger of Nepal's elite Gurkha military forces.

This Nepali chauvinism of the 1970s, coupled with the nearly feudal political system of absolute monarchy and *panchayati raj*, produced an oppressive 20th century environment in which propagandistic notions of what was and was not Nepali wormed their way into the *habitus* of middle-aged women like Vidhya, who then found themselves going head-to-head with neoliberal, postmodern discourses of ease, leisure, and socioeconomic advancement following

the genuine transition to representative democracy in 1991. As the influence of the monarchy continued to wane (reaching its lowest point following 2003's grisly murder spree) and the Communist Party of Nepal, Maoist launched their insurgent civil war in 1996, eventually overtaking government forces in Kathmandu and forming a new government ten years later, women like Vidhya found themselves navigating increasingly complex discourses when it came to class. On the one hand, simplicity and hard work were emblematic of the ideal Nepali, according to both the Nepali chauvinist rhetoric of the 1970s and 80s, when Vidhya was growing up, and of the Maoist movements of the late 1990s and 2000s. These same Maoist groups made class in the classical sense—workers/peasants, middle classes/bourgeoisie, and upper classes/capitalists—increasingly part of the discourse in Nepal, despite the fact that centuries of absolute monarchy and the lack of overt colonialism had created a socioeconomic system in which these categories did not directly map. On the other hand, globally ascendant neoliberal and postmodern rhetoric of consumerism, leisure, ease, and technology had permeated Nepal, both through decades of international development aid (going back to the early 1950s) and more recent introductions of mass media like cable TV, mobile phones, and the internet. In the case of Vidhya, who was a little older than many of my collaborators on the project, and who had achieved something of a rags-to-riches happy ending, the response to this complex interplay of discourses of worth surrounding socioeconomic status and consumption, as expressed through appliances, was clear, if not exactly consciously intentional. She would purchase and use a number of household appliances, but she wouldn't be happy about it. She would emphasize a narrative of simplicity and hard work that reflected both monarchical and Maoist rhetoric while subtly undermining them by utilizing new machines. She wouldn't be seen expressing the idea that appliances increased leisure time or decreased work, because she didn't necessarily believe

that it was proper for leisure time to be increased or hard work to be decreased in a good, middle class Nepali home. But the fact remained that she still had appliances in her home which she used regularly, and her daughters' accomplishments indicated her position in her socioeconomic world was less "simple, medium" than her own words might lead us to believe.

The real insight from the ethnographic data (and maybe I'm showing my hand with another twenty or thirty pages of thesis to go) is not that appliances are good, or bad, or indicative of globalization, or anything as simple as all that. The insight is that all the women had heterogeneous opinions. Yes, being middle class is important to everyone I worked with. Appliances and commodities do clearly play a role for collaborators in delineating middle class identity. But how can every collaborator be middle class, with commodity purchases and practices to reflect it, when there is such heterogeneity among collaborators' backgrounds, appliance collections, and practices? This is the central question and thematic elaborated by the ethnographic data. The heterogeneity of the data belies the idea that Marxian class structure struggles—and ultimately fails—to map onto Nepal. Yet at the same time, it's a hugely available signifier, not least because of the role Maoism has played over the decades in Nepal. Class identity and dynamics in postmodern, late capitalist 21st century South Asia are unstable and broadly socially illegible (or at least deeply perspective-dependent) due to the widespread application of these categories and interpretive frameworks that just don't fit. And yet it's impossible to somehow remove them from the Nepali context; after all, transnational and translocal media-, techno-, and finanscapes have been working changes in the lives of average Nepalis for years, and their postmodern discursive universe is devoid of the touchstones non-Nepali people might expect, like the traditional, Marxian trajectory of class history. I mean, there was never industrialized labor on any great scale in Nepal! There wasn't even much of a

capitalist bourgeoisie; there was only a royal family and its hangers-on, at least until 1990. How should the introduction of a category like “middle class,” which is already hugely perspective dependent and malleable in parts of the world where the more traditional Marxist class structure used to exist, such as Western Europe and the United States, fare in a place like Nepal? In many ways, things are happening exactly as we expect they should, because we should expect nothing! It doesn't make sense!

Limiting our thinking to the categories we already believe we understand, and blindly attempting to transpose them onto uniquely complex situations around the world is always going to create a false sense of understanding, papering over the differences that are the real source of interest for exploring cross-cultural experiences, and differences and similarities.

Chapter Four

Private Consumption and Public Culture: A Journey into the Partially Known

April 13th, 2017, Gahana Pokhari Cold Store, Handigaun, Kathmandu, 11:00 AM

This is the most convenient time of day to approach the corner store at the top of my street, by the Gahana Pokhari tank and down the block from the Tangal temple and bus stop. It's called a cold store because it has a fridge, but like most corner stores in Kathmandu it sells a variety of things—cigarettes and tiny packets of chewing tobacco, often flavored with betel that turns the contents, and the chewer's spit, vermillion red; candy and chips; single-serve packets of Chocos, the puffy chocolate cereal my eight-year-old host sister usually finishes off before I have the chance to eat any. On the plastic lawn chairs and wooden benches scattered on the sidewalk outside local elderly men and the unemployed drink tea and reminisce about the *Baisakh*, or lunar New Year, parade that had culminated in a dunking of floats in the tank the day before. The bits of paper confetti and ice cream bar wrappers caught in the bushes and grass around the tank are potent memories of the neighborhood's biggest festival. Earlier in the mornings and later in the afternoons the cold store is much busier, with people on their way to and from work, day care, or private school bus collection points stopping off to buy dairy, after-school snacks, and the like. Most importantly for me, this cold store stocks a number of newspapers and lifestyle magazines. The newspapers are mostly in Nepali, but the magazines come in a mix of Nepali and English, some imported from India and others printed here in Kathmandu. I opt for a couple local ones—the upmarket, English-language Nepali edition of India's *World of Women*, more commonly known as *WOW*, and the Nepali-language, more quotidian *Nari [Woman]*.

