When Is Housing an Environmental Problem? Reforming Informality in Kathmandu

by Anne Rademacher

Drawing on fieldwork among environmental activists and housing advocates in one of South Asia's fastest-growing cities—and the capital of one of the world's most politically volatile nation-states—this article explores how and when specific forms of urban housing were problematized and reformed through environmental logics. I ask when and how housing was framed as an environmental problem in Kathmandu. In so doing, I demonstrate that a fuller understanding of housing as an environmental problem rests not only in evaluations of public health parameters, risks of toxic exposure, and disaster vulnerability but also in the shifting ideologies of belonging, morality, and governance that animate urban environmental anxieties in specific cities. I illustrate how categories fundamental to the intersection of ecology and housing were produced, effaced, and reproduced over time in Nepal's capital. I argue that the making and unmaking of these categories had clear material consequences that are often difficult to discern through global-scale "slum ecology" logics. I suggest further that the moral and ideological dimensions of urban ecology are never predetermined or fixed and as such complicate global conceptions of housing as an environmental problem.

Across disciplines, deep anxieties animate recent accounts of global urbanization and its dire environmental consequences. Scholarly work calls for a complete rethinking of "the urban" as an object of study (e.g., Amin and Thrift 2002; Low 1999), while policy literature nervously proclaims that for the first time in human history,[1] the majority of the world's population now resides in cities (UN Population Division 2003). Against a backdrop of extraordinary wealth and equally extraordinary wealth disparities (e.g., Dawson and Edwards 2004; Sen 2002), scholars and policymakers question the socioecological consequences of rapid urbanization with increasing alarm, asking whether and how contemporary urban settings might be rethought and reinvented as more sustainable "livable cities" (Evans 2002). The past decade has witnessed a shift from largely passive attention given to something called "urban ecology" to its inclusion among our most pressing global concerns.[2]

Historically, urban anthropology and environmental anthropology have largely maintained and reinforced a conceptual boundary between cities and nature. Despite long-standing theoretical discussions of "nature cultures" (Haraway 1989, 1991, 1997; Latour 1993, 1999; Demeritt 1994; Swyngedouw 1996; Zimmerer 2000), anthropologists have yet to produce a significant body of ethnographic work that fully explores the social life of nature in urban settings. While anthropological engagement with the urban context foregrounds issues such as the politics of place (Hayden 1995; Gregory 1998; Hansen 2001; Baviskar 2003), concerns over segregation and citizenship (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Caldeira 2001; Low 2003), urban governmentality (Scott 1998; Chakrabarty 2002; Joyce 2003; Chatterjee 2004), and cultures of consumption and class formation (Mankekar 1999; Davis 2000; O'Dougherty 2002; Mazzarella 2003; Liechty 2003; Dávila 2004), it rarely relates these issues to ideas and practices of nature and the environment. Similarly, while scholarship in environmental anthropology has engaged issues such as development and state-making (Ferguson 1994; Baviskar

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1. We might usefully question the historical exceptionalism that frames many policy discussions of inadequate and informal housing. Claims to a new and unprecedented historical moment, in which the majority of the world's population lives in cities, may have the unintended effect of detaching diagnoses of the present from deeper historical conditions that lend traction to particular housing conditions in specific cities.

2. For example, see World Resources Institute (1996), which introduced "the urban environment" as a comprehensive set of global problems for the policy and academic audience of the World Resources Institute. For more recent representations of the city as an ecosystem and an environmental problem, see Alberti et al. (2003); Collins et al. (2000); Parlange (1998); Pickett (1997); and Pickett et al. (2001). Also see "Reimagining Cities," a special issue of *Science* (2008).

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1995; Fairhead and Leach 1996; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Mosse 2003), modern ecology and territoriality (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Saberwal 1999; Brosius and Russel 2003), the formation of environmental subjects (Agrawal 2005), and the historical production of ideas and imaginaries of nature itself (Williams 1980; Grove 1989; Peet and Watts 1996; Raffles 2002), it has rarely sought to find "nature" in cities. Instead, environmental anthropology tends to locate its subject almost exclusively in the rural, the countryside, or the agrarian context.

Similarly, scholars using political ecology frameworks to study environmental problems have traditionally focused on rural contexts. By fusing political economy and human ecology approaches (Brosius 1999), work in this vein shows the importance of control over material resources (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987) and contributes rich insights to poststructuralist theory and discourse analysis (Bryant 1992; Bryant and Bailey 1997; Peet and Watts 1996; Escobar 1996, 1998, 1999). Yet our understanding of political ecology in cities is nascent; scholars such as Pelling (1999) and Moffat and Finnis (2005) demonstrate the valuable insights that can be gleaned from applying this framework to urban contexts.

It is, in fact, in the realms of ecosystem science and global environmentalism that particular conceptualizations of urban nature are rather common. These conceptualizations are both discursive and epistemological, mapping not only onto global anxieties about the environmental implications of an increasingly urban planet (e.g., World Resources Institute 1996; United Nations 1996; UN-HABITAT 2001) but also onto work in ecosystem ecology that shows how urban areas complicate more conventional efforts to model natural processes (Rebele 1994; Pickett et al. 2001; McKinney 2002; Pickett and Cadenasso 2002; Grimm, Baker, and Hope 2003). In pairing the urban context and the environment, scientists and policymakers engage urban nature as a set of problems. Folded into these problems are demographic, economic, and cultural assumptions that are often taken as automatic and self-evident.

The global scale at which many urban ecological problems are conventionally framed demands particular anthropological attention and scrutiny, for as Taylor and Buttel (1992) pointed out over a decade ago, experiences of environmental crisis rarely conform to global or regional logics. Rather, the sociopolitical responses of differently placed actors vary considerably across space, time, and position.

In this article, I focus on a particular facet of contemporary urban ecology: informal housing. Drawing on fieldwork among environmental activists and housing advocates in one of South Asia's fastest-growing cities—and the capital of one of the world's most politically volatile nation-states—I explore how and when specific forms of urban housing were problematized and how they were reformed through environmental logics. I ask, when and how was housing framed as an environmental problem in Kathmandu?

Placing Urban Ecology

As is often the case with the narratives through which we seek to forge coherent ideas of "the global" (Tsing 2000), the physical and conceptual geographies of urbanization's dire environmental consequences are at best uneven. Indeed, those sites collectively marked by the most urgent urban socioecological problems are commonly grouped as "cities of the global South."[3] With its cities mired in varying combinations of intractable poverty and intensifying environmental disorder, this global South maps the conceptual locus of a contemporary and future urban predicament—giving spatiality to a current or expected "urban explosion"[4] with potentially catastrophic socioenvironmental implications.[5] Dawson and Edwards (2004, 6) capture the urgency of this predicament when they write, "the megacities of the global South embody the most extreme instances of economic injustice, ecological unsustainability, and spatial apartheid ever confronted by humanity."

Vyjayanthi Rao (2006, 2), in discussing the theoretical category of the global South, notes how the literature of a global city of the South functions as "a shorthand for a certain kind of work that takes an understanding of the South as its point of departure en route to a theory of globalization." She further notes that, insofar as the global South category promotes historicist thinking or foregrounds empire as the historical condition within which the very idea of the global is considered, it marks an important shift in narratives of globalization.[6] However, to signal the worst of a planetary urban predicament through the category "global South" also tends in practice to fix into place expectations of deeply dysfunctional socioenvironmental forms and to background those processes through which "Southern" conditions are reproduced—processes that likely require constant movement across discursive and material binaries such as a North/South divide.

It may be the case that, in a manner similar to the way *development* focused scholarly and policy analytics on the global South in the late twentieth century (e.g., Escobar 1994; Ferguson 1994; Crush 1995; Greenough and Tsing 2003), our

3. For example, see Davis 2006. Throughout the work, Davis advances the "cities of the global South" category as that which knits together his truly global range of case studies and examples.

4. For example, see the film by the same name, produced and distributed by the National Geographic Society as part of its *Journey to Planet Earth* film series. http://www.screenscope.com/journey/journey_urban.html (accessed February 3, 2008).

5. Studies of the cities of the "global North," in turn, tend to focus on issues of overconsumption, greenhouse gas emissions, and other conditions associated with relative wealth. At both poles of the binary, our expectations and priorities are preconditioned by the categories "North" and "South."

6. Dawson and Edwards (2004, 2) assert, "If a turn to a discourse of the global South is to offer a useful intervention, a new cartography (rather than simply a more palatable term for the "third world"), then the term South must indicate a critique of the neoliberal economic elite and its management of the globe according to a developmentalist paradigm."

expectations of the most intractable challenges to defining, designing, and enacting *urban sustainability* anchor our attention to, and in turn reproduce, a global South in the early twenty-first. Within the global predicament of unprecedented urbanization is therefore embedded a particularly Southern urban predicament that is marked by expectations and experiences of potentially intractable forms of urban disorder, suffering, and disaster.

A prevalent facet of this Southern urban predicament is the proliferation of informal housing. Resurgent attention[7] to the public health stresses and environmental risks associated with slum, squatter, and otherwise "informal" settlements has brought large-scale incidences of informal housing directly into the purview of urban ecological sustainability (e.g., Hardoy and Satterthwaite 1989; Emmel and Soussan 2001; Davis 2006),[8] and urban environmental management (e.g., Main and Williams 1994; Evans 2002). At the same time, "the slum" and the extreme forms of exclusion it symbolizes assume a place in particular spatial renderings of the history of globalization itself (e.g., Das 2003; Rao 2006; Gandy 2006*b*).

