

Seeing Red: Maoist Rumors, Hidden Transcripts, and the End of the 2014 Mount Everest Climbing Season

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May 2017

Acknowledgements

The opportunity to complete a research project such as this has been an immensely gratifying and humbling experience. My endeavor reflects the contributions of many individuals, and as such I am deeply indebted to all those who played in this project.

My work would not have been possible without the support those people I had the good fortune of meeting and working with during my fieldwork in Nepal, India, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. I would like to thank Nima Sherpa, Lakpa Sherpa, and those at the Green Tara for taking care of me during my extended stay in Namche Bazaar; Steve Mock and Pete Athans for letting me visit the Khumbu Climbing School and Phunuru and Mingma Sherpa for hosting me at the Phorche Guest House; Lakpa Lama, for his thorough introduction to the Khumbu; Dan Mazur of SummitClimb Treks and Expeditions and Murari Sharma and Deha Shrestha of Everest Parivar Pvt. Ltd, who tirelessly provided logistical support; David O'Brien, who ably led and organized my Everest expedition; Glen Young, who provided helpful travel advice; and Ben Ayers, whose pointed questions helped shape my thinking early on. Lastly, I would like to thank my Nepali family, Scott MacLennan and Sunita Sharma, Sushila Aryal, Namunaa Lopchan, Usha Neupane, Alisha Lamichhane, Laxmi Lamichhane, Radip Lamichhane, Shanti Rai and all the rest who made The Mountain Fund such a home for me and so many other travelers.

I would also like to acknowledge the many ordinary Himalayan adventure travel industry participants – local residents, travelers, trekkers, and mountaineers – that I crossed paths with from Darjeeling to Lhasa, many of whom I interviewed for this project or who contributed in other ways. Although you must go unnamed here, your camaraderie and candor in sharing your experiences constitute the heart of my time abroad and the backbone of this thesis. All of its limitations are mine alone.

I would also like to thank all of those at the University of Washington and the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies whose assistance was invaluable. Professor Deborah Porter and her relentless attention to detail and logic taught me how to be a better thinker and writer. Maya Magarati, Biraj Karmacharya, and Scott Halliday of the Nepal Studies Initiative at the South Asia Center provided constant critiques and regional expertise to make my work stronger.

I would especially like to thank my adviser David Citrin, whose advice, insight, and experience challenged me to engage deeply with a project of deep personal interest.

Partial funding for this project was provided by a Cascade Leadership Challenge Explorer in Residence Fellowship. I am grateful to Director Mark Steelquist, Harrison Laird, KJ Clark, Frances Steelquist, and Leo Chrisafis, who fostered my sense of adventure and curiosity about Everest before, during, and after our trip to Asia.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their patience, understanding, and continued support as I spent three years consumed in this project.

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Introduction

At approximately 6:30 AM on 18 April, 2014, a massive serac collapsed onto teams of high altitude workers (HAWs)¹ hauling expedition supplies through Mount Everest's Khumbu Icefall in preparation for the spring climbing season. Sixteen people were killed and nine others injured, three of them severely enough that they had to be evacuated to Kathmandu by helicopter. Despite an extensive rescue operation mounted by witnesses from nearby Everest Base Camp, three bodies were never found. Everest, and the Nepal Himalaya, had suffered the deadliest disaster in its history to date.

Even before the grim work of recovering bodies and conducting funerary rites concluded, the first signs of unrest began brewing in Base Camp. What started as a series of high-level discussions in the wake of the tragedy soon devolved into a complex mix of posturing and political theater. The shock and suddenness of the disaster received extensive international media coverage and thrust a number of issues to the fore, from longstanding grievances held by HAWs against the Government of Nepal (GoN) to latent historical, cultural, and economic tensions between Global North and Nepali expedition operators, guides, expedition members, and support staff. For several days the situation at Base Camp remained tense, with a persistent sense of uncertainty settling in as political maneuverings and negotiations between various parties continued. In response to a 13-point charter petitioning the government for a redress of grievances signed by hundreds of HAWs, word arrived from Kathmandu that Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation Minister Bhim Prasad Acharya and other dignitaries would come to Base

1. In popular accounts of Himalayan mountaineering, high altitude workers are often referred to as "Sherpas." Traditionally most HAWs were, and are, ethnically Sherpa men, though this has begun to change in recent years. The ethnically-neutral term "sherpa" denotes an occupation and refers to hired staff that work above Base Camp; they should not be confused with porters, who carry loads below Base Camp, or with guides, who assume specific leadership functions on expeditions and have usually received some level of formal training and/or hold specific credentials.

Camp to listen to the HAWs' demands and offer clarity whether climbing would continue.

With the question of continuing the climbing season still unsettled, a memorial *pūjā*² (religious ceremony) for the fallen HAWs was held at Base Camp on 22 April. According to eyewitnesses the volatile atmosphere quickly became politically charged, and after the ceremony rumors began to spread warning that any attempt to continue climbing would be met with violence. These threats were quickly attributed to Maoist³ sympathizers or individuals associated with one of Nepal's Maoist political parties. Despite last-ditch attempts by some Global North and Nepali expedition operators and guides to dispel rumors and diffuse the situation, the damage had been done. Fearing the threats placed their staff and clients in unacceptable danger, one expedition operator after another withdrew their teams and cancelled their climbs. Though Minister Acharya and the GoN denied that the mountain was closed and several successful summit attempts were mounted later, political upheaval culminating in Maoist rumors led to the de facto end of the 2014 Everest climbing season.

Besides tragic human toll, the consequences of the 2014 incident⁴ were far-reaching. Despite achieving some concession, the de facto closure put hundreds of HAWs out of work and left many Global North expedition members frustrated and angry, resulting in acrimony that persists to the present day. Many expedition operators suffered major financial losses and were caught between feuding parties and the government. Observers and commentators were quick to

2. In this thesis I have transliterated Nepali words in Roman type. I have tried to differentiate between retroflex and dental, and aspirated and non-aspirated consonants; for example “द” would be written as (*d*), “ध” as (*dh*), “ड” as (*D*), and “ढ” as (*Dh*). To indicate the long vowel “aa” as in “father,” I use the diacritic (*ā*). Interested readers should consult Shapiro (1989, 8-23) for a complete discussion of Devanagari syllabary, pronunciation, and transliteration.

3. The term “Maoist” is often used amorphously in the Nepali context. Here, I use the term narrowly to refer to the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN (M)], which declared the Nepal Civil War in 1996, or to individuals associated or thought to be associated with the party or inspired by their political ideology.

4. I use the word “incident” throughout this investigation to describe the events that transpired in the six days (18-23 April, 2014) on Everest following the serac fall. I acknowledge the limitations of this term as a descriptor, but my usage is intended to convey moral and political neutrality.

condemn an industry they claimed was built on a foundation of greed and exploitation and decry the changes mandated by the government as inadequate. Along with the well-publicized brawl between European guides and HAWs on Everest in 2013 and the end of the climbing season in the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, recent events on Everest have spurred intense debate about the continued viability of the current commercial paradigm and raised renewed questions of equity and safety.

In an industry defined by high ideological and financial stakes, the causes of the 2014 incident are also far-reaching and demand further examination. This task is complicated by the extensive web of interconnections that bind together the people that live, work, and play in the remote Himalaya. Among the tallest peaks on earth, a globalized and cosmopolitan industry worth hundreds of millions of dollars yearly overlays complex systems of preexisting sociocultural relations and a tangled local and national political landscape. Because of its continued prominence in the world's consciousness and enduring place in popular media, narratives of Everest distill these intersectionalities with unusual ferocity, creating disparate and dissenting imaginaries around the world and on the mountain itself. The causes and consequences of these cultural encounters are exemplified by Maoist rumors, whose inclusion in established narratives of Everest appears idiosyncratic and out of place in a region presented as a Himalayan Shangri-La. Though they played an instrumental role in bringing a swift end to 2014 Everest climbing season and received wide exposure in popular media and discourse, these rumors have attracted relatively little scholarly attention and their origin, significance, and implications remain poorly understood. Despite the fact that rumors of Maoist involvement were never substantiated, why were they so influential in hastening the end of the climbing season?

I argue that rumors of Maoist involvement were highly influential because they gave

voice to specific anxieties and preconceptions about the structure and function of the Himalayan adventure travel industry in general, and the Everest industry in particular. A traumatic and seemingly incomprehensible event created an ambiguous space where dominant discourses could be anonymously engaged with and challenged. While the jointly-constructed public transcript of Everest portrays Everest climbing as a largely unproblematic collaboration between local and international actors that enables heroic adventure, a number of hidden transcripts emerged in the contested wake of the disaster that attempted to confront a rapidly-changing industry through far more polarized and nuanced interpretations of sociocultural interactions. Such characterizations situate ordinary actors within the Everest industry, ultimately determining who lives and who dies on the tallest mountain in the world, and who is held responsible for the consequences that result from the pursuit of a dangerous sport and the social fallout from natural disasters that individuals have little control over.

While the factual details of the 2014 incident are well-established, my interest lies in exploring a set of implications that extend far beyond a single tumultuous climbing season. This investigation seeks not only to deconstruct several tragic and contentious days on Everest, but demonstrate how contested ideological underpinnings of the contemporary Himalayan adventure travel industry are reflected in a dialectic of narrative and action. The seemingly unexpected emergence and mobilization of Maoist rumors – first by Global North but ultimately Nepali actors as well – to rationalize a particular sequence of events suggests they encapsulated specific sets of dissident discourses that exist in opposition to dominant perceptions and portrayals of Everest. The spread of this particular rumor at this particular historical moment betrays both the discursive power of Everest itself to create and sustain narratives and reveals the essential structural features that order the social, political, and economic life of the remote Himalaya.

Literature Review

Introduction

This review brings together a number of disciplinary perspectives to provide an understanding of why rumors of Maoist involvement proved influential in bringing an end to the 2014 climbing season on Mount Everest. James Scott's theory of public and hidden transcripts provides the theoretical foundation for my investigation, and Susan Birell's intertextual analysis of Everest narratives provides its specific interpretative frame. Infiltrated with theoretical and historical perspectives, my analysis will focus on uncovering the social and political underpinnings of the Himalayan adventure travel system and the disruptive role of rumors and discourse in shaping contemporary perceptions and events.

In the first section, I examine how scholars have conceptualized rumors. Broadly, rumors are a means of communicating information within an environment where information is unreliable or unverifiable. I focus not only on theories about why rumors emerge, their social utility, and the means by which they diffuse within an information environment, but what they reveal about the underlying order of power, privilege, and discourse within specific social contexts in specific times and places. I also seek to situate rumor in the Nepali context.

In the second, I deconstruct and analyze James Scott's theory of transcripts. The study of transcripts, or the overarching discursive frameworks that reflect and are reflected in both public and private society, offer unique insight into systems of social relations, reveals the dialectic between domination, subordination, and resistance, and explores how information and narratives are transmitted within society. While offering several critiques of Scott's work, I adopt his conceptual framework and analytical language to demonstrate how public transcripts may be jointly constructed by so-called dominant and subordinate classes, and how major events can

create a space of disguise where anonymous expressions such as rumors can reveal the hidden transcripts that develop offstage and in in opposition to prevailing discourses.

In the third, I offer a discussion and analysis of scholarship on Maoism in Nepal and how it provides a useful entry point into Everest's public discourses and private transcripts. While seemingly incongruous and at odds with the pervasive imaginary of Nepal as a Himalayan Shangri-La, the country's Maoist legacy is inescapable. Nepal's key place in Cold War-era anticommunist doctrine, the 1996-2006 Nepal Civil War and its aftermath, and ideological struggles that have persisted into the post-September 11 era have generated fear, anxiety, and distrust among many international observers and visitors. Maoist rumors went viral because they seemed to speak convincingly and cogently to a Global North perception of Nepal defined by the inherent disorder of the developing world, fear of international communism and terrorism, and the danger of anti-imperialist rebellion by indigenous⁵ peoples.

In the fourth, I explore the popular discourses of Everest which focus overwhelmingly on mythic meanings of challenge, accomplishment, heroism, and adventure while largely ignoring or minimizing problematic historical and political entanglements. The Himalayan adventure travel industry is predicated on a particular and idiosyncratic interplay between philosophy, people, and place, and I adopt Birell's argument that Everest has been appropriated through a specific discursive process to carry ideological messages that empower some views but obscure others. The power of this narrative, jointly constructed by the explicit or implicit consensus of Everest's many stakeholders, has made possible a century of Himalayan mountaineering and

5. The term "indigenous" is highly contested in a number of contexts, including the Nepali one. The Nepali term *janajāti* is often rendered in English as "indigenous" (or "nationality") and used mostly as a catch-all designation for groups that do not fit neatly in the Hindu caste system which was institutionalized in Nepal. Many Himalayan ethnic groups, such as the Sherpa, Gurung, Tamang who dominate the Himalayan adventure travel industry, are considered *janajāti* and have traditionally experienced discrimination and marginalization. I adopt this usage in this investigation.

enabled the creation of a multimillion-dollar industry that has largely proved impervious to continual incidents, disasters, and negative publicity. The 2014 incident created a contested, ambiguous space where the fissures in the public Everest consensus become evident and features of Everest's hidden transcripts came to light.