There's a reason why I waited until Nepali Lunar New Year to take a look in women's magazines. The entire country officially runs on a lunar calendar, and *Baisakh* is one of the big

national holidays, in addition to the time for celebrating a number of religious and cultural festivals. As a result, this time of year is a great time for deals in local appliance showrooms—the Labor Day or President’s Day sales of Nepal, second only to the sales leading up to the October holidays—and the most common place to find them advertised is in weekly magazines and local papers. On a recent trip to the clinic for an ear infection I’d snagged a couple of worn-out copies of such ads from last year’s *Baisakh*, and I was dying to get my hands on this year’s.

I paid for the magazines and sauntered home to my host family’s flat, enjoying the genuinely warm April weather. Flipping through the magazines on my platform bed before *bhaauju* called me to lunch, I started to take notes on the advertising in my field journal:

Ad for “Him Electronics Private Limited, a shop that sells Himstar brand appliances in Naxal: smiling South Asian woman in Western dress (khakis, flats, button-down printed blouse) leans her left arm on top of a Himstar fridge, pointing to it with her right index finger, a huge smile on her face. The fridge and freezer compartment doors are wide open, and a range of foods can be seen inside: whole heads of broccoli, bell peppers, tomatoes, and summer squash; a bunch of cilantro, grapes, apples, a sliced kiwi (!) slices of melon, a pineapple, oranges, what appear to be other stone fruits. Bizarrely, all this produce lines the shelves, some of it in a bowl (though not the already cut fruit, inexplicably). The produce drawer on this model isn’t see-through and lies closed. A number of slices of what looks like black forest gateau share a shelf with the pineapple, oranges, and one of the bunches of grapes. There’s some dairy, too—what looks like four different cartons of yogurt. The door of the fridge holds a crapton of juice in cans and cartons, what appears to be a liter of maple syrup, a bunch of bottled water, and condiments like tomato sauce and salsa. The fridge and freezer sections, though different on the model with clearly different controls, both hold typically refrigerated items; in the freezer I see two two-liter bottles of soda turned on their sides to fit under the rack/shelf, and another cake, this one frosted with a white buttercream, plus more yogurt, if such a thing is to be believed. The ad copy reads: “Nepalmaa sarvadhik bikrii hune electronics brand,” in Devanagari script. Translated, it means: “Most sold electronics brand in Nepal.”



The Himstar Electronics Advertisement

The other ad which is immediately apparent is one for Samsung appliances, also placed by Him Electronics Private Limited, which appears to have the market cornered on print advertising in *Nari*. In addition to selling Himstar, they are licensed dealers for Samsung in Nepal, and the ad has the Samsung logo in the upper right-hand corner. Across the top third of the page is an enormous graphic-design banner with a silhouette of a generically Nepali skyline—tiered temple

roofs, other buildings—and some blossoms from a flowering tree, with a medallion in the center that reads “SAMSUNG [in English]—NEW YEAR 2074 [in Devanagari script]—Celebrations [in English].” The medallion is flagged by party bunting and wrapped gifts. The middle third of the page is a collection of Samsung appliances, presumably carried by Him Electronics; I count three different sizes of bridge, a semi-automatic washer, a fully automatic washer, a gas geyser, a wall-mounted air conditioner, a countertop electric oven, and a huge flat-screen TV. There’s also English text, reading “This New Year bring home Samsung products and get exciting assured gifts.” The bottom third of the page lists what those assured gifts are—and contact information for Him Electronics’ numerous outlets around Kathmandu.

SAMSUNG

SAMSUNG
नयाँ वर्ष
२०७३
Celebrations

This New Year bring home Samsung products and get exciting assured gifts*

Authorized Distributor of Samsung Consumer Electronics for Nepal

HIM ELECTRONICS PRIVATE LIMITED

Service please contact our Customer Service Plaza (CSP)
Surbhara, Kathmandu, Nepal. Tel. +977-14222888 / 14260666

Hotline No: 8000970115

Offers and gifts are subject to change without prior notice. All gifts shall be on 'AS IS' basis. Images, features & specifications shown are for representational purpose only, actual may vary. For more details contact your retailer. The offer is being provided by HIM Electronics and Triveni Byapar.

Second Advertisement

Approach to the Chapter

I've briefly discussed the role of advertising in health and wellness discourses above, but this chapter will discuss the role of advertising as public culture much more explicitly. Appliance-related consumption and practice in Nepal takes place almost exclusively in the home, as is true most places; after all, they're called "home appliances." Only purchase practice actually occurs in what is typically perceived as the public arena. But one of the things which originally drew me to the topic of appliance purchase and consumption in Kathmandu was what I perceived, from an early point in my time in Kathmandu, as an upward trend in purchase and usage of appliances. So many friends, neighbors, acquaintances of my host family or other students' host families, discussed regularly their *new* induction cooktop, vacuum, fridge, washing machine, or the like; anecdotally, a shift was taking place as more and more people in Kathmandu came to own more and more appliances. There are numerous reasons why this might be so, several of which have been discussed in preceding chapters, like urban development and the increased reliability of infrastructure, greater disposable income, and so on. But I found myself wondering: if I take my collaborators at their word (which I do; my project depends on it, and more importantly, I would feel even worse about the crisis of representation if I didn't), how do they decide on what these practices I've been looking at throughout my project? How do their daily use habits come to be? After all, most of these appliances are being used, or consumed, within the home, a space that is insular, almost private, and there aren't industrial consumer fairs of the kind America sent their appliances to during the Cold War, with demonstrations for potential new consumers. My first thought was that the notion of "public culture" might be an interesting lens through which to examine how practices and discourses

surrounding appliances were being modeled in shared, public places for people to bring home with them.