As Nezar Al Sayyad (2004) points out, informal housing and the related notion of urban informality have a long genealogy. Al Sayyad traces the contemporary emergence of the concept of an "informal sector" to the 1970s and notes that by late in that decade, Caroline Moser, writing in *World Development*, defined the informal sector as "the urban poor, or as the people living in slums or squatter settlements." Al Sayyad further notes the curious fact that, "even though 'informal sector' embodies a broad set of activities and people without clearly identifiable characteristics, scholars continued to represent it by means of a dualistic framework" (Al Sayyad 2004, 10).[9]

Through his spectral title *Planet of Slums* and an equally foreboding narrative, Mike Davis (2006) recently captured public and policy attention with his portrait of the astonishing contours of contemporary urban informality. Although he is explicitly concerned with the neoliberal economic circuits that unbound the global South, Davis's descriptive account nevertheless maps a "planet of slums" made up of overwhelmingly Southern cities. The book addresses the intersection of environmental concerns and housing through the proposition of a *slum ecology* (Davis 2006, 121), assessed through public health, risks of toxic exposure, and proximity to geologic and climactic hazards. Following a long legacy of scholarly attention to "the slum" as a socioenvironmental concept,[10] this formulation associates uneven spatial distributions of human vulnerability with experiences of social and material life embodied in, and signified by, inadequate shelter.

Although potentially useful as political critique or metanarrative, an approach such as that of Davis is insufficient for assessing the dynamism of the housing/environment problematic. As with the meaning of informal housing itself, the relationship between housing and environmental problems—urban or otherwise—is neither automatic nor preconfigured. In fact, the very moments in which conceptualizations of urban housing and notions of urban ecological sustainability converge warrant careful attention, as they prompt questions about the specific temporal and political contexts within which particular social conditions enter and exit "environmental" problematics. We might usefully ask, in what ways and at what scales of analysis do the politics of adequate housing provision intersect with assessments of urban environmental order, disorder, and governance in specific cities and under specific historical conditions? How are presumed intersections between urban environments and urban housing made, and made *meaningful*, in specific settings? This idea of "making" the environment draws simultaneously on work that focuses on the "production of the environment" (e.g., Smith 1984) as it relates to Lefebvre's idea of the "production of space" and the historical processes that influence ideas and imaginaries of nature itself (Williams 1980; Grove 1989; Peet and Watts 1996; Raffles 2002).

Understanding how "slum ecologies" are infused with meaning and operationalized as practice also responds to Michael Herzfeld's (2006) call to investigate not only the anxieties associated with growing urban populations but also the related bureaucratic processes that produce urban *de*population—that is, the ways in which informal populations become "matter out of place."[11] Ideas of environmental improvement are integral to such an investigation, because human actors often inflect their assessments of ecological vitality with moral logics (e.g., Worster 1994) and specific subjectivities (e.g., Agrawal 2005). They infuse debates about public health or vulnerability to disaster with concerns about

7. As Peter Hall (1988) writes in his classic history of planning, *Cities of Tomorrow*, anxieties about the adverse social and environmental effects of urbanization have animated urban planning history from its inception. Ebenezer Howard's Garden City is one among a host of examples of ways in which early urban planners considered natural spaces to be a source of remedy for urban social ills.

8. For instance, Davis (2006, 5) writes of Mumbai: "Mumbai . . . is projected to attain a population of 33 million, although no one knows whether such gigantic concentrations of poverty are biologically or ecologically sustainable."

9. In this article, I use the phrase "informal housing" in the rather blunt way that it was used by activists and development professionals with whom I conducted participant observation; that is, it is generally applied to housing that is either untitled or considered substandard, or both.

10. As AlSayyad (2004) notes in "Urban informality as a 'new' way of life," Wirth's ideas in *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1991, [1938]), the analytical agenda of the Chicago school of urban sociology of which he was a part, and the later contributions of the Los Angeles school of urban geography all retain enduring relevance for contemporary formulations of housing as an environmental problem. Al Sayyad notes in particular that ideas of third world cities "were mainly generated in the crucible of the Chicago school" (p. 8).

11. My reference to this classic analytic follows Herzfeld (2006), who argues that Douglas's (1966) notion of "matter out of place" is most useful when it incorporates "the dynamic aspects of spatial symbolism and the agency operating in and against bureaucratic power" (see Herzfeld 2006, 131).

"proper" socioecological relationships to the landscape. Through ideas and practices of ecological order, they configure acceptable ways for humans to enter and inhabit urban space. At the same time, these moral dimensions of ecology are not predetermined or fixed, and they are never fully monopolized. They may be as useful to, and utilized by, dominant groups as they are for more marginalized groups as they stake claims to power or seek political change.

In this article, I consider when and how official ideas about housing intersected with logics of ecological improvement in Kathmandu. By embedding a discussion of housing and environment in a broader consideration of the city's political transformation, I aim to complicate more globally conceived notions of "slum ecology."

Ecology, Informality, and Political Volatility in Kathmandu

Nepal occupies a noticeable place in global narratives of inadequate shelter. UN-HABITAT's (2003) recent inventory of *Slums of the World*, for example, lists Nepal fourth—just below Ethiopia, Chad, and Afghanistan—among the countries with the world's highest percentage of slum dwellers.[12]

While by no means a fixture of megacity (and more recently, hypercity)[13] debates, Nepal's capital, Kathmandu, has long ranked among South Asia's fastest growing cities. For nearly two decades, Kathmandu has witnessed annual urban growth rates of between 6% and 7%. The largest urban center in a nation-state that until recently was consumed by civil war, Kathmandu is a rapid-growth capital city whose inhabitants navigate a complex combination of political unrest and environmental stress.

One way to explore the inclusion of inadequate housing among problems of "ecology" in Kathmandu is to focus on recent official projects aimed at promoting urban environmental improvement. Using a long-term perspective on river restoration struggles as a departure point for analysis, I describe in the sections to follow how actors delineated who was, and who was not, "in place" through their ecological assessments of a particular contested urban environmental space. I aim to foreground how actors used ecological logics to collapse social difference, generate social categories, and stabilize "unruly" (Smart 2001), sometimes fluid, boundaries between built environments considered to be formal or informal. I ask, how were inhabitants of informal riparian[14] shelter implicated in shifting diagnoses of urban ecological disorder? How did actors then use these diagnoses to frame migrant settlements as invasive in a manner transgressive not only of river territory but also of a moral geography (Creswell 2005)[15] in which the capital city formed a symbolic locus of state power and national identity. Urban ecology practices reinforced this moral geography by situating informal settlements in a broader narrative of urban environmental disorder and degradation, as well as by ultimately legitimizing a resettlement scheme, in part, through its "ecofriendly" characteristics. I explore the situation as it unfolded over time in order to show the critical importance of historical context and political change for understanding when and how—in practice—urban housing intersects with ecological logics.

Nepal's capital city is located in the Kathmandu Valley, an area contiguous with the Upper Bagmati Basin, a 600-km^2 area that includes the drainage of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers. The two rivers converge in the heart of the city at Teku Doban, a temple complex that marks the mythological point of origin of Kathmandu. After they converge, the Bagmati and Bishnumati flow through the Middle and Lower Bagmati basins and eventually join the Ganges River in India. The Bagmati and Bishnumati are somewhat unique in Nepal because they are rain- and spring-fed rather than snow-fed. Since the head reaches of both are located within the Valley, surface water and the capacity for the rivers to assimilate wastes are relatively limited.

During the 1990s, a range of factors, some related to unprecedented urban growth, precipitated a rapid decline in the quality of Kathmandu's physical environment. The Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers assumed a prominent place among increasingly degraded features of the urban landscape.

Characteristics of that degradation included severely reduced water flow and quality, significant morphological changes, and, some argued, the loss of cultural and religious values historically attributed to the rivers. In policy and development studies such as the Bagmati Basin Management Strategy (Stanley International 1994), river deterioration inside the urban area had four main causes: the discharge of nearly all of the city's sewage—completely untreated—directly into the rivers; the widespread dumping of solid waste into

12. UN-HABITAT, "Slums of the world: The face of urban poverty in the new millenium?" working paper, 2003; Nairobi; cited by Davis (2006, 23). See also Tanaka (1997) for an extensive demographic portrait of slum housing and residents in Kathmandu. Bal Kumar (1998) reports that the proportion of people living in urban centers went from 4% in 1961 to 9.2% in 1991 (or from 1 in 25 to 1 in 10); he also noted that less than 50% of the urban population has access to adequate drainage, solid waste facilities, or sewage and sanitation services. Kumar describes a trend of "gradual shifting of the rural poor to urban areas," particularly from the "immediate countryside" areas of Ramechhap, Trisuli, Dolakha, Sindupalchowk, and Dhading. In 1991, informal settlements in urban riverbank areas were estimated to be growing at 12% annually, a rate twice that of the city itself (HMG/ADB 1991). In 2001, growth of squatter settlements continued at a rate of 12%–13% (Hada 2001, 154). Over the 10 years between 1990 and 2000, the number of urban squatter settlements almost tripled, with a majority located on public lands along rivers (Hada 2001, 154).

13. A megacity is a city with over 10 million inhabitants; a hypercity has a population of over 25 million.

14. This is the ecological zone related to the watercourse.

15. Creswell (2005, 128) calls a moral geography "the idea that certain people, things, and practices belong in certain places, spaces, and landscapes, and not in others." Anthropological literature on Nepal and the Kathmandu Valley includes several important works on sacred geography, including Slusser (1982), Levy (1990), Gutschow (1985), and Gutschow et al. (2003).

the rivers and on their banks; and sand mining in riverbeds and banks, which supplied mortar and cement materials to the city's booming construction industry. The latter was blamed for significant morphological change and severely channelized flow patterns in both rivers. In addition, most policy and development analyses identified a fourth cause—human encroachment on the banks, floodplains, and river beds exposed by channelization—as a significant factor in river degradation.