With this conceptual grounding, I arrive at my methodology. Putting the many texts of Everest in conversation with each other, as Birrell (2007) does, and subjecting it to a discourse analysis that seeks evidence of Scott's public and hidden transcripts provides both a theoretical foundation and specific interpretative frame for analyzing semi-structured key informant interviews which I conducted between August and September 2016 and other data. Through an intertextual analysis, I will concretely identify features of Everest's public and hidden transcripts and situate them within a wider regional and thematic context to explain why the 2014 incident was particularly suited to revealing Everest's resistant narrativizations.

Rumors

In this investigation I examine the events of the 2014 Everest climbing season, where rumors involving threats of violence after 16 Nepali HAWs were killed in a serac fall in the Khumbu Icefall hastened the de facto closure of the mountain. In the confused days that followed expressions of grief and anger were common, as was persistent uncertainty over if and when the climbing season would be resumed. For many Global North guides and members caught in the middle of political unrest, lack of linguistic and cultural awareness and a broader ignorance of the sociopolitical forces at work on Everest led to confusion over the ambiguous situation and fueled speculation that Nepal's Maoists had some role in the revolt. Rumors – best understood as a means of communicating information within an environment where information is often

unreliable or unverifiable – thus became a useful tool for rationalizing the events unfolding around them. They also provide the entry point for analyzing the events of 2014 and their significance beyond a single tragic day on Everest.

It is widely accepted that rumors are a social process, but theorists differ on their specific social utility, how they originate and propagate, and why they serve as useful conduits of information despite questionable veracity. Shibutani (1966) argues that rumors primarily function as communal sense-making tools in social contexts, defining them as...a recurrent form of communication through which men caught together in an ambiguous situation attempt to construct a meaningful interpretation of it by pooling their resources” (17). Rumors allow social groups to construct plausible explanations for ambiguous events by combining discrete viewpoints and interpretations to paint a more complete picture than possible individually, and this crowdsourcing approach to knowledge formation provides a collective tool for discovering truth scalable from small groups of individuals to entire societies.

Kapferer (1990) expands this argument by theorizing that rumors are not merely social phenomena but political ones as well. Rumors can ultimately be true or false, but their genesis is dependent on a subjective conception of reality. He defines rumors narrowly as the “emergence and circulation in society of information that is either not yet publicly confirmed by official sources or denied by them” (19). The emphasis on “official sources” in his definition is reminiscent of Foucault’s claim that discourses are tightly controlled by those that societal consensus has determined has the authority to speak and can therefore reveal a great deal about societal organization. Indeed, Kapferer explicitly states that “*a rumor constitutes a relation to authority*” (20, his emphasis). Though his interpretation may seem at somewhat at odds with Shibutani’s more commonsense explanation, it is not difficult to imagine that the search for truth

is a communal process that takes place in an ambiguous yet bounded information environment.

Rumors, Kapferer argues, should not be dismissed simply because they are often false. Rather, they are an interesting topic of study because they are sometimes true, because they provide an important mechanism for information diffusion, and because they reveal a great deal about hierarchies of information. Not all information is considered equal, so what factors cause only some information to be passed along as rumor?

Rumors tend to develop as a response to a specific confluence of social, emotional, and structural factors. First, rumors tend to develop in response to specific states or events. Kapferer (1992) observes that individuals are constantly bombarded with external stimuli, but only a small percentage of incoming information is suitable source material for rumor formation; information that seems to succinctly answer immediate questions and take on meaning at a certain moment in time ultimately become rumors. In other words, rumors necessarily have both a certain level of materiality and a finite shelf life.

Second, rumors tend to reflect prevailing moods and consolidate common reactions. Shibutani (1966) argues that rumor is not only inseparable from the circumstances in which it arose, it is inseparable from its social genesis. Rumors have discursive power because they reflect a commonality of perspectives within a landscape of individual viewpoints that can only spread as the result of wide appeal and some level of consensus or acceptance. Strang and Soule (1998) find that information tends to diffuse most prolifically among spatially or demographically proximate actors who share certain and definable commonalities. The implication of this, according to Krull and Anderson (1997), is that events tend to be interpreted according to preconceived notions of how the world around these actors is ordered and their expectations of what they expect to find based on personalities and prejudices. Mobilization of

expected realities provides a heuristic shortcut that allows information to be processed quickly and efficiently, even to the point where the explanations encapsulated in rumors are “generated in a very automatic manner when an event activates a knowledge structure” (2).

Third, rumors often evoke strong emotional reactions. Rosnow (1991) argues that four major emotional factors influence rumor generation and transmission: general uncertainty, outcome-relevant involvement, personal anxiety, and credulity. He found that so-called “dread rumors” – those negative reactions associated with anxiety – are passed on more often than other kinds of rumors. This suggests an important psychological link between anxiety and rumors, though the specific mechanism of interaction has been explained in several ways; Rosnow (1980) theorizes that rumor is a coping mechanism for relieving anxiety in uncertain situations, while Walker and Blaine (1991) suggest that the value in spreading rumors establishes the social support needed to cope with stress resulting from dread rumors. Importantly, Sunstein (2009) argues this essential need for communal sense-making in the aftermath of emotionally-fraught traumatic events that demand closure often leads to development of conspiracy theories, which assign blame and often has actionable implications:

Terrible events produce outrage, and when people are outraged they are all the more likely to accept rumors that justify their emotional states, and also to attribute those events to intentional action (16).

These three characteristics of rumors challenge the common perception that they are simply background noise or idle talk. Rather, rumors occupy a necessary niche in information hierarchies because they allow people to make sense of events in a social context in real time. These immediate, often unfiltered reactions are highly revealing of the forces that bound society and discourse, and for this reason study of rumors is analytically useful.

While Nepal’s political sphere will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections,

it is important to introduce the place of rumor in the Nepali experience. According to Lecompte-Tilouine (2016, 33), whereas the English word “rumor” often refers to a distant, indistinct sound, the Nepali words for rumor (*hallā*, *hallā-khallā*, or sometimes *ho-hallā*) convey intensity more akin to what is described in English as a “hubbub,” “uproar,” or “tumult” intended to cover up something else. Rumor formation is thus conceived of as an active process of sense-making that consciously situates itself in contrast and opposition to official sources of information. In a society that has traditionally been both highly stratified and tightly controlled, Hutt and Onta (2016) note that a skeptical public remains distant from both the state and sources of reliable information. For “people outside the political or aristocratic elite [who] do not expect to be told the truth” (5) rumor plays an outsize role in shaping imaginaries and making sense of the world.

The significance of rumor in the Nepali context is exemplified by reactions to the 2001 Royal Massacre, in which King Birendra, Queen Aishwarya, and nine other members of Nepal’s royal family were shot dead in Kathmandu’s Narayanhiti Palace. Crown Prince Dipendra, who shot himself and was declared king prior to his death two days later, was identified as the gunman but few people were satisfied by the official accounts that emerged from the palace. Thapa (2005) reveals that the failure of Nepali media to report on the incident in a timely manner, the inconclusive investigation that followed, and the inadequacy of government explanations created a space of ambiguity in the following days and weeks that fueled rampant speculation and numerous conspiracy theories about what had actually taken place or who else besides Dipendra might have been responsible. The Royal Massacre proved an ideal catalyst for rumor formation because it was a shocking and unexpected event that took place in an enclosed and inaccessible space, it was a trauma which the people of Nepal ascribed vital importance to for understanding the sociopolitical developments that followed the massacre, and because errant

data and unanswered questions provided openings for alternative explanations. In the end, Thapa notes, many Nepalis acknowledged that they might never know the truth, and this sense of communal uncertainty and resignation became a shared national experience. In the absence of a definitive accounting, the Nepali public was “left to recount anecdotes and stories, to content [themselves] with myth” (47).

Rumors are essential vehicles for arriving at communal truths. Though they originate at the level of the individual, they only gain traction at the societal level if they seem to fit within a broader, more universal pattern of belief. Only information that has a clear relationship to a specific event, a coherence with other beliefs already held, and provokes an unusually strong, often negative emotional reaction will become a rumor. Because they originate in contexts where information is unreliable or unverifiable they are important sense-making devices for ordinary people and form a counterpoint to the supposedly reliable and verifiable information from official sources that bound the information environment. In the Nepali context, where these official sources of information have historically been tightly controlled, rumors have become essential sense-making mechanisms for ordinary people. Close examination of rumors reveals the reasons for their discursive power, and provides some indication of the social hierarchies of the societies in which they arise.

While this section has reviewed many important characteristics and uses of rumor, Krull and Anderson’s assumption that rumors reflect and receive their power from the preconceived notions individuals have about the nature of the world around them deserves more attention. This assumption is rooted in a confluence of causes: the social order of society, the relationship of unverified rumors to verified official accounts, and the contested and ambiguous political and social moments in which rumors arise and take on a life of their own. It therefore becomes

necessary to imagine a theoretical framework that encompasses these essential features.

James Scott's Transcripts

Much of anthropologist and political scientist James Scott's work theorizes underclass politics. Though much of his early research focused on post-colonial Malaya, his 1990 work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* attempts to provide a methodological framework for understanding class relations across a broad spatial and historical spectrum. By exploring its subjective dimensions through a careful analysis of the symbolic politics of resistance, the experience of subordination in a variety of contexts can be better understood.

Specifically, Scott is concerned with the multifaceted relationship between dominant and subordinate classes. While the relationship between societal elites and those individuals and groups who find themselves under social, political, economic, and class domination has been widely explored by theorists in a variety of fields, particularly Marxists and neo-Marxists, Scott's theory of transcripts reimagines their relationship as one that is primarily discursive in character. Critical discourse theory postulates that the stories, narratives, and discourses that circulate within society not only reflect societal divisions, but actively perpetuate domination, subordination, and resistance. However, Scott expands this understanding by explicitly linking certain narratives with dominant and subordinate groups. He refers to these narratives or discourses as transcripts, the social scripts that encapsulate "contradictions, tensions, and imminent possibilities" (xii) that structurally bound social groups. As Scott is primarily concerned with social underclasses, he believes that "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a hidden transcript that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). At the same time, the dominators also develop a hidden transcript, one that

represents the “practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed” (xii). In the public realm, however, the process of domination and subordination generates a hegemonic public discourse. Scott theorizes a dichotomy where the relations of domination are public transcripts and the articulation of resistance in search of an outlet are hidden transcripts.

Both public and hidden transcripts reflect and are reflected in everyday politics of power. While many analyses focus on articulating the beliefs, values, and practices of the dominant, postulating the existence of public and hidden transcripts allow for examination of the dominated’s culture of resistance. Dominant discourses are often shouted by the town crier or broadcast over state television, but others nevertheless exist in the margins, though they may be muffled by the apparatuses of state and society. Not only do the dominated reject the official script, they develop their own counter-ideology. Scott posits that subordinate discourse takes four forms, each with increasing visibility and decreasing adherence to official discourse. The first is based on rituals flattering the elite; the second on offstage discourse; the third on disguise and anonymity; and the fourth on a full rupture between public and hidden discourse (18-19).

In the first three stages, Scott envisions public transcripts a kind of libretto for stylized performance that accord the powerful the necessary deference and respect to avoid punishment, a social arrangement jointly created by the dominant and the weak for their own reasons and to maintain an outward sense of social order. However, this performance is often only skin-deep and what is said offstage often sharply contradicts what is done onstage. In sites sequestered from domination and shielded from surveillance such as back streets, slave-quarters, and taverns, a sharply dissonant political culture is possible where none was imagined to exist before. Scott notes that the dominated enact a dramatization of power relations, all the while subverting the system: “A combination of adaptive strategic behavior and the dialogue implicit in most power

relations ensures that public action will provide a constant stream of evidence that appears to support an interpretation of ideological hegemony” (70). Linking his analysis to a broad range of case studies from Malaysia, Russia, India, England, Chile, and the United States, Scott argues that the lived experience of domination, exploitation, repression, and resistance have played out in substantively similar ways at many different times and places.

Between the public and hidden realms and their transcripts Scott locates the middle ground of disguise. Here hidden transcripts can be expressed openly, albeit in veiled form. Bringing the consciousness of the hidden sphere into the public realm, the expressions and gestures of the dominated find their form in “rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct” (xiii). These unregulated or unregulable sociocultural expressions constitute “undeclared ideological guerrilla war” (137) against the carefully-maintained consensus of the public transcript. The intensity and frequency of such expressions can increase when a dominant group is weakened or at a time of increased opposition, perhaps eventually progressing to outright rebellion and revolution and the fourth and most extreme variety of subordinate discourse.