“Public culture” is an idea from visual and media anthropology, developed by Arjun Appadurai and his wife, the late Carol Breckenridge. They write in the introduction to *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World* that

public culture... allows us to describe not a type of cultural phenomenon but a *zone* of cultural debate. This zone cannot be understood apart from the general processes of globalization that we cited at the beginning. From this point of view, the contestatory character of public culture has much to do with the tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes. These tensions generate arenas where other registers of culture encounter, interrogate, and contest one another in new and unexpected ways. Thus national culture seeks to co-opt and redefine more local, regional, or folk cultural forms. Commercial culture (especially in the cinema, television, and audio industry) seeks to popularize classical forms. Mass cultural forms seek to co-opt folk idioms. This zone of contestation and mutual cannibalization—in which national, mass, and folk culture provide both mill and grist for one another—is at the very heart of public modernity.¹⁰⁸

Basically, public culture is a shared cultural space where the conflicting things made part of South Asian (or other) globalization and transnational flows can be examined, debated, “cannibalized,” and incorporated into life. That’s why I opened this chapter with an examination of advertising, the most common zone of public culture appliances operate within. In comparison to many of the women I worked with, the advertisement reads like the *Stepford Wives* of Nepali homemakers and their refrigerators. The woman depicted is fair, naturally but heavily made-up, and dressed in conservative-by-American-standards yet hugely progressive “western” blouse and slacks, smiling as she leans casually against a fully stocked fridge, implying that it’s hers. Inside there are bizarre foods that almost never make their way into a

¹⁰⁸ Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, “Public Modernity in India,” in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 5.

Nepali home, like black forest gateau and heavily frosted, decorated white layer cake. I mean, there's a kiwi in there! Almost all fruit in Nepal is imported, so it's true that out-of-season or non-native greenhouse-grown fruits like strawberries or cantaloupes are sometimes *more* accessible there than places where fruits grow naturally like India (where local fruits are typically the only thing being sold, and so often read to me as exotic, tropical delicacies: the hot season and early monsoon in May and June is the time for things like fifty varieties of mango, or *kala jamun*, an aggressively astringent, plum-like stone fruit, or *chikoo*, a fruit which has a wonderfully sweet, pulpy brownish-purplish flesh hidden by a furry, kiwi-like exterior, or the bizarre fresh lychee), but these are rarely actually purchased by women like my collaborators, who stick to the affordable staples like apples, bananas, sweet limes, and pomegranates. Or take what I described as a "liter bottle of maple syrup" in the Himstar refrigerator's door. Practically every homestay in Kathmandu (and in India too for that matter) probably has a souvenir-sized jug of maple syrup lying neglected in a corner of the kitchen, a "thank you for welcoming me into your home, here's something unique from America" gift brought by a hapless New Englander at some point or another. In my experience, it's almost always untouched, nestled behind a widely consulted collection of ayurvedic medicines from *chyawanprash* paste to aloe vera juice to ashwagandha powder. What Nepali woman would keep an entire liter in her fridge? Using "public culture" as a way to examine advertisements like this one and how they were similar and different to the practices I observed in Nepali homes might be a valuable way to parse out some of these ideas.

To be clear, a lot of the use of public culture exists in the realm of visual anthropology, or other forms of media anthropology. I greatly enjoyed and found compelling ethnographies like Arvind Rajagopal's *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the*

Indian Public, Chris Pinney's *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Peter Manuel's *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, Purnima Mankekar's *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*, and Gabriella Lukács' *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*, all of which are "media anthropology" operating within the zone of "public culture" studies.¹⁰⁹ As I mentioned in the Introduction, I don't utilize the unique perspective of visual or media anthropology within this project. It would just be biting off more than I can chew, and that's why I've tried to limit the project's engagement with things like television, radio, film, and the internet in urban Nepal. But this project does operate with the material culture of the zone of public culture in Kathmandu: print advertising. It also touches on the notion of public culture in my discursive analysis of my collaborators' discussion of the process of purchasing appliances, in attempt to examine this aspect of appliance purchase and usage in Nepal.

The problem is, I'm not entirely convinced I have much compelling ethnographic data. It was persistently challenging for me to access the discursive space surrounding these elements with my collaborators. No matter what kinds of questions I used, it wasn't really a topic that engaged the women I worked with in a meaningful way. With that in mind, this chapter will deviate somewhat from the other argumentative chapters in the project. I want to present and

¹⁰⁹ So that's Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Gabriella Lukács, *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

reflect on what I *do* have, but I don't want to make a definitive interpretation. As I wrestled with this material over the preceding months, I wasn't even sure I would end up presenting it; it was the primary bone of contention between me and "anthropology," or even me and myself, as I tried to manage my anxieties and deeply felt concerns around the representation of my collaborators. But the project without the material feels more unfinished than presenting the material without a definitive argument. I think there is something to be found in the material presented, both in the analysis of material culture like the print ads from the beginning and the discursive material presented below. I feel more comfortable with the vulnerability of presenting it here with mere gestures to decisive argument that I would either a) leaving it out entirely or b) trying to force an argument onto it that doesn't really fit. I hope the reader is able to follow my process in thinking through the fragmentary, partial knowledges presented here, and perhaps feels agentic enough to offer their own.