Rapid urban growth stimulated a level of housing demand that overwhelmed existing housing stock, pushing many to seek informal shelter in the riparian zone, an area of large sand flats caused in part by river morphological change. In 1991, the Asian Development Bank estimated that these informal riparian settlements were growing at 12% annually, a rate twice that of the city itself (HMG/ADB 1991). By 2001, a significant part of the urban river corridor was lined with semipermanent structures and settlers asserting rights to the land they occupied.

Officials undertook river improvement efforts against a backdrop of tremendous political volatility. From a turbulent and incomplete conversion to a democratic constitutional monarchy in 1990–1991 through a "People's War" between the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) and the army of the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M), the stability and sovereignty of the state remained in flux and constant contest.

Violent conflict between state authorities (the Nepal police and later the RNA) and the army of the CPN-M began in 1996. The resulting People's War had claimed over 13,000 lives by 2006. Following the massacre of nearly all of Nepal's royal family in June 2001, the new king, Gyanendra, consolidated authoritarian rule, suspending what remained of nascent democratic processes. This exacerbated state instability and further polarized the positions of those holding political power and those seeking radical change.[16]

The latter period of the People's War was marked by a national state of emergency, declared after Maoist fighters directly attacked the RNA for the first time (previous violence was between the Nepal police and the Maoist army). In November 2001, after peace negotiators failed to reach an agreement in a third round of peace talks between His Majesty's Government and the CPN-M, the Maoist army launched attacks in Surkhet, Dang, Syangja, and Salleri. At least 14 RNA soldiers, 50 police officers, and several other government officials were killed; the number of Maoist casualties was unclear. Although as many as 60 Maoists were reported killed, only 15 bodies were officially reported as recovered. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba announced the emergency on November 26. The government then mobilized the RNA to fight Maoist insurgents, whom Deuba officially declared "terrorists." The cabinet enacted a "Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance," authorizing arrests without due process and facilitating new controls over media and information. These controls extended to public life and free expression, rendering public discourse on topics such as urban policy nearly mute (e.g., Rademacher 2008).

On February 1, 2005, King Gyanendra seized direct power, which lasted until massive protests around the country led the king to reinstate Parliament in April of 2006. Through a declaration, the reinstated Parliament officially stripped the monarchy of its power in May of 2006, and elections for a Constituent Assembly, expected to draft a new democratic constitution for Nepal, took place in April 2008.

It is in this biophysical and political context that I conducted field research among activists and officials involved in river improvement debates and interventions on the Bagmati and Bishnumati. During 20 cumulative months of fieldwork in Kathmandu over multiple periods between 1997 and 2003, I conducted extensive participant observation and 57 periodic semistructured interviews among actors in activist and development organizations actively engaged in the planning, execution, and/or contestation of Bagmati and Bishnumati river improvement initiatives. Taking the Bagmati Basin Management Strategy (Stanley International 1994) and Kathmandu Urban Development Project Bishnumati Corridor Environmental Improvement Program (HMG/ADB 1991) as starting points, I traced river improvement actions and reactions in an effort to "follow the conflict" (Marcus 1995) that animated river restoration politics. My interlocutors included bureaucrats and development professionals in charge of specific interventions for river improvement, including the Bishnumati Corridor Environmental Improvement Program and the UN Park Project, as well as NGO workers and activists for housing rights and river cleanup, including the shelter advocacy organization Lumanti, the cultural-heritage-focused Save the Bagmati campaign, and the largely urban, expatriot Friends of Bagmati. These actors constituted networks through which critical representations of and knowledge about Kathmandu's slum ecology were generated, disseminated, and contested (e.g., Riles 2001). Their selection mapped my own travel through these networks even as they revealed the content and contours of river debates. In the summer of 2006, I returned to Kathmandu to complete 2 months of participant-observation and 11 follow-up semistructured interviews among informants from the 1997–2003 study.

In the area of riparian housing, I focused on those who claimed to speak on riparian migrants' behalf or act in their interest. In so doing, I sought to understand the narrations of riverbank/slum space that circulated in spheres of urban ecological activism and development. Such a focus, in which direct migrant voices are notably absent, should not be misinterpreted as a privileging of nonmigrant voices but rather as a methodological technique for exploring the activist, official, and institutional lives of slum ecology in Kathmandu. It is inspired by recent work among activists and housing advocacy alliances such as Appadurai (2001) and extends from

16. This polarity gradually became more of a triad, with three main factions—royalty, political parties, and the Maoists—eventually feuding among one another (e.g., Rana 2003).

an interest in the ways that housing advocates define and aggregate urban informality. It also constitutes an attempt to understand the politics that create, and seek to undo, what Ashis Nandy (1998, 2) called the "unintended city."

I proceed in three parts, beginning by exploring narrative constructions of migrants as river degraders in the mid- and late 1990s, before the emergency of 2001. I then discuss changes in ecological assessments of migration and slum housing in the immediate wake of the 2001 state of emergency. Finally, I explore a postemergency slum relocation scheme that in 2006 resulted in Kathmandu's first "ecofriendly" slum resettlement.

The Rural in the Urban: River "Degraders" in the Democratic Decade[17]

In 2001, the demographer and sociologist Sudarshan Raj Tiwari detailed an important shift in Nepali national migration patterns that took place during the 1990s. Over that decade, historical patterns of seasonal rural-to-rural and interregional migration transformed into primarily permanent rural-to-urban migration. Tiwari attributed the shift to persistent rural impoverishment and escalating rural violence, and he argued that through migration, the unevenness of Nepal's modern history of socioeconomic development had brought what he called "rural characteristics" to Nepal's "urban fringes" (Tiwari 2001, 2). These so-called rural characteristics, evidence of a development periphery physically present in the administrative and economic center of Nepal, were increasingly visible in the form of informal settlements along the banks of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers through the 1990s.

In my earliest inquiries into perceived relationships between the growth of urban riparian settlements and urban river degradation, I was often encouraged to question the legitimacy of migrant claims to landlessness and to avoid sympathy for individual migrants or their communities. When a language teacher learned about my research plans, for instance, she joked that in addition to the word *sukumbāsī*, which is the term generally applied to rural-to-urban migrants in Kathmandu,[18] I should also learn the word *hukumbāsī*, since this, she said, was what most sukumbāsī really were. Whereas sukumbāsī means someone who has nothing, the prefix *hukum-* indicates someone who wields power. Implied in her suggestion was the notion that, although they appeared to be powerless, the sukumbāsī population was actually in full control of its territorial destiny.

State and development officials involved with river improvement often characterized riparian sukumbāsī communities in a way consistent with my teacher's "hukumbāsī" logic. They questioned the authenticity of sukumbāsī landlessness claims and implied that occupying riparian land was more often a tactic to benefit from possible resettlement grants than a result of poverty or desperation. As I reviewed development and policy literature related to urban river restoration, I found this sentiment reinforced in nominally environmental discussions as well. I read, for instance, this excerpt from the Bishnumati Corridor Improvement Project, a major restoration undertaking on the Bishnumati River (HMG/ADB 1991):

> Most of the squatters living in the Bishnumati Corridor are not . . . bona fide landless urban poor, but instead are merely land grabbers or those in their employ. If existing settlements are legalized, or at least seen to be through upgrading, it is likely that the rate of squatter growth will increase dramatically.

I occasionally heard a further delegitimizing characterization of the urban riparian landless: that they were of overwhelmingly Indian, rather than Nepali, origin. This use of the category of "Indian" echoed a somewhat common way of characterizing a range of conditions perceived to threaten Nepali national sovereignty and security.

Images of "land-grabbing hukumbāsī," of foreign origins or with foreign loyalties, can be traced in part to a history of state-encouraged internal migration and its unintended consequences. While the details of this history warrant a separate discussion, it is important to note that the very existence of a sukumbāsī population in Kathmandu is itself an unintended artifact of historical state and nation-building efforts.

Official ideas of river restoration intersected with images of migrants in specific ways. In an interview with a high-level Asian Development Bank official involved with restoration

17. The decade following the 1990 *jana andolan*, or People's Movement, brought the reinstatement of democracy to Nepal; the country's first free elections since 1959 were held in 1991. Major media expansion and explosive growth of the Nepali nongovernmental sector characterized the first years of democratization. The 1990s were also a time of tremendous material change; an urban middle class was growing, luxury goods were newly available to more than just royalty and the elite, and an awareness of material prospects linked to a broader global economy created the fervor of a boom. For many urbanites, this was an era punctuated by high expectations and a sense of unbounded possibilities.

18. There is no unproblematic translation from Nepali to English for *sukumbāsī*, although it is most commonly translated as "squatter." A related word, *sukumbasa*, is the state of having nothing. Used to refer both to people and their settlements, *sukumbāsī* refers to those who are assumed to be landless, or very poor, and who occupy land for which they do not own a legal title. Although technically the term refers to "the person lacking shelter and food; one having neither" according to Pradhan's (2001) *Ratna's Nepali-English Dictionary*, some of Kathmandu's *sukumbāsī* population may not be said to be definitely and universally lacking these things. The population is made up of both rural-to-urban migrants and migrants originating within the Kathmandu Valley. In general, residents of Kathmandu tend to refer to anyone "illegally" occupying public land as sukumbāsī. It should be recognized that the term can carry negative connotations and, although it is widely used, can be taken as an insult. See Tanaka (1997) for more detailed demographic information on Kathmandu's sukumbāsī population

efforts on the Bishnumati River,[19] I questioned what his ideal vision of restoration was. Without hesitation, he responded, "The rivers should be lined with parks, restored temples, and, most importantly, high-end housing." In other words, perhaps, the riverbanks must be made the most expensive and most desirable places to live, not the least desirable and least expensive, as they were at that time. The reality of the present, in which the riverbanks harbored the city's poorest communities (which he repeatedly referred to as "eyesores"), was the precise opposite of the development ideal and a clear violation of this official's sense of appropriate class territories in a modern, developed city in proper ecological order.