Scott pays particular attention to social utility and mechanisms of rumor, which he considers a “powerful form of anonymous communication” (144). Echoing the work of Shibutani (1966) and Kapferer (1992), he believes that rumors thrive in environments where vitally important events and matters of life safety are occurring, such as war, epidemic, famine, and riot in which key judgements must be made but only unreliable or ambiguous information is available. Echoing Krull and Anderson (1997), he believes the process of embellishment and exaggeration inherent in the diffusion of rumors is not at all random and instead fits the

worldview of its messengers: “the rumor...is not only an opportunity for anonymous, protected communication, but also serves as a vehicle for the anxieties and aspirations that might not be openly acknowledged by its propagators” (145).

Because his work deals with information and communication mechanisms as well as the social relations that bound them, Scott’s work is as much about the political significance of narrative as it is about politics itself. He considers expressive forms to be inherently politicized, allowing an analysis of the relationship between speech, belief, and ideology in everyday power relations and the political efficacy and expedience of such gestures. Meaning, order and coherence are imposed on reality through narrative, a constructed existence created to explain ourselves to ourselves. These gestures are intended to be opaque, yet understanding how they are deployed allows for analysis of a broad range of empirical data and historical evidence.

Scott’s work occupies a central role in the theory of a number of disciplines, most notably anthropology, because it theorizes the means by which subordinate classes might make a substantial entry into political debates. However, transcript theory has not been without criticism; scholars have pointed out the analytical limitations of assuming the majority of societies are organized in a more or less binary fashion and in which dominant and subordinate groups are both easily distinguishable and mutually antagonistic, as well as questioning the extent to which subordinate groups can truly be given voice.

Foremost among the critics of this so-called “dualistic fixity” is Gal. She argues that Scott’s single schematic dichotomy of dominant and subordinate

...flattens the great range of power relations evident in the diverse social formations of the historical and ethnographic record into a single opposition between dominant and subordinate... There are important sociological reasons for not conflating so many different forms of political and economic domination (1995, 414-5).

Different forms of domination produce what Scott would call different kinds or orders of transcripts. She cites Humphrey's (1994) work on Soviet-era Mongolian politics in which Humphrey argued that instead of a small core elite surrounded by the subordinate class "domination resides in a series of equivalent positions in nesting hierarchies, such that a similar domination may be exercised at each level" (1994, 46). Although Soviet domination constituted an official public transcript, opposition to it was neither organized nor particularly hidden. Lines between subordinate and dominant became impossible to draw because both domination and subordination were universal experiences within tightly nested hierarchies. Likewise, Field (1994) points out that in a number of the institutions cited as Scott's case studies, such as Russian serfdom and slavery in the American South, constituted a spectrum of subordination and dependency rather than a strict verticalized hierarchy.

Similarly, a number of critics have argued that adopting a binary system in which subordinate transcripts are inherently reactionary in nature and remained locked in a dialectic with dominant transcripts presents a number of epistemological problems. Gal (1995) claims that Scott wrongly argues that subordinates do not experience ideological contradictions or a doubled or divided consciousness and that it is relatively easy for them to articulate a counter-ideology, a point disputed by both her and Humphreys. Likewise, Ismail (1993) disputes the conditions under which the public declaration of the hidden transcript occurs. If such a rupture occurs in response to a weakening of a dominant group or at a time of increased opposition, it must depend on a subjective reading of the balance of power by the dominated. Yet the factions in revolts are rarely neat or clear-cut, which points to a greater lack of societal homogeneity than Scott admits. The hidden transcript might contain the seeds of revolution, but it can equally contain the seeds of restraint for all or some members of subordinate groups.

Disputed too is the extent to which subordinates are or can be autonomous agents, and by extension the extent to which their transcripts hold actual discursive power. Little (1994) notes Scott argues that the face of the subordinate does not grow to fit the mask of domination, yet maintains they are incapable of autonomous discourse. According to Ismail (1993), Scott claims subordinate classes suffer a restraint of action rather than experiencing a limitation on thought. Yet Scott accords the hidden transcript the status of truth, since the staged performances of the public transcript mask social “reality” that resides in the hidden transcript, raising questions about the epistemological status of the hidden transcript in relation to the public transcript. Spivak (1988), in addition to problematizing the colonialist undertones of overarching analyses such as Scott’s, cautions that the very project of assigning voice to the subaltern – those residing outside of hegemonic power structures – robs them of agency. The experiences of subordinate groups are described in a vastly different language than the experiences of the dominant, and so cannot simply be rendered visible by outsiders.

Just as it seems unlikely that most societies are organized in binary fashion, so does the idea that there are a defined or finite number of transcripts. Scott himself allows that while the global binary pair of public and hidden transcripts are the most important, dominant and subordinate groups each have public and hidden transcripts of their own. This opens the possibility for transcripts to exist at ever-shrinking levels of analysis as these groups are broken down into their constituent parts, but this makes it difficult to identify which transcripts are in fact hidden, from who, and why. Field (1994) argues that hidden transcripts are hidden, at least in modern times, not necessarily because they exist in opposition to public transcripts but because of the completion of rival texts and subtexts. The relative cacophony of the modern information environment, and the multitude of actors in play, suggests that discourse and

transcripts can be challenged both vertically and horizontally within information hierarchies.

My interest in applying transcript theory to an analysis of Everest are multifold. From Scott I draw the basic concept of transcript: the idea of dominant and subordinate discourses that maintain an uneasy and tacit coexistence yet define not only a set of power relations but how narrative functions within this framework. From his critics, I take an appreciation that the relationship between the dominant and the subordinate, and the information environment itself, is likely far more nuanced than Scott claims. In particular, I am interested in exploring the ways in which dominant and subordinate actors work jointly to construct the public transcript. Scott argues that the “terrain of dominant discourse is the only plausible arena of struggle” (103) which ensures “that the hidden and public transcripts remain mutually intelligible” (135) and mirror one another in the public realm. As subordinates perform for the elite and maintain hidden transcripts for themselves, so too do the elite legitimize themselves through these same public transcripts and express their true ideological positions in hidden transcripts. If public performance represents the subordinate’s means of keeping up appearances, public rituals represent the elite’s means of legitimizing their mastery through the mechanisms of state and society. While Scott’s dichotomy is problematic, it is useful for problematizing a Himalayan adventure travel system which has traditionally been interpreted as a binary, unequal relationship between privileged Global North guides and members and impoverished indigenous actors that mirrors the larger geopolitical dichotomy between Global North and Global South.

Also of interest to my investigation is the function of the anonymous space of disguise that exists in the contested space between public and hidden transcript. The discursive power of prevailing Everest discourses is such that it has proved nearly unassailable in the face of continual incidents, disasters, and persistent notoriety, yet recent incidents have created a

ruptured, ambiguous space where anonymous expressions of resistance can take root. While many of these expressions are dissident in nature and reflect new and longstanding criticisms of the equitability and sustainability of the Everest system, others reflect unvoiced opinions, anxieties, and aspirations by various actors. Understanding why Maoist rumors on Everest in 2014 encapsulated these dissident sentiments requires delving into the history and ideology of Nepal's Maoists, and how the legacy of the Nepal Civil War influenced the way they and the nation of Nepal are perceived and engaged with by the wider world.

Nepal Through a Maoist Lens

On 13 February, 1996, the little-known Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) [CPN (M)] formally declared the beginning of what they called the *Janā Yuddha* (People's War) by launching a series of coordinated attacks across Nepal. Among other acts of violence, Maoist fighters attacked banks in Gorkha District and burned loan documents, fought with police in Rolpa and Rakum Districts, and bombed a soft-drink bottling factory owned by a multinational corporation in Kathmandu (Thapa 2005). In a world where the end of the Cold War had made international communism something of an anachronism, attacks on government personnel and international commercial ventures in the following days took many analysts and policymakers by surprise. The reaction of other observers was one of puzzlement, even bemusement: on the eve of the new millennium, how had a Maoist insurgency broken out in the world's only Hindu kingdom? For those who considered Nepal a mythic, timeless place, it seemed that the troubles of the outside world had finally come to Shangri-La.

By the end of the Nepal Civil War in 2006, at least 14,000 people had had been killed and thousands more injured, displaced, and disappeared. It also dramatically remade Nepal's political

landscape; the monarchy was formally abolished on 28 May, 2008 after the war by Nepal's Constituent Assembly, by which point Maoist parties had become full participants in the government and their goals for social transformation had come to dominate the national agenda (Adhikari 2014). To outside observers ignorant of Nepal's evolving public discourse, the onset of a violent Maoist insurgency and their eventual reintegration into the GoN came as a profound surprise (Hutt and Onta 2016). Yet it is often forgotten that Nepal has been a crossroads of cultures and ideas for centuries, and has long been of the world's most geostrategic counties (Rose 1971). Rumors of Maoist involvement in the 2014 climbing season both spread rapidly and provoked intense reactions, strongly suggesting the existence of internal contradictions within public Everest discourses. The fact that this particular rumor took hold indicates that Nepal's tangled political milieu plays an integral role in determining the structural constraints of the Himalayan adventure travel industry and the narratives that circulate within it. The industry does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by the intersectionality of Maoism's long presence in Nepal, continuing repercussions of global ideological struggles, and contemporary perceptions of Nepal's current precarious political situation and contentious future.

Maoism is a broad term that encompasses a range of political ideologies that have been developed in various places and various historical moments. In the China of Mao Zedong, for whom the philosophy is named, Maoism became a kind of rural revolutionary nationalism loosely drawn from the early Soviet experience. According to Cheek (2013), Chinese Maoism's worldview was

...modern in the sense of teleology and faith in science and technology, internationalist in the sense of an identity of interests among peoples subordinated to the imperial powers of the day, self-confident in the hearts and minds of various revolutionary elites who were sure they had the truth and were competent to save China (101).

In China, Maoism was perceived as a mechanism to achieve both internal economic development and engage with Global North imperial power. By achieving a degree of national economic and political independence, as the Bolsheviks had attempted to do under Lenin and Stalin in the Soviet Union, Maoists in China could attempt to ward off dependency (Cheek 2013).

Chinese Maoism, steered by Mao himself, culminated in the disastrous Cultural Revolution and failed to provide a coherent or effective mechanism for national development. It did, however, provide a template for peoples in Latin America, Africa, and Asia who sought political reorganization and economic development. According to Shah and Pettigrew (2009), Maoists in the developing world believed, like their counterparts in China and in contrast to Marx, that rural peasants rather than the urban proletariat would form the core of a revolutionary force seeking to overthrow the ruling classes. For them, Maoism became an explicitly revolutionary ideology in which popular conflict would usher in sociopolitical transformation and expunge the last vestiges of colonialism and the scourge of class domination.

As a region in post-colonial transition, South Asia became an incubator for Maoist ideology. Santana (2001) and former CPN (M) Prime Minister Bhattarai (2003) argue that Maoism in Nepal was particularly suited to contemporary Nepali ideological warfare precisely because it emphasized the rural struggles of peasants facing severe poverty against their landlords. Protracted agrarian revolution created the possibility for a society organized according to socialist principles and ruled by rebels. Despite the proximity of India and China and their ideological contributions to Nepali Maoism, their most direct historical parallel is Peru's *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path). Scholars such as Nickson (1992) and Mikesell (1993) draw a number of parallels between the development of the Shining Path movement and the rise of Maoism in Nepal. Both Nepal and Peru were agricultural societies traditionally dominated by warrior

polities and had backward, underdeveloped hill regions suffering from ethnic and linguistic discrimination and dominated by lowland political elites. Rapid educational advancement coupled with poor economic growth created a class of disaffected minorities attracted to the prospect of equality and democracy and an end to the political, social, administrative, and military hegemony exercised by high-class groups. Remote and impoverished regions of Peru and Nepal are also two of the world's most popular destinations for mountain tourism; Beyers (2007) observes that the same isolation that made these destinations attractive to adventure tourists has ensured intractable poverty and continued political disenfranchisement, a combination that provided an ideal catalyst for nascent revolutionary movements.

In the wake of Indian independence in 1947, Maoist political activity moved above ground in the north Indian provinces of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, eventually giving rise to the Naxalite movement in the 1960s. In Nepal, Indian independence destabilized the autocratic Rana regime and opened the way for the formation of the country's first political parties. The Communist Party of Nepal (CPN), founded in 1949, provided a focal point for communist organizing in Nepal, though it was banned several times as the monarchy reasserted control and established the Panchayat system (Gellner 2007). Following the Sino-Soviet split in 1965, the party fragmented into a multitude of groups with communist leanings, differentiated by adherence to varying ideologies and the extent to which they sought to work within the Nepali state or violently oppose it to achieve their political goals (Millard 2007).