Discussing the Public Culture of Private Consumption

Pushpa, the forty-year-old housewife and coop employee first discussed in Chapter Two, was a prime example of an adopter of the public culture-defined expression of proper appliance practices and discourses, as demonstrated by advertisements like the one which opens this chapter. She had some of the clearest trans-national and global ties of all my collaborators, being quite widely traveled, with a daughter living in the United States and a combined family income that made their comfortable home in the upscale Baluwatar neighborhood possible. One way I want to explore her demonstration of commitment to publically mediated appliance practices was in her strong belief in the value of "branded" appliances, and her Samsung brand loyalty. As I mentioned briefly above, when I asked about brands and people's goals when purchasing, it sometimes took some dancing around the topic and cajoling to make people comfortable

discussing the issue with me; often, my collaborators didn't understand why I was interested in what their thought process was when picking out an appliance at the store, or told me they hadn't thought critically about what they had been looking for until I asked them to. Pushpa, on the other hand, dove right in, saying:

The machine's brand is necessary for me, because if you buy something for cheap and a year later, it's finished, then you have to buy another one in a year. That's not true with branded things. They're a little long-lasting usually. So I have a Samsung washing machine, and now, after nine or ten years, it's never broken. It still works. If one has Samsung-branded things, then they're more likely to do good work...my refrigerator is also from Samsung. Now after ten or fifteen years we still have it. It's good. I don't need [appliances] to be cheap. I need [them] to be branded...we in Nepal can't change [and buy a new one] year-by-year...it's not like America!

There's quite a bit I'm trying to think through in Pushpa's discussion of brands. Her primary interest when purchasing a new appliance is its long-lasting quality; this is a value that is kind of difficult to ascertain in the discourse of appliance purchase and advertising. While we all can accept that one way consumers and manufacturers alike have been taught to measure quality and investment-worthiness in a big-ticket purchase like an appliance is by figuring out how long something ought to last and how regularly it ought to be repaired, there's also typically what seems like an interest on the part of manufacturer and sales outlet to continue selling appliances; quality is often alluded to in advertising discourse through popularity with "buyers like you," and the experience of a product as quality seems to come often through years of personal experience or word of mouth. The expression of brand loyalty seems to me a complicated example of this, one that appears often in the discourse of my collaborators as well as in ad copy. Think back to the ad I encountered as part of *Baisakh* sales during the month of April—the text that accompanied the smiling woman and her decked-out Himstar fridge read, "Most sold appliance brand in Nepal." This implies that the majority of Nepalis are choosing Himstar—and you

should too! Popularity comes across as an implicit measure of brand loyalty, which itself appears an implicit measure of quality. Pushpa strikes me as making this connection clear when she describes some of her longest-owned and biggest-expense appliances as being Samsung. The expensive things need to be the longest-lasting, as they're the hardest to replace. And for those things, she has chosen to remain loyal to Samsung, though it is not a Nepali brand like Himstar or CG, and so is a little more expensive from the get-go. She draws this comparison explicitly when she says, "I don't need [appliances] to be cheap. I need [them] to be branded."

Interestingly, though, Pushpa goes on to draw a direct comparison between this need and what she perceives as practice in the U.S.: "we in Nepal can't change [and buy a new one] year-by-year...it's not like America!" Of course, it's impossible to ascertain the extent to which our conversation surrounding the topic is informed by her knowledge of my American background, but this statement stands out to me. Despite my perception of her discourse as completely analogous to those held by many consumers in the U.S.—especially those in a comparable socioeconomic position vis-à-vis other folks in the country—she indigenizes it, postulating it as uniquely Nepali, a marker of her national identity in a transnational performative discourse of advertising and appliances. She seems to be drawing on the public culture-mediated understanding of the kind of discourses of American appliance purchase and usage from the Cold War that were discussed briefly in Chapter Three, positing that as the real American consumption pattern—and then implies that the Nepali practice, as mediated through private consumption practices as well as public culture—is somehow inherently different.

I want to draw attention to discussion of brands because my collaborator Gayatri also engaged in a discourse surrounding quality determination, but for her branding didn't matter. Our discussion was unique; it took place in her home like all the others, but she only felt

comfortable with her husband and college-aged son there during the interview. It was one of the only times I wasn't fully sure if my collaborator wanted to work with me; I only met with Gayatri once and she seemed really shy, relying significantly on her husband to supply a lot of the answers to my questions. She was a 50-year-old housewife, married to a government paper-pusher, with two adult children. I had met her kids before; they had traveled quite extensively abroad and we had a lot in common. For this reason, seeing Prateek there didn't surprise me as much. I couldn't make heads or tails of how to weave this data, which was as much about Gayatri's husband's experiences and opinions as her own, into the narrative I had created for myself about how I was working with my collaborators and what kind of data I had.

When I asked her what she looked for in making an appliance purchase—say, the price of the item, or the brand—she replied that both were important. There was a slight disagreement between her and her husband on this point. Gayatri said, “For machines, the easiness is very important [ease of use, lack of breakage, e.g.], so for that reason *both* are important. Both, yeah.” To this her husband replied, “Both type and price. I mean, the *quality* of the thing is also necessary, and if the cost is very expensive...well, sometimes that shows...”