These logics of class and legitimacy were supported by an ecological diagnosis in which riparian "land" settled and claimed by sukumbāsī was characterized as riverbed. According to development planning documents (e.g., Stanley International 1994), severe channelization from sand harvesting and reduced flow resulting from municipal out-takes upstream had prevented rivers from flowing at their previous levels for many years. Restoration schemes called for resubmerging exposed sand flats through an elaborate system of weir dams. These would trap sediment during the annual monsoon and thereby raise riverbed levels. This vision placed many sukumbāsī settlements squarely "in" the river—on riverbed that, in a restoration scenario, would be resubmerged by river flow. Sukumbāsī were thereby considered obstacles to restoring that flow, having claimed river territory as land in a way that was inconsistent with perceived ecological order. Their land claims were rendered as illegitimate in urban environmental terms as they were in legal terms.

This idea of ecological illegitimacy was corroborated by popular and official perceptions of causal links between accelerated informal settlement growth and worsening river deterioration. Migrants' proximity to the rivers gradually naturalized them as an assumed catalyst for, and even aspect of, river degradation. For example, although nearly all of Kathmandu's sewage flowed untreated into the river system, riparian migrants were often disproportionately implicated in declining water quality. This description from the Bagmati Basin Management Strategy reinforces a conflation of insecure tenure and incapacity for environmental stewardship (Stanley International 1994, A3):

> Because sukumbāsī have illegally settled, they feel insecure and therefore care little for the riverine environment which they occupy. Few of their houses have toilets or proper solid waste disposal services, and their wastes flow directly to the rivers.

Judging riparian migrants as incapable of "caring" for the river reinforced the view that they did not belong there and should be subject to removal and relocation.

But embedded in the question of whether and how to replace riparian migrant communities were debates over urban ecology itself. Just as there were ecologically driven narratives that linked migrants and river degradation, there were also ecologically driven counternarratives that sought to delink them.

Through conferences, media coverage, the raising of public awareness, and official negotiations, advocates for urban housing rights, particularly those active in the housing NGO Lumanti, countered dominant perceptions that sukumbāsī were an obstacle to restoration by employing their own ecological narrative of river health. Drawing on concepts such as "healthy cities" and "sustainable human settlements," ideas associated with the United Nations Habitat Program, they integrated socioeconomic concerns into debates about urban river ecology. They framed river restoration in terms of a "sustainable urban future" and advocated upgrading those settlements that were relatively less vulnerable to flash flood events by improving public health, education, and sanitation conditions within them. These goals were portrayed as fundamental aspects of a future-focused, forward-looking urban ecology.[20]

In 1997, Lumanti hosted the Future Cities World Habitat Day Conference in Kathmandu, a local follow-up to the UN Conference on Human Settlements (also called Habitat II) held in Istanbul in 1996. The organizers of the Kathmandu conference had attended the global gathering in Istanbul, and the Kathmandu conference was their attempt to relate what they had learned there to the problems of their own city (e.g., Bajracharya and Manadhar 1997).[21] Throughout the session, phrases such as "sustainable human settlements" and "habitat," were localized by their application to the plight of Kathmandu's sukumbāsī. Yet, unlike in more dominant usage, here "sustainability" did not imply a threat to sukumbāsī or their claims to riparian land. Rather than blaming riverside settlements for Bagmati and Bishnumati pollution, for example, activists emphasized insufficient sewage and water infrastructure in slum communities. Rather than classifying riparian sukumbāsī as invaders making a disproportionate contribu-

19. The Bishnumati Link Road Project was one element in a larger scheme to improve the Bishnumati Corridor in Kathmandu. It proposed a 2.8-km road along the Bishnumati River that would link Kalimati and Sorahkhutte, with an aim to improve access to high-density areas and improve traffic flow. The concept dates to the Kathmandu Valley Physical Plan of 1969. In the 1970s, a more detailed road plan was developed; reports in the early 1990s by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and a Japanese investment group proposed routes for the road. In 1992, the ADB started three projects related to the Bishnumati Corridor, but in 1999–2000, ADB pulled out and the government assumed responsibility for the project. According to ADB, its decision was based, in part, on the government's refusal to compensate and resettle squatters who would be evicted for road construction.

20. A "healthy city", for instance, as it was explained at the World Habitat Day proceedings in Kathmandu, requires a "healthy environment," assessed by its capacity to provide food, clothing, and shelter (Bajracharya and Manandhar 1997, 5).

21. The United Nations Habitat Agenda, established at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in 1996, can be viewed at http://ww2.unhabitat.org/declarations/habitat_agenda.asp.

tion to river degradation, they were discussed as the disproportionate sufferers of its consequences.[22]

When I asked if popular suspicions of sukumbāsī legitimacy limited the potential effectiveness of "sustainable human settlement" claims, the director of Lumanti replied,

> The sukumbāsī are not hukumbāsī—they are not rich people, although probably some of them own something somewhere—a small piece of land in the village, a small house somewhere, probably that is true. . . . But [the fact that] they are here in the city [tells us that] they don't have any earning opportunities there. The legitimacy of the landless? This question has to be looked at as: how do we provide affordable housing for the poor? . . . How do we address this now, and for the future? Poverty is shifting from rural to urban. How do we make the city ecologically sustainable?[23]

Settlements in a State of Emergency

The struggle over whether sukumbāsī were ecologically in or out of place on a restored riverscape took on new dimensions in the context of the emergency, which was first declared in late 2001, nearly 6 months after most of Nepal's royal family was murdered under questionable circumstances.[24] Debates about the poverty and legitimacy of the landless were then officially and popularly reframed in terms of the rural-based, revolutionary political movement that was now widely regarded as a serious threat to the state. Migrants fleeing rural violence were portrayed as the catalyst for a new kind of crisis in the capital. The National Habitat Committee (2001, 26) reported,

> In the last five years, urban population has grown tremendously not only because of its natural growth and city light attraction, but security and safety in rural areas. Unless the crisis is solved, the movement of rural people to the cities does not seem to stop. Consequently, heavy pressure on already scarce basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, etc. has been created.

Previous narratives of ecocultural degradation or riverbed invasion now assumed more overt political inflections as riparian communities were increasingly suspected of political dissent or security threats. A front-page newspaper article from 2002 called migration from rural areas, and the settlements it generated, a "malignant urban tumor" (Post 2003).

This "invasion" was inflected with a particular tension: on one hand, more and more migrants were acknowledged to be refugees fleeing brutal violence in the countryside; on the other, riparian settlements represented a relatively uncontrolled space where rural dissent and rebellion might assemble and take refuge in the city. Settler visibility on the Bagmati and Bishnumati riverscape was not only a reminder of uneven development, then, it was also a reminder that uneven development had generated a violent movement for an alternative polity and a reordering of the sociopolitical landscape that had historically privileged the city over its hinterlands.

I resumed a period of fieldwork in Kathmandu a few months before the 2001 emergency was imposed. At that time I found housing advocates at Lumanti extraordinarily optimistic about the future. There had been no forced evictions in the city since 1996, and particularly in 2000 and 2001, the Kathmandu municipality had been conducting what housing advocates interpreted as a promising dialog about upgrading and legalizing some riparian settlements. Municipal representatives attended Lumanti-sponsored rallies and awareness-raising events and even cooperated in an effort to issue identification cards to sukumbāsī families. But the rising expectations that accompanied this seeming concession to riparian settlers were brought to an abrupt halt with the declaration of emergency in late November 2001.

The most explicit official shift took the form of forced evictions—almost immediately and without public recourse, because of restrictions on dissent imposed through the emergency. As violent incidents such as bombings and abductions became more frequent in the capital, so too did violent raids on sukumbāsī settlements that officials and media labeled as "security checks."[25] Riparian settlements became the default location of risk to the state in its urban capital territory.

During this period, many state and development officials involved with river restoration turned from an annoyance with the settlements as "eyesores" to openly and explicitly identifying them as *the* primary obstacle to restoration. In interviews in late 2001 with the director of a riverside park project called the UN Park, I was assured that the sukumbāsī settlements located inside proposed park boundaries were not only a "nuisance" but were now the single most important

22. A contemporary example of this argument as it relates to Mumbai was made by P. K. Das (2003), who writes, "most of today's leading environmental cases are against the interest of the majority of people. These cases do not consider the issues of housing the poor and the working class as an integral subject of environmental concern, thereby, aberrating the poor from environmental cause" (p. 209). Referring to the over 400,000 slum dwellers who live on the edge of Borivali National Park in particular, he calls for the issue of housing to be brought into the purview of environmental projects and environmentalism.

23. Interview, Lajana Manadhar, January 8, 2002.

24. On June 1, 2001, the Crown Prince Dipendra reportedly opened fire on his family in the royal palace at Narayanhiti. Fatally wounded were King Birendra, 55; Queen Aiswarya, 51; their son, Prince Nirajan, 22; their daughter, Princess Shruti, 24; the king's sisters, Princess Shanti Singh and Princess Sharada Shah; Princess Sharada's husband, Kumar Khadga Bikram Shah; and Princess Jayanti Shah, a cousin of the late king. Dipendra is said to have committed suicide after murdering most of the royal family.

25. For example, after a March 29, 2002, explosion at the Bishnumati bridge at Kalimati injured 24 people, all surrounding sukumbāsī settlements were reportedly raided. In a January 2002 interview, the director of Lumanti reported similar raids in Balaju and Kumaristan after an explosion in the Balaju neighborhood.

factor limiting international donor interest and involvement in (and therefore the progress of) the UN Park project. The director told me, "This land is not clean for donors," arguing that it was, now more than ever, the government's responsibility to "manage" sukumbāsī.