Amidst unsettled politics worldwide, the 1990 *Janā Andolan* (People's Movement) led to the end of the monarchy-supported Panchayat system in place since 1962 and the creation of a constitutional monarchy. The Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN (UML)], founded in 1991 as a consolidation of several communist groups, emerged as a popular

mainstream communist party, adopting a centrist orientation and winning a minority in the 1994 parliament (Hutt 2004). By contrast, the CPN (M) was founded in secret by a small number of disaffected Maoist leaders from other parties in 1995. Led by its enigmatic leader Prachanda, it was created for the specific purpose of leading an armed uprising against the government (Thapa 2004; Millard 2007). Unrecognized by Nepal's electoral commission, the CPN (M) tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with the slow pace of democratization and foreign dependency by denouncing "imperialist" and "expansionist" powers such as the United States and India, generating much popular support for the Maoist insurgency it directed (Adhikari 2014).

The emergence and rise to power of Maoist parties represented a defeat for anticommunist policymakers in the United States, who had fought to suppress growing Maoist undercurrents within it since the dawn of the Cold War. According to Shrestha (1991), as communism made significant gains in East and Southeast Asia Nepal became seen as key domino in its march towards South Asia. A critical piece in Truman's containment strategy, Nepal received its first 22,000 rupees of foreign aid in 1951 (Rose 1971), and the first cohort of Peace Corps volunteers arrived in 1962 as part of Kennedy's anticommunist outreach to the developing world (Shrestha 1991). Khadka (2000, 81) notes that the goals of this outreach in Nepal was to help the country maintain its independence and neutrality, support Nepal's development efforts to become a modernized and developed economy, and further Nepal's "Western orientation." With Nepal today a recipient of billions of dollars in foreign aid and the home of the one of the Peace Corps' longest-running missions, this anticommunist agenda firmly established Global North interests in Nepal. It also firmly connected Nepal to the Global North's decades-long preoccupation with international communism and to longstanding distrust of China, despite China explicitly disassociating itself from the movement (Banerjee 2002). These

policies ultimately failed to halt the spread of Maoism in Nepal but created a legacy of distrust, even fear, that Nepal was at risk of turning or had already turned red.

Fear of a Red Shangri-La may have provoked popular unease, but the Maoist insurgency became geopolitically expedient for a new era in after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. On 23 November, 2001, Maoist fighters attacked Royal Nepalese Army soldiers in Dang, killing 14 soldiers and 23 policemen, and two days later killed 33 police, soldiers, and government officials in Solukhumbu. In response to the unprecedented violence, King Gyanendra declared a State of Emergency on 26 November and promulgated the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Control and Punishment) Ordinance. This legislation officially branded Maoist insurgents as “terrorists” and deployed the Royal Nepalese Army against them (Hutt 2004). In January 2002 Nepal’s Maoist insurgents earned the Specially Designated Global Terrorist and Terrorist Exclusion List tags from U.S. Department of State, joining such militant groups as the Taliban and Al-Qaeda (Banerjee 2002; Adams 2005; Miklian 2008).

Initially, the Nepal Civil War did little to slow tourist arrivals in the country. No tourists were killed or kidnapped during the conflict and were largely ignored by the Maoists, who preferred to target military and police personnel, rival politicians, and “class enemies” (Gellner 2007). In her ethnography of tourism at the height of the war, Hepburn (2012) notes that tourism visitation actually continued to increase until the State of Emergency was declared. While the intensification of the war led to a precipitous drop in tourism, those tourists that remained were generally ignorant of the conflict’s seriousness and the practical strain it imposed on Nepali society. Rather, those who encountered military personnel or Maoists tended to describe their experience as benign or at most only somewhat upsetting. Others openly relished the lack of tourists, the deep discounts in hospitality services, and showed off the “Maoist visas” they had

obtained by paying “donations” to rebels in trekking areas with excitement. While tourists were aware of the conflict, they felt they had little to fear.

Despite this perception, traveling during this period was not actually without risk for trekkers and mountaineers, nor were all travelers so carefree. Campbell (2006) describes a disconnect between the statements of the Maoists pledging safe passage for foreigners with those denouncing foreign influence and imperialism in Nepal, of which the adventure travel industry was a prominent vehicle. This rhetoric created the impression that tourists and tourism were not really wanted in Nepal, despite seeming assurances and inducements to the contrary. Indeed, that year two Russian mountaineers were injured when a grenade was thrown into their vehicle on the road to Jiri after their expedition was mistaken by Maoist insurgents for a government convoy. Even areas of Solukhumbu, at the foot of Everest, briefly came under the control of rebels who solicited “donations” on the trail between Lukla and Namche Bazaar. Because they ventured into the rural, remote areas where the Maoists exerted the most political control where casual travelers such as Hepburn’s interviewees would not venture, it is unsurprising that interactions between adventure travelers and the Maoists were both more frequent and more contentious.

Further, both Gellner (2007) and Hepburn (2012) argue that disguise and obfuscation were common tactics during the conflict, making it difficult to definitively identify the perpetrators of criminal or legally dubious activities. Gellner reports several instances where robbers posing as Maoists held up tourist busses and made off with money and valuables, while Hepburn describes the difficulty that tourists had in telling the difference between genuine Maoists or extortionists claiming to be Maoists soliciting “donations” on trekking trails. Despite repeated assurances of safety the conflict created an environment of uncertainty and fear where enemies – both real and imagined – could be encountered anywhere at any time.

At face value the rumors of Maoist involvement in 2014 Everest climbing season seem absurd, yet they spread rapidly and seem to be widely believed. Far from being absurd, these rumors spread precisely because they seemed believable to many, or at least a critical mass, of people at Base Camp. They went viral in part because they emerged in the wake of a traumatic event where information was scarce and because they were “dread rumors” that tapped into deeply-held but little-acknowledged anxieties held by many foreigners about Nepal. The vision of the unspoiled remote Himalaya many hoped to find contrasted sharply with their perception that Nepal was the kind of inherently chaotic and disordered place that, despite its idyllic image and reputation, could plausibly harbor subversive actors like communist insurgents or international terrorists. Their presence at a given time or place, whether real or perceived, opened the possibility that they had a hand in otherwise innocuous or ambiguous events. Though the period of armed conflict may have passed the memories of a not-so-distant past where fear, uncertainty, and misrepresentation was common remain relatively fresh.

The real incongruity in all this is not rumors of Maoists on Everest. Instead, it is that these perceptions of Nepal’s Maoists coexist alongside more traditional narratives of Himalayan supermen and the mythic accomplishment of Himalayan mountaineering. These starkly different and perhaps simultaneously plausible interpretations of what really goes on in the remote Himalaya demand a reconciliation. The events of 2014 created a rupture in the unproblematic public Everest discourse that revealed many of the slippery contradictions left unaddressed by popular narratives. While rumors of Maoist involvement do not reveal the Everest’s hidden discourses themselves, they encapsulated several major themes that characterize such an account – the inherent disorder of the developing world, fear of international communism and terrorism, and misguided rebellion among indigenous people against supposed imperialist projects – in an

efficient and cogent manner. In this way, the rumors that emerged represented a revealing, perhaps truer portrait of the current Everest gestalt and the superficiality, limitations, and even vulnerability of the constructed public discourse surrounding Everest.

Everest: From Public Discourses to Hidden Transcripts

In the previous three sections, I have explored the mechanisms and functions of rumor, adopted Scott's theory of transcripts with some critiques as a methodological frame, and examined the history of Maoism in Nepal and some of the perceptions surrounding it. However, I have yet to substantively unpack the rich collection of discourses surrounding Everest itself. I argue that the prevailing discourses about Everest tend to emphasize the mythic and romantic dimensions of Himalayan mountaineering, but underemphasize the complexity and contradictions of the social, cultural, and especially political realities that actually characterize life on Everest and the everyday function and structure of the Everest industry.

Understanding how rumors of Maoist involvement on Everest reflects hidden aspects of popular discourses requires unpacking of these narratives. To do this, I adopt the particular analytical frame of sociologist Susan Birrell (2007). Rather than offer a history of Everest exploration or celebrate mountaineering exploits, she attempts to trace the use of Everest as a cultural icon over the course of the twentieth century by positioning Everest itself as a text and focusing on the narratives and representations about it that are generated in the popular media. She looks specifically at three events (the disappearance of British mountaineers George Malloy and Andrew Irvine in 1922, the first successful summit by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, and the 1996 disaster made famous by Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*) to theorize the ways in which "Everest has been appropriated to carry ideological messages that empower some

views and values while dismissing or obscuring others” (3). These narratives are not discrete; intertextual relationships constitute broader Everest discourses. Though the specific ways in which these events are (re)framed and (re)produced in popular discussions – or the process of narrativization – Birrell argues that Everest has become as an enduring international symbol whose constructed mythic history “constitute[s] a dominant and preferred reading...that has been so thoroughly naturalized that it is rarely critical” (3).

Birrell’s method of textual analysis is a kind of linguistic analysis that requires a specific methodological practice to be applied to a particular subject. Two sets of texts are in fact examined: a subject constructed metaphorically as a text (in this case, Everest) and textual sources that form the basis for historical analysis. Both texts can then be “read” using literary methods of analysis. In order for these texts to be “read,” a particular incident or actor must be identified so that they can analyzed, in this case for exploring the specific relations of power they articulate. McDonald and Birrell (1999) elaborate on this process:

What were once regarded as individuals, celebrities, or even heroes [or events] become repositories for political narratives, and our task as cultural critics is not to search for the facts of their lives but to search for the ways in which those “facts” are constructed, framed, foregrounded, obscured, and forgotten. Such an analytical strategy displaces the notion of privileged access to “truth,” relocating it...in a complex interrelationship of the producer of the text and the reader of text rather than the text itself (292).

In this way, textual analysis becomes framed as a search for dominant, preferred, and resistant meanings surrounding a particular subject and becomes a mechanism for accessing dynamic processes of sense-making grounded in specific historical and cultural context from which it is inseparable. Analyzing why particular narratives are constructed in specific ways, whose interests are served by perpetuating such narratives, and what sort of discursive work narratives are intended to accomplish depends on linking multiple texts into an encompassing narrative.

The discourse of Everest itself is built on an idiosyncratic relationship between philosophy, place and people. Mazzolini (2010) argues that “discourse about Mount Everest distills material and ideological relations between humans, technology, identities, and the Earth with unique intensity” (1) because the mountain is seen as a place where broader patterns of human behavior and a web of intersectionalities are contested in microcosm. Sociologists, anthropologists, and geographers who have contributed to Everest literature have identified several recurring themes woven throughout popular Everest discourses, and this brief introduction to the most significant of these prefaces subsequent discussion and analysis.

By analyzing the historical development of the Himalayan adventure travel industry, a number of scholars have attempted to document the shifting philosophical underpinnings of Himalayan mountaineering. Bayers (2003) and Isserman and Weaver (2008) focus on Himalayan mountaineering’s expeditionary period, which lasted from the 1920s through the 1970s. In this period of siege tactics and national expeditions ranging from the large to the massive, mountaineers climbed for national pride, their motivations for climbing shaped by notions of heroic masculinity underpinned by broader notions of nationalism and imperialism. Though this was particularly the case prior to the Second World War, the golden age of Himalayan mountaineering in the 1950s and 1960s coincided with colonialism’s waning days.

Yet these mythic meanings were not the same in every nation: Hansen’s (2000) analysis of the first ascent of Everest in 1953 notes that the narratives of Hillary and Norgay’s triumph was quickly appropriated in different ways by the people of Nepal, India, Britain, and New Zealand. With the “confetti of empire” (311) still very much visible in 1953 as four nations attempted to define their identities in the postwar era, seemingly simple questions took on real and contentious political significance. Norgay was a particularly versatile figure; despite his

reluctance to define himself as anything but an ordinary man he could be Commonwealth, Indian, Nepali, Tibetan, Sherpa, or a CPN comrade for whoever it was politically expedient. From the beginning, Everest was seen as a place where nations and peoples could plant literal and metaphorical flags and define themselves against the challenge of Everest, or else have these meanings defined for them by others. In her analysis of Chile's Aconcagua, Logan (2006, 166) notes that most international climbing expeditions function merely "as a forum for individual and expeditionary self-reflection and for national, and especially North-South, identity politics to be played out." A similar phenomenon seems to be at work in Everest's discursive project.

During the period of transition between the expeditionary period and the current commercial period in the 1970s and 1980s, light and fast alpine-style climbing became popular among those who rebelled against Himalayan mountaineering's culture of discipline and excess. Nevertheless, these countercultural climbers were similarly selfish, seeking transcendent experiences on their own terms (Ortner 1999). The commercial period, which began in the late 1980s, ushered in what Isserman and Weaver (2008) dub the "age of extremes." Mountaineering became intensely individualistic, with teams composed primarily of strangers with varying motivations climbing together only for convenience. Salisbury and Hawley (2007) comment on the proliferation of people pursuing records both benign like "being the first ethnic "x", the oldest or youngest "y", or overcoming obstacle "z"" (6) to those bordering on the dangerous and absurd like summit bivouacs and wingsuit descents. Whereas George Malloy famously declared that his reason for climbing Everest was aspirational – "Because it is there" – the motivation for climbing has since become an identity value: "Because I'm here" (Ortner 1999, 288).