“No, the cheaply priced types of things are good, yeah.” Gayatri interjected, softly implying that the real decision was about determining quality at the lowest price point. She was methodical about this, telling me her process of shopping around at a variety of shopping centers and appliance showrooms around the city. “Bhatbhateni is nearby, of course, so that can be good,” she mentioned, “but a lot of other places are cheaper than Bhatbhateni, so that can be important.” She was also the only one of my collaborators to go into detail about the process of negotiating delivery of appliances to the home or finding a way to get the appliance itself from the shop to the house. I had entered Bhatbhateni countless times through the pickup entrance,

seeing bickering families working with the store's employees to load beat-up cardboard cartons into or onto little hatchbacks, printed with images of what was inside—a washing machine, an air conditioner. Delivery, according to Gayatri and her husband, could be expensive, but the real trick was to find a retailer who included it in the price of the appliance—and to discuss beforehand, as with a taxi driver, the expected route the delivery man would take, how many flights of stairs he'd have to carry the appliance up, and whether or not he had to hook it up himself. It was another great example of all the aspects of this industry that can be so easily taken for granted; furniture or appliance delivery here is advertised in enormous wall hangings inside every IKEA and Best Buy. But in Nepal, where appliances were in many ways a burgeoning industry, the lay of the land was still being established. Each delivery was individually debated, haggled over. Yet Gayatri and her husband treated it as natural and an expected part of the whole process, rather than something to be learned. It's like when I meet someone starting college who's never done their own laundry, staring at the coin operated washer-dryers in the basement of my dorm with total befuddlement. These are the kinds of hidden aspects of appliance practice which are less hidden in a place like Nepal, where that publicly mediated practice is being made in front of our eyes. Much as uncovering our own ideas about the natural way to use a machine sometimes requires meeting someone in the laundry room who's never done their own laundry, rendering what today is as familiar as those cozy, warm pajamas fresh from the dryer strange, maybe uncovering the process of development of practices within the same arena in Kathmandu sometimes required little more than a few prying, idiotic-seeming questions from a 20-year-old blond American girl. These second-natures seemed to me still so close to the surface as to be hardly second nature at all.



The Entrance to Bhatbhateni Supermarket

In contrast to Gayatri (but in accordance with Pushpa), branding was also important to Jaya, a 38-year-old insurance office worker. She lived in a large, three-story single-family home in Gairidhara with her husband, children, mother-in-law and one hired “domestic;” hers was the only household with a full-time service worker of all my collaborators. The house was one that made me feel wonderfully comfortable. It had close, kind of dark rooms and lots of warm wood

and soft textiles. The vibe was very 1970s-ranch house somewhere in the suburban Midwest, a feeling furthered by the house tour where she showed me framed photographs of relatives cavorting on Chowpatty Beach during a vacation to Mumbai in the late 70s or early 80s. The washed-out color photos of young men laughing and running up and down the beach with Amitabh Bachchan-in-*Sholay* haircuts and denim-on-denim outfits put me right at ease. Jaya had a big, warm personality too, enveloping me in a hug as soon as I came through the door and falling in love with our similarly cut hairstyles; she knew I had taken her advice a few weeks earlier on a good and affordable haircut in the area. Before I left the house, she asked me to take four or five selfies on each of our phones documenting the similarity and sent me a Facebook friend request. Jaya wasn't brand loyal like Pushpa was to Samsung, but she was clued in to what seemed like a cachet of "branded-ness" in general. She took extra pride in the appliances around her home that came from a "good brand." An example of this came in her National brand fridge. "See it over there?" Jaya asked me during our first few minutes of chatting. She pointed over the half wall separating the sitting area in the front of the ground floor from the kitchen, where her service worker "uncle" was brewing tea for us and her son Anmol. I hopped up and wandered over to the corner where the white, shiny fridge was installed. "It's National brand—Japanese," Jaya remarked, arching her brows and nodding knowingly. "Our TV is too—what is it again?" she poked her teenaged son in the ribs, causing him to look up from cycling through their cable package's sports channels. "Toshiba," he muttered. "Yeah, Toshiba!" Jaya told me, patting my forearm. I interpreted this as "Japanese," for Jaya becoming, as it had for so many other people around the world since the advent of the Sony Walkman, a shorthand for good taste in high-quality, cost-effective appliances.

Mallika—the forty-year-old finance coop employee, living in Chandol and married to a boxing instructor—was, like Pushpa, a devoted Samsung user. “I use Samsung,” she said when talking about purchasing appliances. “Samsung is good. My TV is also Samsung...fridge, too. All these things. I usually buy them at the supermarket, on Durbar Marg, or at the Samsung showroom.” She explained that, similar to Pushpa, she felt Samsung products were typically reliable and long-lasting, and that for now she saw them as the best on the market. Explaining how she chose what to buy, she said:

[I choose from the] catalog, from looking through the catalog. I looked at all the machines I could [afford to] buy myself, I bought them one at a time. At different times...not in a lump, but at different times...I looked at the catalog, and if there was something I didn't understand I phoned up the showroom, and they gave me the information. It was easy for me; this sort of thing isn't difficult.

My understanding of our conversation was that shopping for new appliances is explicitly value-laden for Mallika; there's something easy about it for her that isn't inherently present among all her peers. Mallika's explanation reads to me as a narrative of her accomplishments; her ability to perform the role of a well-educated, savvy purchaser choosing the right items for her family—and for her, it is *not hard*. It's a complicated discourse Mallika is invoking. She sees Samsung as good, but what she wants to focus on isn't the evaluation of quality and why Samsung is good, unlike Pushpa. Her focus is the purchase process, and her emphasis is on the ease with which she navigates it, focusing more on the underhandedness present in the system, that could take a rube for a ride. She takes the subtext present in Jaya's tone and body language and brings it into her discourse. For me, there's an implied critique of other peers of hers in the way Mallika says, “It was easy for me; this sort of thing isn't difficult.” Her process does imply a confidence of looking in the catalog, understanding the catalog, and being able to identify the things she didn't understand and gain the necessary information from salespeople.