It was only a few weeks after this interview that the Thapathali settlements to which the director was referring were forcibly evicted by state officials citing a "security concern." That same afternoon, the director and I met again for a previously scheduled meeting, and he discussed the evictions with elation and relief, saying that the government had been "freed to act" by the emergency. He said, "these settlements must be brought under control, for the good of the environment and for the survival of the city." He then smiled and told me that, at last, ecological restoration of the Bagmati and Bishnumati could be realized rather than simply dreamed of.

In January 2002, the Asian Development Bank revived a long-dormant initiative to improve environmental conditions in the Bishnumati River Corridor. A central element of this project was the Bishnumati Link Road, intended to improve traffic flow and relieve extreme congestion in central areas of the capital. Since much of its length was planned alongside the Bishnumati, the road required the removal of existing sukumbāsī homes.[26] Officials advised affected families that they would be compensated for the value of their lost homes, so housing advocates pursued municipal and government authorities to produce a written compensation agreement. Officials and activists resolved that residents whose sukumbāsī status could be verified as "genuine" landless would be paid NRS 2,000 (approximately US$27) monthly for a period of 3 months, and that by the end of that period, alternative, affordable housing would be provided. Accordingly, some residents of the designated project zone voluntarily demolished their houses, and all remaining structures were bulldozed in April 2002. Compensation, meanwhile, was delivered unevenly,[27] and the question of how and where to resettle affected families remained.

However, on June 22, 2002, King Gyanendra abolished local governments in a move to further consolidate his power. Kathmandu's mayorship was left vacant for nearly 3 months. When a government secretary was eventually appointed to the post, he refused to honor prior written agreements related to the Bishnumati Corridor, declaring instead that alternative housing would not be provided. Meanwhile, demolished homesites stood undeveloped, and spaces designated for river corridor improvement quickly gave way to other uses.

Re-Placing Settlements and Sustainable Futures

When I returned to Kathmandu for a period of follow-up research in the summer of 2006, I found colleagues at Lumanti again optimistic, having recently experienced what they considered to be a favorable conclusion to the displacements related to the Bishnumati Corridor Environmental Improvement Project. In the aftermath of the emergency, collaborative efforts between housing advocates and municipal officials had restarted, and eventually a resettlement site was identified and acquired. The financial terms of rehousing were said to be extremely favorable, allowing families to draw low-interest home loans from the Urban Community Support Fund administered by Lumanti.[28] This then was not simply a resettlement scheme; it was also an effort to extend home ownership opportunities to untitled, displaced migrants.

I learned quickly that activists' enthusiasm for the resettlement site was driven as much by ideas of environmental improvement as it was by the financial details through which displaced migrants might transform themselves into homeowners. The new housing was unique because it was, according to a Lumanti promotional pamphlet,[29] a "precedent setting," "ecofriendly" housing development. The very migrants whose presence on the Bishnumati riverbanks was once perceived as environmentally degrading and later as politically dangerous now assumed citywide prominence for pioneering ecologically sensitive urban living.

Designed in consultation with the displaced families that would eventually settle there, the new housing site featured large open spaces, a rainwater-harvesting apparatus, and an on-site wastewater treatment and gray water reuse scheme. These elements combined to form a showcase of ecological order.

I joined Lumanti advocates for a much anticipated visit to the site, eager to hear from residents about their new homes, and to see the overall design of the development. My enthusiasm waned as our van inched its way through and then beyond Kathmandu's congested streets, far from the urban core, into Kirtipur—and then on to Kirtipur's outskirts. This, a housing advocate assured me, was the closest site that could be feasibly acquired, and the uncertain implications of its significant distance from the urban center for inhabitants' livelihoods presented an acknowledged problem.

As our van rounded a bend and began to descend over a rolling dirt road, the housing development emerged—tucked between the road we traversed and steep, terraced emerald green fields. Lumanti workers guided me through the site, pointing out the open spaces, the rainwater-harvesting ap-

26. Five communities were affected: Dhumakhel in ward 15 and Khushibahil, Chagal, Tankeshor, and Dhaukhel in ward 13; a total of 142 houses were scheduled for demolition.

27. According to Lumanti (2006, 12), "People resettled anywhere they could find shelter, mostly in nearby areas. Many doubled up with relatives. Those who had been deemed eligible waited to receive their first rent payments, which did not materialize in many cases. Eligible residents in Dhumakhel received the money for three months' rent. Those from Tankeshwor and Khushibahil were asked to provide assessments of their properties that had been made a few years earlier by the ADB, and those that could come up with them were provided with two months' rent."

28. See Lumanti 2006.

29. See Lumanti 2006.

paratus, and wastewater treatment facilities. I was given a comprehensive tour of some of the homes, and some residents gathered in the common courtyard. Lumanti workers asked them how they felt about their new homes, and their replies followed a notably consistent script of contentment, relief, and gratitude for the assistance of the government and housing advocates.

But how might one make deeper sense of this slum ecology "success" through the re-placement of riparian squatters in an ecofriendly town on the outskirts of Kirtipur? It was obvious that my formal tour of the settlement needed to be followed up with a more grounded, longer-term inquiry into the actual experiences of resettled residents—an inquiry that was not possible at the time and at this writing is yet to be done. However, the very fact of the resettlement site, the foregrounding of its ecologically sensitive characteristics, and its place in a broader story of Kathmandu's housing and environmental politics, raise some preliminary points germane to the question, "When is housing an environmental problem?"

The geographic and ecological shifts evident in the re-placement of Bishnumati settlers were striking. As noted above, migrants once marginalized as environmental degraders now assumed potential citywide prominence as Kathmandu's vanguard of sustainability—but now they were on the margins of the city. On one hand, the site was more periphery than city, disconnected from the economic opportunities associated with the city center. But on the other hand, through relocation and re-placement, previously landless families might now realistically aspire to land ownership, that condition that is assumed to precede responsible environmental stewardship, according to ecological modernization theory (Fisher and Freduenburg 2001; York and Rose 2003). Ownership, furthermore, would not be of "conventional" homes but rather of buildings with structural characteristics that implicitly contested previous assumptions that landless migrants shared an ecological pathology. Or did it reinforce them?

Tiwari's "rural in the urban" had become, it appeared, simultaneously valorized and reruralized in a way that suggested that the green rehabilitation of informality could take place only outside the city. I immediately recalled historical urban organization in the Kathmandu Valley, which relegated the lowest castes to the farthest outskirts,[30] but it was also clear that the simultaneous shift out of the city and into green "formality" collapsed economic and ecological moralities. Further striking was the way that re-placing riparian migrants seemed to simultaneously accomplish a greening of the capital's riverscape and, as Herzfeld has noted in his study of the evacuation of urban market spaces, the relegation of "potentially 'dangerous' populations to spaces where they can be subjected to increased surveillance, and away from those spaces where their continuing presence is indeed viewed by the authorities as 'matter out of place'" (2006, 132).

The built form itself became a crucial point of this environment-development intervention, functioning simultaneously as an instrument of environmental and social reform. The legitimizing power of environmentally sensitive resettlement was immediately clear; it seamlessly merged with Lumanti's long-standing commitment to a forward-looking vision of urban ecology that focused first on housing rights for the poor. Yet this same urban ecology seemed to simultaneously combat stereotypes of slum dwellers incapable of caring for the environment while reinforcing the perceived need to reform their housing practices. It also transported the entire community to a place remote from the urban core, which they might imagine reentering only after having assumed "formal" status through land ownership.

Thus, the social and environmental rehabilitation accomplished through ecologically friendly re-placement reworked the relationship between the form of housing that migrants occupied and the kind of urban citizen-subject they might become. Ecological sensitivity, in this case, reinforced an expected bridge between informal and formal housing status and facilitated a more acceptable path from the city's margins to its core. Migrants were not simply resettled, then, but replaced—in political, moral, and environmental terms—through interventions derived from intersecting problematics of housing and environment.

Informal Housing and Ecologies of Reform

The re-placement of Bishnumati Corridor migrants raises questions about the kind of political work accomplished at the discursive and practical intersections of housing provision and sustainability. Ecology was a fundamental concern when defining not only the built form of a future Kathmandu, but also the relationship between that built form and the moral practices of its inhabitants. A Kathmandu developed in a more sustainable guise promised to reform not only an ecologically problematic set of building practices and sites but perhaps, as well, its new or untitled inhabitants.

Practices of urban ecology and environmental improvement functioned discursively and materially to frame a politics of place and belonging—belonging to the river system and to the core areas of the capital city. In the 1990s, settlements of rural-to-urban migrants were an increasingly prominent, visible reminder of the spatial inequities of decades of national socioeconomic development in Nepal, and as such they stood

30. Considering Pode, Cyāme, and Kasāin in particular, these three historical walled cities of the Kathmandu Valley are regarded as having followed a general pattern of settlement in which "high castes tended to cluster around (an) exalted nucleus (the large central area where the palace was), the lower castes lived progressively further away, and outside the wall were the outcastes. Finally, well beyond the city wall laid the realms of the dead, the *śmaśāna* (Nepali, *masān*), the various cremation grounds and ghats. Superimposed on such human orderings were various other orderings related to the divinities. These were in the nature of mystic diagrams, mandalas in which particular sets of deities were linked in concentric rings of protection inside and outside the city" (Slusser 1982, 94).

as reminders of state failure situated, visibly, in the state's own bureaucratic and symbolic heart, its capital. This was Tiwari's "rural in the urban"—the rural brought into the logic of the capital city, and the city's response in the form of anxieties over mounting environmental pollution, degradation, and decline.

But in the context of the emergency, this "rural in the urban" came to stand as well for the political disorder of Nepal's rural revolution—recast through the emergency as a legitimate threat to the state. In this political context, urban environmental interventions became more explicit, overt gestures of state control—maneuvers to be understood in the broader arena of war.