The commercial period has been defined by intense discussions, mostly in the popular media, about the extent to which these recent trends toward individualism and commercialization

has caused or contributed to recent well-publicized incidents and disasters. Significant too has been the discussion about interactions between humans and technology, and how the Everest industry increasingly relies on technical innovations to facilitate social processes, expand capacity, and push limits (Frohlick 2000). The growing trend toward technicalization reflects a broader, perhaps hazardous reliance on technology to solve social problems whose causes are not well understood (Lenk 2003). Mazzolini (2010) notes that proliferation of such moral judgments and ideological assessments have only increased Everest's cultural status rather than doing anything to diminish it. Outside observers and longtime climbers might long for a time when Everest did not seem so complicated, but in reality Everest climbing has always been contested and characterized, at least in the most critical sense, by futility, frivolity, excess, waste, recklessness, and endless obsession with having a more authentic experience than everyone else.

The immense physical space of Everest and the Himalaya backdrop this Global North quest for heroic adventure and self-definition. Long rumored to be the location of the mythical kingdom of Shangri-La, the stunning natural landscapes of the Himalaya imbues pursuits like trekking and climbing a strong sense of romanticism. The popular archetype of the Himalaya as a remote and exotic place is presented in its earliest and most famous form in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933), which depicted a British diplomat who found peace and purpose in a Tibetan lamasery on the eve of world war (Bishop 1989). According to Des Chene (2007, 213), portrayals of the remote Himalaya as a place removed from time and disconnected from the outside world have been perpetuated for decades in expedition accounts, popular media coverage, and travel writings and exert an "undeniable conditioning influence" on generations of visitors. The imaginaries of Nepal, the Himalaya, and Everest as places of myth and mystery not only make for good storytelling, but provide the ready makings of a commercial adventure travel

industry. Because remote mountain regions are believed to be some of the last places on Earth that offer authentic physical and cultural experiences, they become attractive destinations to a wide spectrum of cultural tourists and adventure travelers (Nouzeilles 2008).

The people that live in the remote Himalaya are inevitably included in the mythologizing project. Because philosophies of Himalayan mountaineering and depictions of the Himalaya are largely framed through the experiences of outsiders, the perspectives of indigenous people on the ground are largely absent. Indeed, the indigenous people of the Himalaya, generically and universally referred to as “Sherpas,” are characterized as smiling, docile, and peace-loving Buddhists who live in simplicity and poverty isolated from the outside world but are generally not considered to be active participants in either Himalayan life or their own representation. Just as Global North representations romanticize the place of Everest and the Himalaya, indigenous involvement in the Himalayan adventure travel industry are confined to fascination with Himalayan supermen that obscures more troublesome questions of power and privilege.

The extensive scholarship on the Sherpa people helps frame the how this process of representation accomplishes important discursive work. According to Ortner (1989), the name “Sherpa”⁶ originally designated a particular ethnic group who migrated from the Kham region of Tibet around the 1530s and settled primarily in and around the Solukhumbu District at the foot of Everest in Nepal. As Sherpas followed old routes of circular migration to Darjeeling, India to join the labor pool in the 1920s, many sought employment on British mountaineering expeditions. They quickly distinguished themselves by their abilities at high altitude and became valued for their physical strength, stamina, and the apparent ease with which they navigated the

6. The concept of last names as they are used in Global North contexts is foreign to Nepal; the name of the ethnic group to which an individual belongs becomes a default last name. A more precise approximation of the Sherpa/Tibetan name “Sherpa” would be *Sharwa* or *Sherwa*,” meaning “people from the east” in reference to the claimed Sherpa homeland in the Kham region of Tibet.

mountain environment. Accounts from the 1920s through the 1960s highlighted by Ortner enumerated good humor and temperament, generosity, and heroism as desirable intangible traits of the Sherpa, and as well as their level-headedness and supposed impassivity in the face of death which was most often attributed to their Buddhist religious beliefs. By the 1950s, the term “Sherpa” became used to designate any indigenous high altitude worker, and the name shifted from an ethnic designation to an occupational category. This image of the Himalayan superman persists despite the growing involvement of other Himalayan peoples in the industry, with ethnicity and occupation confusingly conflated and poorly differentiated by casual observers. This lack of differentiation obscures important ethnic and demographic distinctions and is only the most obvious example of how perceptions of ethnicity, culture, politics, and narrative color – and constrain – interactions between Global North visitors and Himalayan peoples.

The cultural encounters between indigenous Himalayan peoples and adventure travelers are unique in that representations are shaped by the both the presence of Everest and a circular, recursive dialectic between indigenous peoples and outsiders. Two schools of thought about how such narratives evolved draw on ethnographic fieldwork in the Himalaya and broader analyses of the relationship between identity and the superimposed landscape of adventure travel.

Adams (1996) posits that the foreigners’ representations of Sherpas reflect and embody Global North desires for an imagined “Other” possessing admirable, emulable, and otherwise authentic qualities attractive to outsiders. Sherpas, for their part, see their own identities reflected back at them through the “authentic” representations of Himalayan life generated by tourists, mountaineers, and anthropologists. In doing so, they attempt to make themselves and their culture into what they think that Global North visitors want to see. Through this mimetic process, Sherpa culture as it is perceived by foreigners is essentially an artificial construction built almost

entirely by the discourses circulated among adventure travelers, and in this way Sherpa identity and its authorship is fundamentally linked to tourism, mountaineering, anthropology, and other culture-generating enterprises.

Ortner (1999) expands on this model, accepting the strong influence of Global North visitors and imaginaries in identity formation processes, but arguing that Adams overprivileges their discursive power. Rather, Sherpa identity formation by both Global North actors and Sherpas takes place simultaneously in a complex and unpredictable dialectic. Increasingly, Sherpas work to bend seemingly fixed Global North imaginaries of them to fit their own ends, harnessing its power to (re)discover and reclaim neglected identities, a classic phenomenon in ethnic tourism. Indeed, Fisher (1990, 137) argues that “Sherpas are so massively reinforced at every point for being Sherpas that they have every reason not only to “stay” Sherpa but even flaunt their Sherpahood.” The advantages of the Sherpa do not go unnoticed by other Himalayan peoples; their growing prestige has sparked a “Sherpaization” process where the Sherpa are emulated and even impersonated by members of other ethnic groups like the Tamang, another ethnically Tibetan people. As in other adventure tourism interactions around the world, there is evidently tangible benefit to people on the ground in becoming who outsiders expect to meet.

Fisher, Adams, and Ortner all argue that popular representations of the Sherpa neglect to portray Himalayan peoples with any sense of dimensionality. Nouzeilles (2008) expands on MacCannell’s (1976) theory of tourism by arguing that indigenous peoples become essential but largely static feature of adventures travel landscapes because they embody a timeless sense of place authenticity for adventure travelers. Nowhere else are a region’s indigenous peoples more integral to an adventure travel landscape as they are in the Himalaya but less understood; as Thompson (1983) puts it bluntly and colorfully, “The Sherpa still remains a Cheshire cat of

mountaineering literature: little more than a big smile at the opposite end of the arm to the Sahib's [foreigner's] pre-dawn mug of tea" (301). In an age where mountaineering is both individualistic and commercialized, the lack of substantive cross-cultural exchange, hindered by cultural and linguistic barriers, leads to a pervasive incuriousness and misunderstanding among both Himalayan peoples and foreigners about each other's lives, motives, and motivations. Thomson notes that the basic assumption is that foreigners climb Everest because it is there, and the Sherpa climb it for money because they are poor and uneducated and have few other options. If the Sherpa are indeed concerned only with economics, then they become simply an economic input in the Everest machine. They become reduced to a mere instrument to be employed by others in the pursuit of achievement, presupposing any sort of agency.

Birrell (2007), considers this seemingly callous calculus the basis for claims that the indigenous people of the Himalaya are abused or otherwise taken advantage of in the Himalayan adventure travel industry. According to Schaffer (2013), there is little agreement, at least among foreign guides and members, about whether their continued employment in the industry is inherently exploitative or not or whether it is entirely voluntary for many of its participants. In many respects the pendulum has swung the other way in recent years; contemporary depictions tend to publicize efforts by the Sherpa and others to break out of traditional roles and stereotypes. Ironically but unsurprisingly, this only reinforces the notion that indigenous peoples are fundamentally misunderstood, structurally constrained, and inherently malleable.

Though they differ in their interpretations, the analyses of both Adams and Ortner suggest that the development of narratives surrounding people, place, and meaning are jointly constructed by both Global North and indigenous actors. It therefore follows that the public discourses surrounding Everest can be considered a transcript according to Scott's definition.

Further, the dominant reading of Everest is premised on a simple binary hierarchy between dominant Global North actors and subordinate indigenous actors. While the reality is rather more complex, the resistant meanings surrounding Everest attached to these subordinate actors represent a hidden transcript in Scott's theoretical model. This dichotomy, along with a clear temporal and thematic rupture provided by the 2014 disaster, means that my analysis of Maoist rumors and the end of the 2014 climbing season lend themselves well to a transcript analysis.

Clearly, one cannot ask directly after hidden transcripts; they are, after all, hidden for a reason. Nevertheless, Scott's transcript theory, with the caveats and critiques presented earlier, provides the theoretical framework for an investigation of public and hidden transcripts and Birrell's intertextual analysis of Everest narratives provides a specific interpretive frame. Though both scholars present methodologies rather than conducting significant analytic work themselves, together their analytic approaches provide a complementary, interlocking framework for a qualitative investigation such as mine. If Everest is to be viewed as a text and its discourses analyzed as transcripts, I must determine which constituent texts I will analyze within Everest's encompassing narrative.

Methodology

To support my assertion that the rumors of Maoist involvement in the end of the 2014 Everest climbing season have revealed features of Everest's hidden transcripts, I conducted primary research between November 2014 and September 2016. This study was approved by the Human Subjects Division of the University of Washington. Through participant observation and interviews, I collected narratives that chronicle life and cultural encounters in the remote Himalaya, providing source material that constituted Everest's text that I could then analyze for

sociocultural patterns in how the industry's structural features and specific events are perceived and depicted by different actors.

From November 2014 to July 2015, I traveled in mountainous areas of Nepal, India and the Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China investigating a number of issues broadly pertaining to the Himalayan adventure travel industry. As a participant observer, I led two expeditions to 6,000-meter trekking peaks in Nepal and served as a mountaineering guide intern on an Everest expedition organized by the outfitter SummitClimb Treks and Expeditions, an international expedition operator with offices in the United Kingdom and the United States. I was also an observer at the annual Khumbu Climbing School in the Khumbu village of Phorche. While experiencing firsthand the logistical and cultural challenges of Himalayan trekking and climbing, I cultivated working relationships with a network of international and Nepali expedition operators, guides, veteran mountaineers, NGO directors and employees, and Himalayan chroniclers, bloggers, and journalists. Although my experiences represented only a small window into the contemporary Himalaya they nevertheless helped to clarify my thinking and revealed avenues for future study, including this investigation.

In August and September 2016, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a number of these key informants, who embody a broad spectrum of national, cultural, and socioeconomic perspectives. The majority of these interviews were conducted in person in the Seattle area of the United States or in the Kathmandu and the Solukhumbu Districts in Nepal, though others were conducted electronically. Additional informants beyond my original list were identified through snowball sampling. I developed a list of questions that covered a broad range of topics and could be customized to fit the backgrounds of individual interviewees, with the aim of eliciting a broad overview of the Himalayan adventure travel industry with a special focus on interpretations of

contemporary events and the lived experiences of individuals within the adventure travel system. Interviews began with questions about the background of interviewees (where they were born, grew up and were educated, what work their parents or other family members did, etc.) and evolved organically from this starting point. Other questions asked about how they became involved in the industry, career information (organizations or outfitters worked for, climbing resumes, notable incidents or accomplishments, illustrative vignettes, etc.), and why they continue to be involved in the industry. I also asked questions about recent events on Everest, including the 2013 brawl and the 2014 and 2015 disasters. Selected interviewees were asked specifically about the rumors of Maoist involvement and the end of 2014 climbing season. These conversations shed light on a variety of interrelated topics, such as social and political life in Khumbu and neighboring regions, the region's development progress and trajectory, and impressions of local and national governance. Such insights helped contextualize my findings and situate them within a larger political and thematic context.