Not everyone in Kathmandu has the ease and comfort in purchasing that Mallika makes explicit, at least as far as I can tell. Vidhya's struck me as a good example of the kind of person Mallika's words above construct her in contrast to. As investigated in the previous chapter, Vidhya's self-perception was deeply embedded in a discourse of middle class Nepali-ness stemming from the *sahaj*, or "simple" life, emphasizing the use of one's own effort. She reminded me regularly that she was not *paDhe-lekheko*, or "read-and-written," having never completed secondary education. She didn't mean that she was literally illiterate, but rather that she didn't have the tools to access a highly educated discursive space—or didn't want to develop those tools since it would go against her understanding of what it meant to be middle class, which was a key referent for her understanding of herself. Readers will remember that when I asked her if machines made her life easier, she explicitly raised the issue of education again, remarking, "for people with a little education, it might be easy with machines. [But] we're not educated, so for us machines aren't easy, because we don't know how to use machines." Similar to Sushmita telling me that she never cracked open her induction cooktop's owner's manual, Vidhya described her gradual acclimation to using newfangled appliances: "Because we don't know how to use machines, we kind of *can't* use them. [For example,] right now in my house there isn't a Microban [air filter]. I've seen them in other houses, but I feel like, 'ah! How to use this? I don't know!' And before this my house didn't have a EuroGard—other houses had them, and again, 'ah! How do I use this? My house doesn't have one.' But I got one, and *then* I learned." Vidhya always stood out to me for having only brought a fridge into her house eight months ago. She explained that she had had one downstairs, in her shop, but had never needed one herself. "But when my daughter had come back from studying in Europe—after she went to Europe and came back," Vidhya remarked, "she wanted a fridge, said it was necessary. She said,

‘we *need* a fridge, so we can drink really cold water.’ So, we took what she went out and bought.” But even with the fridge in the house, Vidhya’s every day private consumption practices hadn’t changed significantly. She still bought food daily, instead of shifting to every few days or once a week and storing food in the fridge until it was used. She went to the vegetable market a couple blocks behind her house every morning, as early as she could make it, and brought back things to store in the fridge until the mid-morning and evening meals of *dal-bhaat* were cooked. She explained that she found food stored in fridge less “tasty” than food not stored there. “It’s not a habit [for me to keep things in the fridge]. I now put milk, vegetables in there in the morning, so they don’t spoil during the day, and that’s really easy, put things in there in the morning and use the things I put there in the evening. But not a lot of...cooked things. Raw things only, and only between morning and evening. I *really* don’t like cooked things from there.”

Conclusion

Vidhya’s discourse above contrasts directly with what I found in the zone of public culture surrounding appliance purchase and appliance practice, mostly in the realm of print advertising. The advertising, as discussed above, wanted to craft an image of the Nepali appliance purchaser and user more to look and behave more like Mallika and Jaya. They enjoyed looking through catalogs and discussing with salespeople at various showrooms the specifications and merits of different brands, which to me demonstrates a comfort in engaging with the public discourse of appliance practice and usage. By contrast, women like Sushmita and Vidhya seem to push back against that image of the fancy, modern Nepali woman in the Himstar ad. Remember Sushmita telling me that her induction cooker “came with instructions and everything, but I just figured out how to use it.” While I don’t at all feel comfortable

interpreting my collaborators' tone, there's something about the way Sushmita told me that that fuels this partial knowledge that some of my collaborators felt more comfortable with the public culture-approved way of buying and using appliances (i.e. Pushpa, Mallika, Jaya, and even Gayatri) while others (Sushmita, Vidhya, even Sarjana my host *bhaauju* to some extent) did not.

I call this a "partial knowledge" because it feels like some kind of intuition, made up of immersion in participant observation in all its forms, public and private. It involves my reading of facial expressions, tones of voice, and body language, in addition to words and observed practices. Outside of the house, it involves the constant bombardment of advertising, media, opportunities to shop, and interactions with all kinds of Nepali folks. But that doesn't mean that it's totally convincing, and I'm not sure I could find a way to make it so. What kinds of questions could I have posed that would have made more sense? What kind of theory could I have applied to make better sense of what I do have on the page?

The reality is, I'm not really sure. I don't know. And despite working on a project for over a year (taking into account my time abroad as well as my final year at Wellesley), I still haven't found the answer. But I wanted to include the data and my stabs at making sense of it as a kind of partial knowledge, or understanding, because it made the project feel more complete. I wanted to understand how the discourses and practices I was identifying and unpacking came to be, and while I may not have found the answer, I found a lot of interesting material that I'm still puzzling over and working on parsing out. And I feel lucky that I'm able to be vulnerable and say that I don't have an answer or a defined argument, but I do have some evidence to explore and some ideas to unravel. This project, by its very nature, allows me the space to do that, to admit to not knowing everything about my own project and revel in that knowledge of my own

partial understanding. It's invigorating and engaging for me, one of the primary takeaways from my entire thesis process.