When development initiatives resumed in the aftermath of the emergency, ecofriendly resettlement produced a spectacle of reform, re-placing, and in the process remaking, an entire community and its place in the city. The environmental sensitivity of resettlement housing simultaneously reinforced the idea of squatters as invaders and degraders in need of reform, while situating them at the vanguard of a new kind of urban poor, whose housing was more sustainable and would become, in the long term, both economically and ecologically formal. Only then, presumably, might they reenter core urban space in a way deemed legitimate and consistent with ecodevelopmentalist logic. In the meantime, they could also serve as a spectacle of the reformation of informality and the assumed economic and ecological "potential" of Kathmandu's urban poor.

It is not insignificant that riparian areas along the Bishnumati were resettled as part of a major riverside road building initiative, hardly a facet of urban development that has automatic ecological benefits but rather one with clear links to logics of developmentalist modernization. It remains to be seen what form of housing will be permitted along the Bishnumati River in the future and the degree to which it too will be subject to questions of ecological order or sustainability.

As a set of malleable scientific and policy tools for enacting environmental improvement, urban ecology in practice gave ideologically opposed actors a conceptual apparatus for either excluding or including riparian migrants in a vision of river restoration. It offered categories through which ideas of environmental degradation, social invasion, and informality made sense, just as it provided fundamental concepts to advocates calling for sustainable human settlements.

To problematize and to "place" more conventional notions of a global urban ecological crisis is to raise important questions about how the urban environment is problematized in rapid-growth cities and how institutions at a variety of scales respond. A long legacy of critical environmental scholarship has focused on how the environment is "made" through formal efforts to save, conserve, restore, or protect it (e.g., Greenough 2003; Grove 1989; Sivaramakrishnan 1999). Yet in rapid growth urban contexts such as Kathmandu, those same spaces of restoration may also be sites of settlement, complex zones of struggle over precisely which territory constitutes human habitat and which constitutes the urban environment. While the processes of delineation, infusion with meaning, and constant negotiation are fundamental aspects of how nature is made and remade in any setting (e.g., Zerner 2003), the twenty-first-century urban context introduces new and unique stresses, contests, and calculations about just how much room for nature exists in cities. And there remains, in its urban guise, Raymond Williams's (1980) enduring question of the ideological work that ideas of nature perform.

It is, therefore, essential to anchor global metanarratives of urbanization to particular places and to ask what specific ideologies of belonging, morality, and governance animate urban environmental anxieties in specific cities. Prevalent metanarratives may obscure our understanding of the nuances of these social conditions and likely mislead us about the ultimate ecology of slums, resettlement, and urban environmental improvement.

If it is in the very production of global slum ecology discourses that their differentiated experience is obscured (Taylor and Buttel 1992), then a fuller understanding of housing as an environmental problem depends on grounded tracings of the contents of social categories such as "slum dweller" and "urban nature" in specific contexts. It requires a sensitivity to the dynamism of social categories themselves—made, unmade, and reconstructed as they are by actors with concrete stakes in political and economic transformation. As the case of slum ecology in Kathmandu shows, the moral dimensions of these categories are never fully fixed and predetermined, nor can they be fully discerned through global renderings of slum ecology.

Comments

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This paper analyzes how official and activist projects to improve urban and riparian environments reveal the categorization of squatter settlements and informal housing in Kathmandu and lead ultimately to their destruction and relocation. It uses the riverbanks of the Bishnumati and the Bagmati rivers in Kathmandu and its temporary inhabitants as the center point for discussing outsider perspectives on the status and legitimacy of slum dwellers as citizens and their role in environmental degradation and innovation. Rademacher frames this categorization with an outline of Nepal's political shifts and upheavals to give the paper an unsettling dynamism; this outline shows that an advertised environmental project may not be shaped by long-standing shared commitments

and visions but by momentary openings or closures in government and funding practices.

The problem I have with this paper lies in the inadequate attention to the center group—the slum dwellers, or sukumbāsī, of Kathmandu. The author admits to leaving their voices and practices out of the analysis in order to focus exclusively on the outsiders' categories and uses of the slum dwellers, but this leaves me with an incomplete picture of the dynamic of categorization. While the slum dwellers are clearly victims of a number of cross-cutting and conflicting portrayals and projects, we do not see their agency, and as such, the account may reproduce essentialist discourses of community and territory (Brosius, Tsing, and Zerner 2005). How do sukumbāsī resist or reinterpret these portrayals and manipulations for their own survival as urban citizens? We need to know how they actually live on the riverbanks, what they take and give to the rivers, and how they work with and interpret residence in the newly constructed ecovillage. Furthermore, since this paper argues for attention to informal housing in environmental studies, it would be an added advantage to know about this housing in relation to river flows, sediment accumulation, and other ecosystem functions.

The literature in environmental anthropology is rich with accounts of community perspectives on official projects to possess (or grab) lands, build infrastructure, and forward conservation or environmental projects. The paper would benefit from references to conservation and community studies (West et al. 2006), from those focusing on the dislocation and relocation of riparian communities for dam and link projects (see http://www.SaNDRP.in for bibliographies focused on South Asia), and from others on water and globalization more generally (Whiteford and Whiteford 2005). The field of environmental anthropology has expanded enormously over the last decade and is no longer locating its subject almost exclusively in the rural, the countryside, or the agrarian context.

The strategies that officials use to reclaim land in the name of river restoration and then ecorehabilitation remind me of similar practices in India. The attempt to blame slum dwellers for river pollution in Kathmandu is paralleled in India by official claims that riverbank dwellers and Hindu pilgrims contribute to Ganges pollution by defecating openly and washing or performing ablutions in the river (Alley 2002). This merely deflects blame away from the poor waste management infrastructure that is the responsibility of government agencies or in the Kathmandu case from the responsibilities of the state to provide housing and facilities for the poor.

Rhetoric aimed at moving inhabitants from the land should be situated in the current dynamics of land grabbing where the state is acknowledged as a major actor (Dupont 2008). Rademacher could tell us more about the politics of land grabbing in Kathmandu before discussing the official view of slum dwellers as alleged hukumbāsī in their "acquisition" of river bank land and flood plains. Government agencies may use a variety of justifications to claim untitled coastal or riparian land for new developments (more recently, Special Economic Zones in India). Since the discussions that Rademacher documents have little to do with any real concern for river flows or water quality and quantity, I am led to think these categorizations of sukumbāsī are really more about land grabbing than about interests in water transfers or pollution prevention at these locations. If water is a larger concern, then we need to know about the state's interests in surface water and how the water-land dynamic plays out over time.

Finally, the paper shows that officials involved in urban renewal blame slum dwellers as a way to legitimize the dispossession and relocation of their communities. The activist agencies working for the rights of the poor are left with the burden of shifting from a blame dynamic to a revitalization approach; in this case an effort is made to transform the slum dweller in to a model of ecoliving. This may involve a wider realm of moral support and funding, perhaps a network of organizations involved in creating ecovillages for relocated citizens. The connections made between environmentality and informal housing are nonetheless important and take the focus on urban environments in new directions.

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Rademacher's aim to complicate global understandings of slum ecology provides insight into the ways activists and bureaucrats can conceptualize and act upon debates around informal housing and processes of environmental degradation. I appreciate the argument that we need to move beyond, and anchor, global metanarratives about urbanization and informal housing. Such metanarratives threaten to obscure diversity among and, more importantly, within different urban centers and their periurban surroundings. Through her analysis of riparian communities in Kathmandu during three recent stages of political upheavals and tensions in Nepal, Rademacher points to the importance of recognizing not a single slum ecology but rather specific slum ecologies as shaped by specific histories. Recognizing that such ecologies can be conceptualized, redefined, repositioned, and strategically employed in the pursuit of specific goals underscores the dynamic nature of debates about the relationships among rural-to-urban migration, housing inadequacies, and riverine degradation. These context-specific insights into ongoing environmental/housing discourse struggles are certainly welcome and add to broader understandings of activist-bureaucrat tensions vis-à-vis the growth of urban centers.

To my mind, the analysis of such discourse tensions could be further strengthened in two ways. First, although Rademacher cites Escobar's (1999) poststructuralist approach to conceptualizing nature, she does not explicitly engage with relevant aspects of his argument. Rademacher addresses the

ways notions of ecology, environment, and human-environment interactions are mobilized from different perspectives and toward different goals. Escobar (1999) focuses on the discourses around social constructions of nature and the uneven ways these constructions can be transformed according to positionality. This leaves me asking how Escobar's analysis of the discursive constructions of nature and their uneven transformations could further inform Rademacher's concerns about uneven constructions of environment-housing dilemmas.

My second point perhaps refers more to important directions for future research on environment-housing tensions in Kathmandu. Rademacher's analysis would be far richer with the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of the migrants who are, ultimately, at the center of debates about informal housing. The construction of environmental and social narratives is a multifaceted process, and there is immense value in understanding not just the articulations of powerholders but also if and when shifting constructions of the riparian environment and informal settlements might overlap among bureaucrats, activists, and migrants themselves. How might members of informal communities mobilize, reject, alter, or internalize shifting narratives about the environment and their actions, attitudes, and priorities? What implications might this have for the development and long-term successes of projects aiming toward sustainable, livable housing? How might a consideration and inclusion of migrant voices help move them from being *sukumbāsī* (those who have nothing) to being citizens who are recognized as having some agency and power to participate in actively and positively shaping, and the *framing*, of the environments in which they live?