My research methods presented several possible limitations. As a member of the Himalayan mountaineering community with an existing relationship with many of the people I interviewed it was often challenging to separate personal opinions from my research, and my positionality of being a male researcher from the United States allowed me unusual access and ease of movement both geographically and within the industry. Both of these were, and remain, potential sources of bias. The majority of interviewees were native English speakers or spoke English with reasonable proficiency, and most interviews were conducted in English. In a few cases where my interviewees were not proficient English speakers, I relied on the translations of trusted research assistants who had been briefed on background and methods of the investigation.

As the focus of my investigation settled on the events of the 2014 climbing season, I

decided to expand my pool of data beyond my interviews. While firsthand accounts of the Himalayan adventure travel paradigm are helpful in building a holistic picture of the some of its major discursive features, several popular media accounts of the 2014 Everest climbing season – the documentary film *Sherpa* (2015), and long form articles by Arnette (2014b) and Schaffer (2014) – provide a chronology of events, additional eyewitness perspectives, and differing interpretations of the incident’s causes and consequences. Together they provide a focal point and framework around which my other data coalesces. Drawing inspiration from Tsing (2004), I seek to piece together an “ethnography of an event” that parses the global intersectionalities that coalesce around a particular location and event.

As Birrell does, I consider my interview narratives about Himalayan life as individual but integral parts of a collective text that reveals both apparent and hidden readings and reflections of the discourses surrounding Everest. To support my intertextual analysis, I conducted a qualitative, interpretative analysis that unpacks how themes are related to one another and how the background of the speaker account for particular narrative content and the presence or absence of certain themes. By definition, the work of revealing hidden transcripts is dependent upon looking for the hidden subtexts in dominant discursive accounts and analyzing the deeper, multiple, and often unseen meanings of texts. While I treat individual interviews as my units of analysis, I sought to build a holistic narrative in which themes were interwoven throughout multiple texts to form a cohesive, if not coherent, whole.

Anthropological perspectives help position my analysis. Drawing on the methods outlined by Bernard (2006), I conducted a discourse analysis of my interview transcripts and media accounts. Following the example of Willms et al. (1990) and Miles and Huberman (1994), I began with a short list of basic themes derived from review of the literature and my own

previous period of participant observation before I conducted interviews, which was expanded as I conducted interviews and selected media accounts, and expanded again during analysis. Utilizing *in vivo* coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 68), a mixed inductive and deductive analysis, allowed me to refine my thinking over time as themes surfaced organically. I eventually arrived at a final list of themes and subthemes that was both exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

As for the analysis of the texts themselves, I focused attention on uncovering how cultural encounters and interactions between differently-situated actors reflected or embodied conscious or subconscious discursive sociocultural readings. Spradley (1979) emphasizes several key pieces of evidence to search for:

...social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal methods of social control, things that people do in managing impersonal social relationships, methods by which people acquire and maintain achieved and ascribed status, and information about how people solve problems (199-201).

In my analysis, I paid particular attention to interviewees' sociocultural, economic, and political rationalizations and explanations, which I coded and interpreted such as indicative of certain discursive frameworks that shaped expectations. This could then be compared to the interviewee's positionality to determine common themes and beliefs across demographic strata. These accounts could also be compared against the expected public discourse of Everest to see how closely they corresponded to the expected or dominant reading of Everest. Significant or unexpected departure from expected themes became evidence of hidden transcripts.

As well as analyzing the content of interviews, I also examined the manner in which information was presented. All interviews began with general demographic and other introductory questions, but from there the flows of conversations diverged, sometimes quite significantly. Firstly, the order in which certain topics were brought up perhaps reflects conscious or unconscious orderings of information hierarchies and what is relatively more or less

important to the interviewee, though I am aware of the possibility that the presentation of information was influenced by my relationship with the interviewee or in the manner in which I asked certain questions despite my efforts to be consistent. Secondly, I noted themes that were not mentioned or deemphasized by certain people contrary to expectation, or themes that proved particularly difficult to tease out of interviewees. Thirdly, I looked for narrative consistency within and among different interviewees, noting the degree to which different interviewees seemed to follow a common narrative script, instances of contradictory information or apparent cognitive dissonance, or widely varying interpretations of the same event, particularly the 2014 incident. Fourthly and finally, I looked for repetition of themes within and among different interviewees to see how my respondents interacted with and circled through the same network of ideas as they provided accounts or explanations for certain phenomena or events.

Through a holistic analysis of the discourses presented in my interviews grounded in both the theoretical literature and the empirics of my fieldwork experience, I can begin to unpack dominant, preferred, and resistant meanings surrounding Everest and the Himalayan adventure travel industry. Lived experiences and contemporary events becomes a mechanism for accessing dynamic processes of sensemaking grounded in specific historical and cultural context, and by critically examining the spread of rumors on Maoist involvement in the end of the 2014 climbing season, I can interrogate the public discourses surrounding Everest and begin the work of parsing the hidden transcripts revealed by them.

Analysis

Introduction to Analysis

I turn now to my analysis of the 2014 Everest incident. In the following sections, I will

explore the far-reaching causes and consequences of six tragic and contentious days on Everest. In particular, I will unpack the pivotal role that Maoist rumors played in hastening a ragged and acrimonious end to the climbing season and how their discursive power reflects the essential but often hidden structural features of an adventure travel system that orders the social, political, and economic life of the remote Himalaya.

In the first section, I present a chronology of the six days of the 2014 incident, drawing on a collection of popular media accounts and personal interviews with those present on Everest that year. Understanding the precise sequence of events that followed the disaster in the Khumbu Icefall allows me to trace the progression of rumors of Maoist involvement from their inception to when they ended the climbing season. By identifying the moments when these rumors originated and the events that hastened their spread and influence, I can uncover how they reflect specific structural or discursive features of the Everest paradigm, both public and hidden. In turn, this allows for a sustained analysis of why Maoist rumors seemed to succinctly encapsulate the prevailing gestalt of Everest from both Global North and Nepali perspectives despite seeming incongruous and otherwise out of place.

In the second section, I explore the discourses and ideologies that define cultural encounters between foreigners and Nepalis in the Himalayan adventure travel paradigm during the period leading up to the 2014 incident. Much attention is devoted to defining and problematizing the public Everest transcript as I argue that traditional depictions of the remote Himalaya as an enduring Shangri-La is jointly created and maintained by Global North and Nepali actors and ultimately exists to facilitate the profitable Everest industry. Much of the substance of this so-called public Everest consensus is necessarily drawn from Global North transcripts, but the process of recontextualization is shared by both Global North and Nepali

actors. However, I also argue that the Everest consensus is neither universal nor accepted for exactly the same reasons by differently-situated actors and that it is far more complex and multifaceted than Scott's dualistic lens would suggest, portending the existence of multiple and competing hidden Global North and Nepali transcripts.

In the third section, I explore the Everest industry's political economy to explain why Maoists were implicated in the events of 2014. Delving deep into Everest's hidden transcripts, I interrogate a number of discourses regarding Nepal's governance paradigm, democratization, and education. Widely-held perceptions of Nepal's recent political history, the current role of Maoist parties in contemporary Nepali politics, the capability of its government to regulate the Everest industry, and the perceived acceleration of democratization and education as destabilizing social forces. The relative balance of power between the Government of Nepal, political entities, and rank-and-file participants in the Everest industry is seen by international tour operators, guides, and members to determine which of these factions has the agency and ability to control the Everest industry. It also does the discursive work of determining the expected behaviors of these actors; deviation from the expected requires the same dots to be connected in alternate ways. For this reason, certain features of the Everest consensus were repurposed in the service of the very different theory of Maoist rumors.

In the fourth and final section, I turn to the sociocultural genesis of Maoist rumors. Examining Nepal's recent political history vis-à-vis specific events in 2014 explains why Maoists and their discursive associations were the particular actors implicated, but it does not explain the underlying structural conditions that allowed Maoist rumors to take hold. To do this, I delve deeper into how technicalization – increased focus and dependence on technical innovations to facilitate social processes in the commercial period – of the Everest industry has

created a set of contested technical institutions and processes. Technicalization is a relational practice in the sense that it alters preexisting social relationships and hierarchies with largely unpredictable consequences. Recent innovations in the commercialized Everest paradigm such as the predominance of standard routes and fixed lines, the rise of Nepali outfitters and increasing professionalization, and increased demands on high altitude labor have created fundamentally differing realities and perceptions of what the Everest paradigm is and its practical effects on ordinary actors between differently-situated actors on the ground. The vastly differing experiences of high altitude workers and foreign commercial climbers led to starkly different reactions to the 2014 incident, ones that ultimately revealed the ideological contradictions of the Everest consensus that could no longer be ignored and required rationalization.

Overview of the 2014 Incident

This section pieces together a chronology of the 2014 disaster and its aftermath, relying on several secondary accounts. The most prominent of these is the documentary film *Sherpa* (2015), which follows the 2014 Himalayan Experience (Himex) team led by owner/operator Russell Brice and his *sirdār*⁷ Phurba Tashi Sherpa who was attempting to reach the summit for a record 22nd time. Comprehensive accounts written by Arnette (2014b) and Schaffer (2014) help to fill narrative gaps, as do interviews with guides, members, and others who were present personally on Everest that year.

By 18 April, 2014, the spring Everest season was well underway. In March, HAWs led by the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee's (SPCC) team of Icefall Doctors had

7. The term *sirdār* refers to the senior-most member of the Nepali staff on an expedition who oversees HAWs and others and liaises directly with the expedition's guides. The term is derived from the Hindi word *sardār*, meaning "leader."

established the route from Base Camp to Camp II, laying dozens of ladders and thousands of meters of fixed lines through shifting labyrinth of the Khumbu Icefall. With 38 teams on the mountain, hundreds of expedition support staff ferried supplies to the upper mountain to establishing higher camps in preparation for summit bids during the good days of May. Base Camp had become a hive of activity as it had every year, growing into a city hosting thousands of guides, members, support staff, NGO personnel, officials, and curious onlookers.

At about 6:30 AM, over a hundred HAWs were ascending the Khumbu Icefall when a massive serac weighing an estimated 14,000 tons calved from the steep slopes above it. Sixteen HAWs – thirteen Sherpas, one Gurung, one Tamang, and one Chhetri – were killed, buried by the falling blocks of ice or swept away by the concussive blast. Nine others were injured, three of them seriously. The serac fall was witnessed by numerous bystanders at Base Camp. Almost immediately radios at Base Camp crackled to life and lines of communication quickly became overwhelmed as parties in the Icefall radioed for help and teams around the mountain tried to find out which teams were involved. International and Nepali guides immediately mounted a rescue, while those on the mountain tended to the wounded. At 10:10 AM the first rescue helicopter reached the site and evacuations began. By 11:00 AM all of the wounded had been evacuated and efforts turned to body recovery, which was suspended at 2:10 PM with three bodies left unrecovered. Despite initial confusion, it quickly became evident that the deadliest disaster in the history of Everest and Himalayan mountaineering was unfolding.

Schaffer (2014) reports that on the afternoon of April 19, the next day, an unspecified number of guides and *sirdārs* met at the SPCC camp for the purpose of giving statements to government officials regarding their deceased staff members. The mood was depressed with the general feeling that everyone on the mountain needed to go home. While people were free to

make their own choices, most intended to tell their staff that the climbing season was finished and inform their expedition operators of their decision at a meeting the following morning.

On the morning of 20 April, Schaffer reports that a larger meeting of 21 people was held in the SPCC tent with government officials. In the interim between the meetings the GoN had announced that it would pay roughly US\$400 to the families of those killed, an amount seen as insultingly low, fueling anger among HAWs. The attendees were primarily influential Nepali guides and *sirdārs*, including Lakpa Rita Sherpa and Dawa Steven, along with several First World guides including Brice, David Hahn, Tim Rippel, and Greg Vernovage. According to Schaffer accounts differed on the tone of the meeting; Lakpa Rita recalled that “the Sherpas were angry but peaceful” and while Brice claimed that a brawl nearly broke out among the officials and the “fired-up Sherpas.” The meeting took a turn when Pasang Bhote, a non-Sherpa expedition operator from the Manaslu region, presented a 13-point charter to the officials, including such demands as a doubling of the death and accident insurance requirement, a disability insurance requirement, a funeral stipend, an education fund paid for by Everest royalties, a plot of land in Kathmandu to build a memorial, and the creation of a national holiday on April 18 in recognition of 2014 as a *lo nak* (black year). It also stipulated that no team should be prevented from climbing, an important assurance to the guides present.

Schaffer reports that nearly everyone present inside the tent signed the charter, though he does not state if the Global North guides also signed. Outside, several hundred people had gathered to hear the result of the meeting, mostly HAWs and a few international guides. Bhote emerged from the tent and read out the charter, which was translated into English by another guide, Sumit Joshi. *Sherpa* captured the speech Bhote delivered next criticizing the government:

The government is supposed to work for the welfare of its citizens, but they just give us false hope...The government is only concerned with money...Royalties

are collected every year. Where are they going? Do any of us know?