Learning that "doing anthropology" means a lot a downtime, a lot of confusion, and a lot of half-thoughts is something that can only be processed through doing ethnography, and I wanted to use this chapter as a space to explore some of those half thoughts and some of those confusions in the context of my project. In some ways those partial knowledges exist as a great metaphor for so many of the big theoretical ideas I'm trying to explore at a personal level. Globalization and the consumption of modernity in the developing world relies on "cannibalizing," in the words of Appadurai and Breckenridge, a number of partial understandings in the public culture and trying to incorporate them into one's own life. Feeling like the exact mechanations of the process of incorporation are still a mystery is probably a defensible reflection of how a lot of my collaborators feel. In that way, admitting that I only partially understand the data I have and am not totally confident in how to interpret, or even present, it is one of the most straightforward ways to interact with this manifestation of the crisis of representation that plagued my entire process.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

I lived in Nepal for only four months during the spring of 2017, but in that time I gained so much. My language skills, new friends, a second family. A greater appreciation for all that research is and the strength of anthropologists who do it again and again as a way to pursue their passions and contribute to the world we share. The experience of examining my data in the form of an honors thesis, pushing me to confront my own strengths and weaknesses as a thinker, writer, time-manager, and communicator was, of course, one of the most important things I did during my time at Wellesley. And, as might be apparent, it wasn't all sunshine and rose-colored glasses. It was hard! There were times I wanted to quit. There were times I maybe should have stopped and focused on other things. But luckily I ignored any and all stop signs (probably the only time in which that is valuable!) and kept on going, reading and writing and talking to Susan; commiserating with other thesising seniors; occasionally letting loose with a constant circle of friends and a rotating cast of dates.

In the end, I accomplished my goal of exploring the compelling, but difficult to grasp, theoretical concerns of globalization and modernity in the developing world that so captivated me throughout my time at Wellesley. I tried my hardest to bring them back down to earth, exploring them through the lens of urban Nepali women's relationship to household appliances. Leaning on Foucault, I worked to capture the discourses my collaborators used to grapple with the everyday reality of time-space compression and the transnationally constituted change it brings. Through discursive constructions of wellness, infrastructure, and related suspicion, my interlocutors wrestled with the rapidity and disorientation of that change. By documenting the role of appliances in constructing class and socioeconomic identity, I recognized the difficulty of mapping preconceived interpretive frameworks onto Nepal's unique situation. This was a

challenging, and valuable, exploration of my own experience and positionality as an anthropologist and for my own collaborators. And I tried to work through the public culture of private appliance consumption as an attempt to trace how these discourses and practices came to be. Learning I don't really know how, and maybe my collaborators don't either, was an opportunity to examine the crisis of representation from a new perspective.

I'm certainly proud of the anthropology I did and the conclusions I drew. I spent weeks learning Nepali, making connections with potential interlocutors, finding ways to become a part of my neighborhood and my collaborators' community, developing questions, navigating new neighborhoods. I read and I thought and I figured out what I wanted to say, which is a genuine accomplishment for me. The project was also valuable as urban Nepal is pretty understudied in the broader anthropological literature, which makes my conclusions and data unique. But more than that, this project gave me a chance to examine the experience of doing anthropology critically. It was a genuine struggle for me to engage my data analytically and make the conclusions I did—after all, one of my most important lessons from this project is that sometimes I might never feel like I'm ready to draw a conclusion from my data, and that's okay. Other times, I will feel powerfully in control of the literature and ready to develop an argument. I could never have anticipated the rewards and serious challenges the project brought me.

In closing, I'd like to address the future. There are a lot of amazing projects that could branch out from this kind of research. Examples include examining urban Nepal's changing foodways—moving from the twice-daily *dal-bhaat* habit means changing work schedules, changing diets. Or the future of the Nepali lunar calendar in the globally connected Nepal. How long can the government operate on a calendar almost sixty years in the future? The options in

media anthropology remain limitless. And there is much work still to be done with commodities, perhaps from a different perspective, like retail.

I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to have this experience. It would never have been possible without the support of so many at Wellesley, in Ann Arbor, and in Nepal. Thanks.

Citations

- Anand, Nikhil. "PRESSURE: The PoliTechnics of Water Supply in Mumbai." *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 4 (2011): 542-564.
- . "Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and its Urban Infrastructures." *Ethnography* 13, no. 4 (2012): 487-509.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, 3-63. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- . "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990): 1-24.
- Appadurai, Arjun, and Carol A. Breckenridge. "Public Modernity in India." In *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, edited by Carol A. Breckenridge, 1-20. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Bear, Laura. *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- . *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Castillo, Greg. *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois at Last?" In *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, 131-147. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.
- Chattopadhyay, Swati. "The Limits of 'White Town' in Colonial Calcutta." In *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59, no. 2(2000): 154-179.
- Chryssides, George D. "Sathya Sai Baba." In *Historical Dictionary of New Religious Movements*. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2012: 275.
- Clark Jr., Clifford E. "Ranch-House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities." In *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War*, edited by Lary May. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

- Cohen, Lizabeth. "The Politics of Mass Consumption in America." In *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 17 (2003): 1-7
- Cohn, Bernard. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- Coleman, Leo. "Infrastructure and Interpretation: Meters, Dams, and State Imagination in Scotland and India." *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (2014): 457-472.
- Comaroff, Jean, and John L. Comaroff. Introduction to *Modernity and Its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa*, edited by Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, xi-2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- . "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 291-343.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven F. Randall. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Farooqui, Amar. *Opium City: The Making of Early Victorian Bombay*. Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. "The Order of Discourse." Translated by Ian McLeod. In *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young: 48-78. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981.
- Ferguson, James, and Akhil Gupta. "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality." In *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*, edited by Jonathan Xavier Inda, 105-131. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.
- Ghertner, D. Asher. "Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property: Middle Class Discourses of a Slum-Free Delhi." *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (2012): 1161-1187.
- Glover, William. *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Gupta, Akhil. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State." In *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (1995): 375-402.
- Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference." *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6-23.

- Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990.
- Harvey, Penny, and Hannah Knox. *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Hazareesingh, Sandip. *The Colonial City and the Challenge of Modernity: Urban Hegemonies and Civic Contestations in Bombay City 1900-1925*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007.
- Hetherington, Kregg. "Waiting for the Surveyor: Development Promises and the Temporality of Infrastructure." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (2014): 195-211.
- Hutt, Michael. "Introduction." In *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, edited by Michael Hutt (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2004): 1-20.
- Jensen, Casper Bruun. "Pipe Dreams: Sewage Infrastructure and Activity Trails in Phnom Penh." *Ethnos* 82, no. 4 (2017): 627-647.
- Kakar, Sudhir. "Health and Medicine in the Living Traditions of Hinduism." In *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World's Religious Traditions*, edited by Lawrence E. Sullivan, 111-126. New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta. "Filth and the Public Sphere: Concepts and Practices about Space in Calcutta." In *Public Culture* 10, no. 1 (1997): 83-113.
- Khan, Naveeda. "Flaws in the Flow: Roads and their Modernity in Pakistan." *Social Text* 89, no. 4 (2006): 87-113.
- Knipe, David M. "Hinduism and the Tradition of Ayurveda." In *Healing and Restoring: Health and Medicine in the World's Religious Traditions*, edited by Lawrence E. Sullivan, 89-110. New York: Macmillan, 1989.
- Knox, Hannah. "Affective Infrastructures and the Political Imagination." *Public Culture* 29, no. 2 (2017): 363-384.
- Kozol, Wendy. *LIFE's America: Family and Nation in Postwar Photojournalism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.
- Kunreuther, Laura. "Technologies of the Voice: FM Radio, Telephone, and the Nepali Diaspora in Kathmandu." *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2006): 323-353.
- . "Between Love and Property: Voice, Sentiment, and Subjectivity in the Reform of Daughter's Inheritance in Nepal." *American Ethnologist* 36, no. 3 (2009): 545-562.

- . "Transparent Media: Radio, Voice, and Ideologies of Directness in Postdemocratic Nepal." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2010): 334-351.
- . "Sounds of Democracy: Performance, Protest, and Political Subjectivity." *Cultural Anthropology* 33, no. 1 (2018): 1-31.
- Larkin, Brian. *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- . "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42, no. 1 (2013): 327-342.
- Leinaweaver, Jessica B. *The Circulation of Children: Kinship, Adoption, and Morality in Andean Peru*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Liechty, Mark. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Lukács, Gabriella. *Scripted Affects, Branded Selves: Television, Subjectivity, and Capitalism in 1990s Japan*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Mandal, Chandra Kumar. "Melamchi Project Set for Breakthrough." *Kathmandu Post*, Apr. 10, 2018. <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2018-04-10/melamchi-project-set-for-breakthrough.html>
- Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Manuel, Peter. *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- May, Elaine Tyler. "The Commodity Gap." In *Consumer Society in American History*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999, 162-184.
- . "Ambivalent Dreams: Women and the Home after World War II." In *Journal of Women's History* 13, no. 3 (2001): 151-152.
- Metcalf, Thomas R. *Ideologies of the Raj*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Miller, Daniel. "Consumption and Commodities." *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 24 (1995a): 141-161.
- . "Introduction: Anthropology, Modernity, and Consumption." In *Worlds Apart: Modernity Through the Prism of the Local* (New York: Routledge, 1995b): 1-22.

- Nandy, Ashis. "Modern Medicine and its Nonmodern Critics: A Study in Discourse" in *The Savage Freud and Other Essays on Possible and Retrievable Selves*, 145-195. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Nickles, Shelley. "More is Better: More Consumption, Gender, and Class Identity in Postwar America." In *American Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2002): 581-622.
- Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856-1877*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- Onesto, Li. *Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal*. Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2004.
- Pettigrew, Judith. *Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday Life in Nepal's Civil War*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Pigg, Stacey Leigh. "Inventing Social Categories Through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (1992): 491-513.
- . "The Credible and the Credulous: The Question of 'Villagers' Beliefs' in Nepal." *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 2 (1996): 160-201.
- Pinney, Christopher. *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- "Program Description." Melamchi Water Supply Project. Accessed 23 April 2018.
<http://www.melamchiwater.gov.np/about-us/melamchi-ws-project/project-description/>
- Rajagopal, Arvind. *Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Rankin, Katherine Nelson. *The Cultural Politics of Markets: Economic Liberalization and Social Change in Nepal*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004.
- Rao, Nikhil. *House, but No Garden: Apartment Living in Bombay's Suburbs, 1898-1964*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- "Satya Sai Baba." In *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*. Detroit: Gale, 2001.
- Shrestha, Nanda R. *In the Name of Development: A Reflection on Nepal*. New York: University Press of America, 1997.
- Shrestha, Nanda R. and Keshav Bhattarai. *Historical Dictionary of Nepal*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003.

Srinivas, Smriti. *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*. Boston: Brill, 2008.

Srinivas, Tulasi. *Winged Faith: Globalization and Religious Pluralism Through the Sathya Sai Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Subramanian, Ajantha. "Making Merit: The Indian Institutes of Technology and the Social Life of Caste." In *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 2 (2015): 291-322.

Taussig, Michael. *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Whelpton, John. *A History of Nepal*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.