Toward the end of her paper, Rademacher argues that Lumanti's framing of urban ecology allowed for the development of an ecologically friendly community that "seemed to simultaneously combat stereotypes of slum dwellers as incapable of caring for the environment while reinforcing the perceived need to reform their housing practices." While this highlights tensions in conceptual frameworks, it is important to avoid suggesting that housing practices *do not* need to be reformed. Urban slums can be deeply uncertain, unhealthy, and uncomfortable places to live. Inhabitants may strongly desire substantial changes to the material realities of their living conditions yet not have access to the resources to ensure housing certainty and security. At the same time, when people are able to mobilize some resources, they can be extremely adept at shaping and enacting priorities within their informal communities (see, e.g., Moffat and Finnis 2005). Consequently, any ongoing research on the constructions of environment, housing, and urban migrants would benefit from engaging with migrant perspectives and goals around housing and environmental issues. This means extending Rademacher's original question somewhat in order to further ask when housing becomes an environmental issue (and when might the environment become a housing issue) for rural-to-urban migrants.

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In 1989, looking for a field site in which to begin my PhD research, I made a brief visit to a Tharu village felicitously called Arjuni in the far west of Nepal. The village ceased to exist very soon after my visit, although I do not believe the two events are connected in any way; the village had to make way for the expansion of the Royal Shukla Phanta National Park. The dispossession and marginalization experienced by the *sukumbāsī* removed from the banks of the Bishnumati is similar to that experienced by the villagers removed to make way for that national park or *adivasis* whose villages are inundated by a new reservoir. The fortunate few may receive new land in exchange, but most eventually end up in the slums of the burgeoning cities and towns of the countries they live in, with neither support nor compensation. It is therefore worth noting that in the case Rademacher describes, those evicted from the Bishnumati corridor actually did receive some land in compensation, even if at the margins of the city.

Anne Rademacher has done a service for anthropologists who work on environmental issues in the Himalaya (and environmental anthropologists generally) by reminding us that urban environments are rapidly becoming the most fundamental kind of environment for human beings and therefore an object that thoroughly merits the attention of environmental anthropologists. She does so by weaving together both the relations of dominance and control that shape human lives and the meaning that actors bring to these relations and the events they produce. Most human beings live today in urban environments, yet environmental anthropology continues to be enamored of the rural and the remote, with the hunter-gatherer or pastoralist's relationship to "that which surrounds" (Ingold 1993, 31), leaving the urban environment to another subfield called urban anthropology, with different concerns. As Ulf Hannerz puts it, quoting F. Benet, anthropologists were "a notoriously agoraphobic lot, anti-urban by definition" (Hannerz 1980, 1). This is especially true of Nepal, where anthropologists have preferred working in the more bracing air of mountain villages to working in the dusty towns of the plains. Rademacher's paper seeks to mediate this divide and shows how environmental anthropology—particularly the branch of it that seeks to elucidate what environment might mean in cross-cultural terms—could contribute to an environmental anthropology of the urban.

Rademacher focuses, as she acknowledges, on the views of those who "claimed to speak on riparian migrants' behalf or act in their interest." Thus, the views of what a riverscape in Kathmandu should look like are those of people who are already plugged into a global discourse about urban renewal and environment and whose discourse in turn appears to be

shaped or to respond to that global understanding (e.g., the views of the ADB official she quotes). But is it not also shaped by the discourse of *sukumbāsī* about their situation? If not, that itself is a notable point and deserves some treatment. To what extent do those who claim to speak on behalf of the *sukumbāsī* actually represent their interests, and why are the *sukumbāsī* themselves unable to enter into that discourse? That too deserves treatment.

Although I agree that "experiences of environmental crisis rarely conform to global or regional logics," Rademacher describes not the experience of crisis per se but the response to it, and this does in fact conform to a global discourse of resistance to urban renewal. She describes activists who are plugged into global networks and who respond to urban renewal in Kathmandu by invoking strategies that are not unique to Nepal but are practiced by activists from Nairobi to Dhaka who are opposed to the removal of informal housing. Other people in other places have argued against removing poor people from land for which the powerful see other uses and instead urged that their occupation of it be regularized and that they be provided proper sanitation and services—the essence of the counterargument of the NGOs discussed in this essay.

The resettlement of *sukumbāsī* from the urban core to the fringe is reminiscent of the social organization of the medieval cities of the Kathmandu valley that relegated the low and outcastes to the periphery, and Rademacher's analysis indexes the moral anxieties underlying the making of environmental policy in Kathmandu. This might be an example of a local logic, but if so, it is not easily distinguishable from a global logic that also consigns the marginal to the periphery. It would be useful to know the caste and ethnic makeup of the *sukumbāsī* population; if it includes people of relatively high caste, their status as "matter out of place" is itself an interesting commentary on how a modern ideology of urban renewal and environmentalism can trump older ideas of status.

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At a time when global environmental anxieties about the future of the planet are being mapped onto alarmist concerns over the rapid pace of urbanization, particularly in the cities of the global South, Rademacher makes a very timely and highly insightful intervention in the ongoing debates on urbanization, urban ecologies, and informal housing. In this exciting essay, she presents a rich and textured account of the making and remaking of urban natures in the crucible of political turmoil, urban planning, and social change. Taking the case of Kathmandu, which was until recently mired in a protracted struggle for political transformation, Rademacher carefully tracks how a new cultural politics of belonging, morality, and citizenship is unfolding in this city through the discourses and practices of urban environmental improvement and river restoration. The richness of her analysis comes not only from her fine sensibility of the overlapping social, political, and ecological terrains of Kathmandu but also from her fine-grained analysis of the human and nonhuman actors (like the river), who actively carve the biosocial landscape. Weaving together diverse bodies of literature—urban anthropology, environmental anthropology, development studies, ecosystems science, urban planning, and environmental history—her essay forges a productive conversation among these literatures and presents a compelling narrative of how urban places come to be to constituted at different moments in unintended, though regionally specific ways.

In the last 20 years, there have been animated debates in different quarters but most vigorously in cultural geography that have reopened the question of the ontology and epistemology of nature and persuasively questioned the relationship between society and nature (Latour 1993; Haraway 1991; Castree and Braun 2001). In light of these debates, a very rich body of work from anthropologists and geographers has come to interrogate the fundamental categories, discourses, and practices that coconstitute the landscapes of society-nature. While this has been a very productive turn, as Rademacher rightly points out, there has been only limited attention paid to the question of social life of *urban* nature. Barring a few recent writings by cultural geographers (Swyngedouw 2006; Kaika 2005; Gandy 2006; Braun 2005), nature in most analyses remains largely external to the social, cultural, and political landscapes of the city, thus inadvertently reinforcing the false boundaries between cities and nature. It is in this new and emerging body of work that Rademacher's contributions are most welcome, since even those who take the socio-natures of city seriously have not paid due notice to the specificities of nature in the cities of the global South. Cities of the South have largely been rendered visible through the familiar tropes of slum ecologies, urban disorder, pollution, poverty, disease, and crime, overlooking the cultural and, more critically, the ecological dynamics that coconstitute urban social ecologies.

Tracing the multiple impulses and practices of the state, urban planners, developers, and housing advocates/activists, the essay deftly situates the case of Bishnu and Bagmati river restoration in relation to the contested issue of informal housing of riparian migrants in Kathmandu. In a manner similar to those of standard narratives of development, Rademacher demonstrates how the ecological logics of improvement treats the migrants as "matter out of place" and deploys governmental strategies to make them ecofriendly citizen-subjects, however distant from the core of the city. While she shows the shifting logics and politics of urban improvement over a period of different regimes, what is most remarkable in the essay is the attention to not only how characterizations of migrants change from landless to environmentally deleterious, politically dangerous, and power wielding at different moments in time but also how the material and ecological land-

scapes of the river are constantly reconstituted through an evolving governmental logic. The "land" occupied by the migrants, for instance, is reconstituted as a riverbed.

Methodologically, the focus on capturing the strategies, vision(s), and practices of those "who claimed to speak on riparian migrants' behalf or act in their interest" is welcome, since it forces us to explore the complex machinations of power and describes how certain dominant discourses and specific ideologies of belonging and morality become relevant in specific sites. In this context, although Rademacher mentions the "foreignness" of migrants, I wondered whether in such a charged political context there were other frames of references and logics of improvement that intersected with the cultural politics of regional, religious, and racial difference, whether there were particular moments in which the specific ethnic or gendered characteristics of some migrants were evoked by different actors to pursue their objectives of social and ecological reconfiguration, and whether and how the migrants and their advocates may have fashioned their own strategies in "ecofriendly" ways. This may be beyond the aim of the paper but it would be an important next step to see how the categories of social difference are produced through ecological practices and how they provide moral valence to the projects of improvement.

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Anne Rademacher's essay is a fascinating and theoretically insightful investigation of urban resettlement, the travels of a global environmental science of "urban ecology" to Kathmandu, and the role of national political events in the making of citizens and urban natures. She links a generation of research on international development, more recent discussions of global slums, and an emerging science of urban ecology. Rademacher pays close attention to shifting political and epistemic alliances between officials, developers and activists in Kathmandu, showing us how some people come to inhabit the political category of "slum dwellers," how they become "dangerous subversives" at a time of national emergency, and, once peace is restored, how they (possibly) become ecologically sensitive suburban citizens. Through her richly detailed and unusually long-term research, she is able to follow the changing positions and arguments of bureaucrats, activists, and developers to show us how national political events and global sciences come to be a resource for the creative remaking of categories of people and place. Environmental activists appropriate the concepts of urban ecology in the name of a resettlement scheme, seeking to turn urban slum dwellers into model citizens in ecological homes far from town. As she shows us, the making and unmaking of categories have material and political consequences.

I would like to ask for a little more detail here, while being sympathetic to inevitable limitations of field research. Why did government officials in 2006 decide to (expensively) resettle slum dwellers, when these same people had been forcibly relocated, apparently without trouble, in 2002? What combination of "stresses, contests, and calculations" caused officials to collaborate with Lumanti activists in 2006? Were slum dwellers blocking roads, messing up thoroughfares? Were activists somehow mustering the political and cognitive resources to undermine official credibility, making a previously unthinkable resettlement financially feasible and politically expedient? Why did officials feel that they could no longer successfully frame all riverside squatters as insurgents; why and how did officials and activists come to collaborate in weaving a new category?