Emboldened by the positive response from the crowd, another person got up and began to cast blame elsewhere:

If company owners don't pressure the government to uphold our rights, we will... Because of this meeting, some expedition leaders might need to do some soul-searching...Sherpas deserve greater respect. Without Sherpas on the mountain, there is no Nepal.

This statement, along with similar sentiments, was interpreted as a veiled threat against Global North expedition operators, guides, and members. The tension in the crowd increased as a HAW eulogized his fallen comrades, with an implicit call for HAWs to not continue climbing:

The route has become a graveyard. Let's respect our brave dead friends by keeping that in mind. How could we walk over their bodies?

Acceding to Joshi, per Schaffer, at this point Bhote asked the crowd "Do you want to continue or not continue?" and the members of the crowd began shouting "Yeah, we don't want to continue!" As many foreigners and Nepalis filmed the proceedings on their cell phones, members of the crowd pumped their fists, chanting "We must respect them."

274 HAWs eventually signed the document, which was presented to the MCTCA by the Nepal Mountaineering Association. The apparent call for a strike seemed to directly contradict the agreement that no one would be prevented from climbing, but the assertion was technically valid in the sense that while no expedition would be prevented from climbing, there was no requirement that support staff be made to support expeditions. Global North members could not understand the content of the meeting as most of the subsequent speeches were left untranslated, but they were taken aback by the ominous appearance of the gathering, appearing to one American member as a "Black Panther rally." Sensing the unrest in Base Camp members on more than one team packed their bags, ready to make a swift getaway if things got out of hand.

Amidst this tense atmosphere, the first suggestions of Maoist involvement surfaced on 21 April. One of the HAWs killed, Dorjee Khatri, was the vice president of the Union of Trekking Travels Rafting Workers Nepal, an influential adventure travel union, and a member of the CPN (UML). Schaffer reported his body, draped in the CPN (UML) flag, was carried through the streets of Kathmandu in a memorial procession along with those of seven other fallen HAWs, and his memorial was attended by former CPN (UML) Prime Minister of Nepal Madhav Kumar Nepal. Images of party members at Khatri's CPN (UML) funeral circulated at Base Camp, where interviewees reported the narrative that began to circulate was essentially that Maoist Sherpa were protesting in the streets of Kathmandu. Pasang Bhote, a prominent voice among the HAWs at Base Camp had worked for Khatri for three seasons and was a close companion of his. A narrative linking Maoist individuals and politics to the political unrest on Everest soon developed from the muddy intersectionalities of ethnicity, politics, and mountaineering.

This interpretation was problematic because Khatri was neither a Maoist nor a Sherpa. The CPN (UML) is a relatively centrist, mainstream communist party, but in this narrative the party and its politics became conflated with the revolutionary politics of the CPN (M) simply because both parties happened to espouse Maoist ideologies. Khatri was not a Sherpa, nor even a *janajāti*; he belonged to the Chhetri (Kshatriya) caste, who along with the Baun (Brahmin) caste has traditionally dominated the upper echelons of Nepali government, military, and business. The participation of high-caste individuals in the adventure travel industry is relatively uncommon, which remains dominated by the so-called *janajāti* castes like the Sherpa, Gurung, Tamang, and others. Pasang Bhote was not a Sherpa either, though he was a *janajāti* of Tibetan ancestry. The fact that Khatri and Bhote were both seen to be associated with the militant Maoism of the CPN (M) and that they represented or were representative of the Sherpa people in

some way indicates these subtle distinctions were not appreciated by casual observers, who connected the dots in a way that was inaccurate but nevertheless seemed to make sense to them.

While these developments were unnerving, events came to a head on 22 April. With tension growing, a memorial puja for the fallen HAWs was held at Base Camp which was attended to 400 to 500 people. The eulogies to the dead quickly took on a political character, with one mourner declaring “We should cancel this year, and in this we should unite.” According to eyewitnesses the volatile atmosphere soon reached a boiling point, and was here that the first threats of violence were allegedly made. Schaffer, along with both Global North and Nepali guides and members I interviewed, claim that someone in the crowd shouted something to effect of “If anybody goes up, we might break their legs with an ice ax!” Few who heard the threat personally believed it was serious, but word quickly began to circulate that striking workers or political activists were not afraid to use violence to enforce a climbing moratorium.

From there, the situation at Base Camp rapidly devolved. Various additional threats began to circulate in short succession; Schaffer reports that Vernovage and his *sirdār* Ang Jangbu heard someone say that if climbing continued, the Kathmandu offices and homes of local operators would be burned. Arnette claims that unspecified “credible threats” were made against HAWs and communication cables for several Global North outfitters were cut, though this was not corroborated elsewhere. According to several interviewees, threats were also directed at the Icefall Doctors repairing the route. It is interesting to note that threats seemed to be directed not at Global North companies, guides, or members, but at Nepali actors or no one in particular.

Multiple interviewees, both Global North and Nepali mountaineers, connected rumors of violence to Maoist sympathizers they claim to have encountered at Base Camp. While descriptions differed in minor details, all agreed that number of alleged Maoists was small,

perhaps no more than four or five individuals. They are said to have arrived at Base Camp after the disaster, possibly from Kathmandu and possibly with political motivations, and that they did not appear to be mountaineers. Rather, they appeared conspicuously well-dressed, sporting designer sunglasses and brand-new climbing gear. At least some of them spoke English proficiently, allowing them to speak directly to foreigners without using local translators. Accounts differ as to what they actually did; one interviewee claimed that these people explicitly identified themselves as Maoists and made threats, while others simply noticed people in Base Camp that seemed out of place and only later connected these shadowy figures to the Maoists. The existence of these people, and if they were indeed Maoists, is impossible to verify.

With foreign mountaineers on alert after events in Kathmandu and in the Khumbu, and Nepalis trying to salvage the climbing season and quell dissent, threats were quickly attributed to these alleged Maoist sympathizers. Violent threats and instigators with unknown purpose became ideal fodder for dread rumors, and the series of events – connection with a political ideology known for labor activism and using intimidation to achieve political goals coupled with public and outwardly threatening popular political agitation – seemed to implicate the Maoists. This characterization tapped into a sense-making need to hold someone or something responsible for such a consequential event in an information environment where misreporting, misinformation, and mischaracterization were rampant. Fueled by speculation and hearsay, these rumors were amplified by the Base Camp echo chamber. As one American NGO worker succinctly put it, “Things get taken out of context when you have 1,500 people hearing different things.”

In the subsequent days, the Everest season came to a ragged end. By 23 April, the conversation shifted to how various parties could extricate themselves from the chaotic situation. Many hoped that MCTCA Minister Acharya would take some decisive action, either to officially

close the mountain as the HAWs demanded, or hear it proclaimed open for business as Global North guides and members sought. Instead, the minister and his entourage were relentlessly heckled as they appealed for calm and declared people were free to make their own choices. Both parties left disappointed, but the Minister's failure to make an authoritative statement that the mountain was open meant that the HAWs had won by default. International media began reporting that Everest was closed due to by a boycott by striking HAWs and such reports made their way back to Base Camp and contributed to the perception that the season was finished. Several Nepali guides I interviewed went camp-to-camp at Base Camp in a last-ditch effort to reassure members and search for the supposed instigators. But their efforts were too little, too late; fearing their staff was unacceptable danger major Global North expedition operators began cancelling their expeditions. Though the government clarified that the mountain was open and several successful summit attempts were mounted later, political upheaval culminating in Maoist rumors led to the de facto end of the 2014 Everest climbing season.

On its face, the role these rumors in ending the 2014 Everest season seem relatively straightforward: Khatri's Maoist affiliation and his posthumous connection to politicized labor demands, along with the emergence of violent threats and alleged Maoist sympathizers at around the same time seem simple. However, this explanation is overly simplistic. First, it fails to account for the multifaceted nature of political unrest at Base Camp. In a sense, the 2014 incident was not about Maoists at all and instead the confluence of a labor struggle seizing a particular historical moment colliding with the economic aspirations of Nepali institutions and individuals, the summit aspirations of Global North members, and the sociocultural expectations by many Global North expedition operators that climbing would resume. In this interpretation, the Maoist connection is tenuous at best, possible only because of misunderstandings, incomplete

information, and inappropriate conflations and associations.

Second, it fails to explain why Maoists were seemingly implicated so quickly and universally. The opinion that Maoists played some part in events is widely held even among expedition operators, guides, members, and staff not personally present in 2014. Many adopted this view after viewing cell phone video, hearing accounts from friends and colleagues and deeming them believable, or felt that Maoist involvement was probable or at least plausible given the way events unfolded against the backdrop of Nepal's fractious political climate. In any case, these narratives continue to circulate more than two years after the event itself, ensuring a lasting place in Everest lore despite their seeming incompatibility with the popular perception of Everest as a Himalayan Shangri-La. What then accounts for their enduring discursive power?

In the subsequent sections, I will conduct an analysis of Everest's public and private transcripts. To define and delineate the public transcript of Everest, I will explore the discursive underpinnings of the Everest industry from both popular Global North and Nepali perspectives that have developed over the past century of Himalayan mountaineering. This discussion of the ways in which this jointly-constructed worldview conceals differing perceptions and ideologies of what the industry is and what it means to its different participants prefaces my exploration of the multiple hidden transcripts that have emerged in opposition to it from both political economy and sociocultural perspectives. Ultimately, this transcript analysis will allow me to explore how rumors of Maoist involvement are fundamentally rooted in, and highly revealing of, Everest's dissident private transcripts.

Himalayan Encounters: Defining the Public Everest Consensus

The Himalayan adventure travel paradigm is built on a complex web of social relations

that converge on Everest. Situated in the borderlands between South, East, and Inner Asia, the remote Himalaya has been defined by cultural encounters for centuries. The era of commercial mountaineering is no different; an amorphous and world-spanning web of organizations and individuals has enabled this massive industry to flourish in recent decades. On its face the industry appears immensely successful in any objective sense, experiencing continual growth and expansion in recent decades. Built on a carefully-constructed compromise among the industry's participants, it has largely proved resilient against the effects of continual incidents and disasters. The foundation for this compromise is not well understood, but latent frictions punctuated by periodic outbursts suggest that the ideological foundations of the Everest industry are fundamentally contentious and contested, and that the sociopolitical compromises that allow the system to function are not nearly as sound as they might appear.

Everest is a cosmopolitan place that, as Mazzolini (2010) notes, distills social, cultural, political, and economic debates and intersectionalities with unusual ferocity. The mythic power of Everest, combined with the lucrative commodification of adventure in the commercial era, mean that the stakes are high and incentivizes individual actors and factions to pursue objectives in direct competition with other individuals and factions. This competition, combined with cultural barriers and shifting patterns of social relations, creates numerous opportunities for conflict and misunderstanding. Although small incidents and minor acts of rebellion have occurred with some regularity since the first expeditions in the 1920s, most of these episodes have been isolated and minor (Ortner 1999). The 2014 incident marked the first time political agitation led to an end to Everest climbing. As such, it is important to understand why this specific event catalyzed a volatile mix of narratives in such a way that it created instant conflict, and why rumors of Maoist involvement seemed to capture the prevailing gestalt so precisely.

In this first section, I will discuss some of the most influential narratives that comprise the jointly-constructed public transcript of Everest that backdrop the 2014 incident. This public narrative, encompassing the contributions of both foreigners and the indigenous peoples of the Himalaya, is dedicated to promoting Nepal and the Himalaya as an attractive adventure travel destination. This account necessarily focuses on Global North transcripts and how they are engaged with by both Global North and Nepali actors in a circular dialectic. However, the gaps and oversights of this transcript – both intentional and unintended – proved ripe for exploitation by dissident opinions and provided the basis for rumors of Maoist involvement in the 2014 incident that encapsulated Global North and Nepali hidden transcripts of Everest.

The Nepal Himalaya is an immense physical space that invites even bigger projects of myth-making. From its earliest days, the sport of mountaineering has traditionally been depicted in the Global North as a kind of heroic enterprise, an adventure undertaken by bold and fearless individuals seeking fulfillment in challenge and the chance to confront objective hazards and emerge unscathed. Famous mountaineers like Hillary, Norgay, Whittaker, Messner, and Viesteurs became widely admired by contemporary climbers and enshrined as key characters in the Everest narrative because they embodied strength, determination, accomplishment, and contempt for discomfort and danger. Others like Mallory and Irvine are remembered as tragic heroes, gentleman explorers who perished in their valiant pursuit of a worthy objective. For many, especially adventure tourists and commercial climbers, these pioneering mountaineers are revered for “conquering” Everest. That they brought glory to their countries and flew their flags from the top of the world in the process solidified their enduring fame within national, literary, and historic narratives. As Ortner (1999), Logan (2006), and other scholars note, mountaineering in general, and Everest climbing specifically, was, and remains, widely regarded as a heroic,

masculine, and imperial discipline.