Rademacher warns against generalizations about an urban ecological crisis in the global South. However, rather than making what is often a stock anthropological appeal to local context, she poses the question differently and sees the role of local actors differently. By asking, "How and when was housing framed as an environmental problem in Kathmandu?" she opens up the question of what "environmental" is, revealing that environmental concerns come to political salience not only as the result of a traveling global slum science but also as the result of creative work by Nepali bureaucrats, activists, and their allies. She shows us how these people are constantly making and remaking social and natural categories, drawing on urban environmental anxieties, ideologies of belonging, morality, and governance. This remaking of categories also makes urban ecology a "malleable tool" (a wonderful and imaginative coinage!). Activists and policy makers indeed remold the science and policy of urban ecology in order to advocate their preferred programs (as when housing becomes environmental), but this remolding is partial. The relative solidity of urban ecology is precisely what makes it a tool that Lumanti activists can use to build ecologically friendly homes inhabited by new ecological citizens. Here I would like to ask Rademacher what other resources, performances, and spectacles go into this remolding? And perhaps, what are the audiences for such performances and spectacles? Did officials agree to expensive model resettlements partly because of the success of activists' performances of urban ecology?

Rademacher's fieldwork fortuitously took place across a period of enormous political change. This makes her study tremendously valuable for thinking about the role of state institutions, traveling ideologies, and discourses in affecting how people understand their daily lives. Dramatic changes in Nepali politics and institutions have produced similarly dramatic changes in how environmental activists talk about the environment, the state, and about the urban poor. Thinking speculatively toward the future, I suggest that this example may help us think about what might emerge from the current financial crisis and perhaps to rethink anthropological approaches to development or capitalism. As Rademacher shows

us, people in Kathmandu are able, at least in a limited sense, to "push back," to remake official slum clearance projects and official urban ecology into new projects of producing model ecological (sub)urban citizens. So too, the project of neoliberal rule is likely to be radically reconfigured, perhaps revealing that it was never as seamlessly internalized and hegemonic as it appeared to be, perhaps that its apparent seamlessness was always underpinned by possible violence and civilized pretense. The current financial crisis is likely to cause a wholesale reconfiguration of state institutions, regulations, and forms of world making but also to provide opportunities for weaving new categories of people, place, and nature.

Reply

I am grateful to the commentators and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful engagement with this article. My response here is necessarily brief and selective, and cannot convey the full range of productive insights that the commentators have brought to the work.

In this article, I analyze an official sphere of engagement with urban ecology that is at once anchored to the urban reaches of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers in Kathmandu and connected to languages and logics of power that we might conceptualize as local, regional, and global. I am primarily interested in understanding official ecology-in-practice as a repertoire of modern, developmentalist techniques for establishing who was, and who was not, "in place," according to a national, and sometimes transnational, order of things. It is worth noting here that ecology, which as a science is fundamentally concerned with complexity and diversity, was used in official practice to collapse social difference, generate social categories, and fix unruly, fluid boundaries between rural and urban in a time of political contingency. My approach to urban ecology sheds light on the processes through which specific development interventions aimed at urban environmental "improvement" are fashioned and operationalized, while highlighting the ways that urban nature is itself designated and constructed.

By focusing on the specific actors who inhabit the official sphere of development and environmental policymaking, I give ethnographic contours to the making and remaking of official urban ecological knowledge. These contours demonstrate how new categories of degraded river and migrant were mutually produced and then effaced as *sukumbāsī* were dissolved into an undifferentiated category of insurgents. They allow us to trace tendrils of what became, in a context of dramatic political reorganization, the simultaneous possibility of a restored river and urban migrant formality.

With an ethnographic focus on the official sphere of knowledge production, we are better poised to understand the process through which a new category, that of the ecologically noble migrant, could emerge from a legacy of discourses in which migrants were synonymous with disorder and degradation. Thus the approach, and the material, are intended to raise questions about the reproduction of official categories of marginality, and the interplay between official urban ecological logics and territorial power.

As reviewers have noted, this approach highlights certain aspects of a fuller study of Kathmandu's urban ecology and necessarily backgrounds others. Recognizing the importance of that which cannot be captured in this analysis, I must reference the larger project from which the data presented here are drawn, a project in which I present and consider a fuller range of encounters, issues, and social practices.

Here, I have chosen to focus on the particular set of actors who take part in development and environmental policymaking through what Appadurai (2002, 22) has called "the politics of engagement." This sphere is worthy of investigation, for as Appadurai argues, in its contemporary form it often affords interactions between traditionally opposed groups, and "produces poor communities able to engage in partnerships with more powerful agencies" (Appadurai 2002, 25). While the direct voices of migrants are certainly missing from this sphere, their mediated voices are most certainly present and amplified, in this case, by the housing activist NGO Lumanti. In fact, it is worth noting that Lumanti is part of the horizontal model of global activism that Appadurai (2002) describes in his own work, through its involvement with Slum Dwellers International and regional housing advocate networks.

The mediated presence, and direct absence, of migrant voices from the official institutional life of slum ecology can be fully understood only by attending to the complex relationships through which advocacy itself takes place in the city's and, indeed, the region's housing sector. These relationships are extremely important, and although they are not the focus of this article, exploring them would go far toward addressing Finnis's very useful question, "When does housing become an environmental issue . . . for rural-to-urban migrants?"

I would like to underline, as Alley does, that it is precisely a housing advocacy NGO—and not an assemblage of migrants per se—that satisfies engagement with "the local" in this official sphere, with potential consequences that have been well documented in the vast and rich literature on "community" and "locality" in development (e.g., Brosius, Tsing, and Zerner 1998; Peters 1996), including in Nepal (e.g., Forbes 1999). However, encounters between nongovernmental advocates/activists, Nepali bureaucrats, and international development officials are also extremely important, as it is within this sphere of engagement that official logics and practices of slum ecology are forged and reproduced.

By focusing my analysis in this way, I anchor the present work to a legacy of studies of institutional knowledge production (Pierce 1995; Dove 1999; Kaufman 1997; Rademacher and Patel 2002), and echo their concern about the relative

lack of ethnographic attention to central institutions and nodes of power (Dove 1999, 225).

Guneratne's question about caste diversity among migrants helps me to further explicate the dynamics of official urban ecology knowledge production. Throughout the period addressed in this article, official ecology-in-practice presupposed a single, homogenous category, sukumbāsī. This category automatically collapsed considerable differences, including the presence of a full range of caste groups and dozens of ethnic groups among the riparian migrant population. Action research studies highlighted this tremendous diversity, beginning with Tanaka's groundbreaking (1996) sukumbāsī demographic profile, referenced in the article. However, the official sphere required a category that would signify all informal housing practices and mark them as singular, regardless of the caste, class, or ethnic identities contained therein. It is indeed the case, as Guneratne hypothesizes, that in this sense the "modern ideology of urban renewal and environmentalism" can and did supplant long-standing cultural norms regarding status and appropriate territoriality along the riverscape.

Caste, class, and regional differences among riparian sukumbāsī gained new relevance to the state in the period of emergency, when state agents feared that settlements could harbor Maoist insurgents. Yet the category that captured all settlers and settlements prevented selective state intervention in those sukumbāsī communities thought to pose a specific and demonstrable political risk. One consequence, described in the article, was that all migrant communities were subject to automatic state suspicion, and some to direct violence. This demonstrates quite precisely the material implications of official ecology-in-practice and its power to collapse social difference.

Guneratne's important insight leads me to emphasize a central objective of my analytical approach. I aim to extend our study of modern ideologies of urban renewal so that we address directly their attendant ideas of moral social order. This follows Robin Grove-White's (1993) claim that environmentalism represents a "new moral discourse" for modern, technological society, but it will apply her observation to a specific geographic, cultural, and political context.

Historically, questions about Himalayan moral order and space have been addressed through the study of sacred landscape. This has produced clear analytical connections between historical urban forms and contemporary political power and spatial meaning. In this article, I notice the importance of developmentalist logics of morality, those concepts of the good and proper society that emerge and travel over global circuits as ideas and practices of modernity. I link developmentalist moralities directly with ideas of nature, aspirations for environmental change, and the politics of urban ecological knowledge. Whelpton (2005, 173) and others have argued convincingly that in the second half of the twentieth century, developmentalism in Nepal "took on something of the status of an established religion," assuming the force of a moral discourse and promising the longed-for bridge to modernity so important for understanding urban life in contemporary Kathmandu.

As this article shows, attending to official practices of urban ecological knowledge production—that is, engaging the very categories through which environmental order and disorder are defined and assessed—raises critical questions of urban ecology that Ferguson (1999) first famously asked of modernity: What social expectations accompany urban environmental interventions? What kinds of polities do powerful actors imagine and intend when they advocate for particular ecological practices, policies, and outcomes? How do those expectations shape the range of responses that are considered reasonable, acceptable, and moral, and how do those expectations provide the building blocks for specific metrics of environmental failure and success?

It is my intention here to contribute to our ethnographic understanding of social difference as it is produced and reproduced through official practices of urban ecology. I contend that it is only in sharpening our attention to, and understanding of, critical categories such as sukumbāsī, degradation, and restoration in official spheres that we can appreciate the material and political consequences of urban environmental interventions. To conclude, I return to Taylor and Buttel's (1992) point, that experiences of—and, following Guneratne, responses to—environmental crisis rarely conform to global or regional logics. If we are to move forward from this critical observation, then understanding ecology as it is forged and practiced in local centers of power presents a central challenge to urban anthropology in the twenty-first century.

—Anne Rademacher

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