The romanticism of Himalayan mountaineering is strongly enhanced by its supposed remoteness, exoticism, and mythic connection to Shangri-La. The representation of the remote Himalaya as a place removed from time and disconnected from the outside world creates a vast, empty, and physically and culturally authentic adventure travel landscape. Nearly all of the features on Everest itself were named for and by foreign mountaineers: the Hillary Step, the Hornbrien Couloir, the Chinese Ladder. While latter-day explorers are unlikely to have their names inscribed on the physical landscape of the Himalaya, they imagine in some sense that they too can leave some enduring mark through their mere presence in a mythic place that can be lethal but nevertheless dispenses glory and good fortune. From the busy streets of Kathmandu to the remote Himalaya, Nepal is seen as an abode of energy, chaos, and endless possibility, a place starkly different from the developed world where normal rules do not apply and that retains some measure of primal, seductive danger.

In his exploration of Shangri-La, Bishop (1989, 19) argues that such imaginaries constitute not an abstraction but a sensual reality and not a series of disembodied ideas but a complex world of images. They are a poor facsimile of reality that does not come close to capturing the full spectrum of social, cultural, and political life in the remote Himalaya and obscure important ethnic and demographic distinctions, but such technicalities little concern adventure travelers who conceive of the Himalayan only in rough strokes. Per Des Chene (2007), the idyllic images of the Himalaya as a kind of Shangri-La have been relentlessly reinforced in expedition accounts, literature, travel advertisements, and other popular media for over a century, to the point where such depictions are not only expected but practically automatic. The myth of Shangri-La may indeed be the “collective hallucination” that Bishop (1989, 7) claims it is, but

Nepal the physical place is just real enough to support it. The popular portrayal of Nepal has become so narrowly associated with a few Himalayan highlights that for most Global North interviewees the imaginary of Nepal *is* the Khumbu itself.

In the expeditionary period, official accounts largely reflecting elite perspectives and occasional travelogues were the main vehicles for conveying these Himalayan imaginaries. During the last several decades of the commercial period, technological advances and new media platforms like blogs, video diaries, and social media have allowed for the rapid proliferation of narratives at the same time increasing commercialization has allowed more international travelers than ever to visit the Himalaya. The cumulative experiences of ordinary people and word-of-mouth fuel what Australian trekker described as the “snowball effect”: prospective visitors to Nepal hear attractive things about the people and place, then experience it for themselves, and then turn around and pass these same accounts on to future travelers. Such personal contacts are often considered to be more “authentic,” and thus more influential, than traditional sources for “reliable” information. While the main intent of such interactions is to convey travel advice, this inherently conditions set of expectations for the people and places they are set to encounter. It also has the effect of marking membership in an identifiable community of Himalayan visitors; firsthand experience creates a set of shared stories and experiences that creates a knowledgeable ingroup that is clearly distinguishable from outsiders. Social affinities such as those among fellow travelers are strongly shaped by the discursive power that a self-perpetuating collective project of narrativization lends them.

Drawn by such stories, adventure travelers from Global North countries have ventured to Nepal since the 1960s, creating a large pool of people who have visited the country and who now serve as ready ambassadors of their Himalayan holidays. Amongst adventure travel destinations

in Asia it has distinguished itself through its fabled hospitality and perceived accessibility; the top reasons Global North visitors gave me for visiting was that they heard it was a nice place to visit, they were interested in the culture, they were seeking freedom and independence, it seemed like a good place to “find themselves” or experience some other kind of personal revelation, and it was cheap. It was interesting to note that a significant proportion of these people expressed little substantive interest in engaging deeply with Nepal’s people. Rather, they seemed much more interested in engaging with the place they imagined Nepal to be and with caricatures of the people they thought lived there, rather than the actual physical reality before them.

The pervasive perception of Nepal as a Himalayan Shangri-La among foreign visitors accomplishes important discursive work. It traffics in sweeping generalizations and fantastical travelers’ tales. It mythologizes a place while anonymizing its inhabitants. It encourages shallow, selfish engagement rather than a sense of connection to actual – rather than embellished or fictional – people and places. It searches for objective authenticity where perhaps none exists. Implicitly, this imperialist mindset positions Global North institutions, practices, and actors in at the top of a sociopolitical hierarchy that claims direct ideological descent from some of the earliest visitors to Nepal who planted their flags among the world’s tallest peaks and claimed them for their own as a means of defining their own national and individual identities in relation to “othered” people and places. In the adventure travel industry, this way of thinking places Global North adventure travel companies, their agents, and their clients in a commanding position with the power to dictate the industry’s structure, character, and social fabric.

This dominant Global North narrative reduces the indigenous people of the Himalaya to secondary characters, who exist as props to authenticate the experiences and expectations of Global North visitors. The people of Nepal are seen as poor, cheerful, loyal, hardworking, and

subservient to Global North interests; those on Everest are portrayed as valiant and unfailingly capable mountaineers who unquestioningly support Global North expeditions and members through feats of strength and selflessness. Indeed, some of the most enduring impressions of the trekkers and mountaineers I spoke with were of the supposedly superhuman nature of porters and HAWs. They are seen to carry immense loads over long distances through difficult terrain, work diligently and skillfully over long periods of time, accept hardship without complaint, and follow orders unquestioningly, all of which are ideal traits for expedition support staff and traveling companions on such a momentous undertaking as Himalayan climbing.

The perception of indigenous peoples as Himalayan supermen is reinforced by modern medical research. Among medical professionals, the Sherpa have become virtual celebrities for their various adaptations to extreme altitude and have been featured in a huge number of studies (see Santolya 1989, Hochachka et al. 1996, Martin et al. 2013, Gilbert-Kawai et al. 2014, and many more) that “prove” that they are in many respects “superhuman,” at least physiologically. Such adaptation is neither particularly surprising or unique; similar traits are shared by other inhabitants of high-altitude regions around the world such as the Tibetan plateau and the Andes. These peoples, however, lack the romanticized backstories possessed by Himalayan peoples, for whom these studies become further evidence they are objectively unique. Buoyed by the air of objectivity lent by such studies, many international travelers persist in the mistaken belief that these physiological adaptations make the Sherpa and other indigenous Himalayan peoples resistant or immune to altitude sickness or other medical problems encountered at high altitude. While many die of altitude-related illnesses, Firth et al. (2008) reveals that more are killed by objective hazards like avalanches to which no one has innate immunity.

The seemingly superhuman qualities and admirable traits of Himalayan peoples inspire

awe for many Global North interviewees, many of whom introspectively compared their vain and materialistic existence to what they saw as a simpler, more wholesome, and more innocent way of life. Though many Global North adventure travelers expressed at least some reservations about the industry's equity, fairness, and sustainability, ambiguity over whether the industry is inherently exploitative allows for some level of plausible deniability and for its current commercial orientation to be justified with a clear conscience. Many cited high altitude labor not only as a coveted "golden ticket" with the potential to lift Himalayan people and their families out of poverty, but that employment in the climbing industry provides them with opportunity far and beyond what many others in Nepal receive. This is indeed true in an objective sense – since the best HAWs can make up to US\$6,000 in a season compared to the average annual Nepali income of less than US\$600 – but fails to appreciate or account for the apparent and hidden costs of working in such a dangerous industry (Schaffer 2013). Their continued cheerfulness is seen as an indication that the job's mental and emotional burdens do not seem to bother them.

Together these characterizations comprise the Global North public transcript of the Himalayan adventure travel industry, and by extension the Global North public transcript of Everest. However, the Nepali public transcript also holds significant discursive and tangible power and is a key component of the Everest's consensus public transcript. Locked in a constant dialectic with Global North narratives, as Ortner (1999) posits, Nepali narratives are shaped by the extent to which they conform or contest the characterizations imposed on them. But this dialectic process is not so straightforward, and creates significant gaps where inconsistencies and incompatibilities are rationalized or obscured. Even where narrative features intersect, the underlying discursive motivations are often directed towards different ends.

For their part, many Nepalis appear to do little to contest the stereotypes and

characterizations of the Global North public transcript. On the contrary, many accept or even embrace these constructed identities because doing so confers practical advantages and facilitates a lucrative industry that directly benefits many (though not all) local people. Global adventure travel is a competitive industry that traffics in appealing images and seductive storytelling, so there is a clear incentive for conforming to and fulfilling the perceived consumer desires of adventure travelers. Those destinations that do the best job of marketing themselves are the ones that attract and retain visitors, and because visitors come to Nepal to experience budget enlightenment, the timeless culture of Shangri-La, and the storied hospitality of its people, the industry has naturally shifted to cater to these tastes. This commodification of culture to fit consumer demands, whether extant, artificial, or a blend of the two, is a common phenomenon in many adventure travel contexts around the world and the Nepal Himalaya is no exception.

In broad terms, Global North discourses are generally accurate in identifying many of the essential sociocultural features self-identified by the Himalaya's indigenous peoples. Many of the ethnic Sherpa I interviewed, for instance, identified Tibetan culture, the Sherpa language (though not all could speak it), and Tibetan Buddhism as defining cultural characteristics that delineated ethnic membership. Many discussed the importance of family, kinship, and solidarity, and Buddhist virtues like hard work and righteous action. Their favorable disposition was also a point of pride, with one Sherpa expedition operator noting that the Sherpa are famous because "they're hard workers, they're honest, and they're humble." They referenced the roots of their fame, consistently identifying themselves as "mountain people" with an innate connection to the Himalaya, regardless of whether they still lived in the mountains or not. Individuals from other ethnically Tibetan groups hailing from the Nepal Himalaya, the Tamang and Gurung, made similar statements, but distanced themselves from their more famous countrymen by pointing out

various cultural subtleties. While an anthropological analysis of Himalayan peoples is beyond the scope of this investigation, what is important to note is that that admiration for or fascination with these traits at a basic level are what makes them intriguing for Global North visitors. These perceived qualities of greatness, are as Bharati (1978) puts it, both “actual and ideal.”

Similarly, there seems to be an interest by many Himalayan residents in projecting an image of simplicity, poverty, and lack of education, all traits ascribed to them in outsider accounts. This supposed poverty is thought by both Nepali and Global North actors to fuel the mountaineering industry, as high altitude labor provides the means to earn many times as much money in a few months as most Nepalis earn in a year, though this is not without substantial risk. “Each climber carries so much: their parents, their wife, their children, even their entire communities,” notes one Nepali guide, enumerating the key role Everest industry participants as breadwinners and as community benefactors. But it is doubtful that many or even most such workers “have no choice” but to participate in the industry, as another Nepali guide asserted, or that “people will keep on climbing no matter how many die” because “all Sherpa need the money,” as one American NGO worker claimed. While certainly not as lucrative and much less of a means for social mobility, traditional vocations such as subsistence agriculture remain viable fallbacks. This vision of poverty contrasts with the wealth of Khumbu region, which is much higher overall than most other places in Nepal, and the substantial wealth accumulated through mountaineering or hospitality work by some families. It is likely that the reality is somewhere in the middle; many indigenous peoples of the Himalaya are not actually as poor as they claim they are, nor are they as rich as some Global North visitors think they might be. In many respects, though, the most valuable asset they possess is not physical but cultural capital, built through seductive images with the “Sherpa” name lending them a seemingly inexhaustible currency.



Figure 1: This advertisement from the outdoor equipment retailer Sherpa Adventure Gear features Lakpa Rita Sherpa, the “Best Sirdar in the Khumbu.” Currently a guide for Seattle-based Alpine Ascents International resident in Shoreline, WA, he has summited Everest 17 times was the first Nepali to climb the Seven Summits, the highest peak on each continent. The implication is that the jacket is as reliable and dependable as Lakpa Rita is; the association of the Sherpa with such virtues has been widely used in advertising in the Global North. Images such as these perpetuate the universalistic imaginary of the smiling, idealized Himalayan superman (Sherpa.com 2017).

While the indigenous people of the remote Himalaya bear broad outward similarities to their portrayals in Global North discourses, where the two transcripts begin to significantly diverge is in what discursive and practical implications arise from these identifications. The most significant of these is the figure of the heroic Himalayan superman, a staple in expedition literature from the earliest days of Himalayan mountaineering to the present. Indigenous Himalayan peoples’ conception of their relationship to the mountains bear little resemblance to this imagined image, which seems to be generally viewed with ambivalence because of the absurdity of some of its claims. While the Sherpa and others may identify as mountain peoples, this identification does not seem to be strongly tied to Himalayan mountaineering as a social system or high altitude labor as a profession. Rather, many indigenous people consider themselves to simply be people who happen to live among the tallest mountains on Earth. They are “mountain people” so far as their unique environment that has profoundly shaped their

interaction with the natural world, aspects of material culture, and political economy. It has also profoundly shaped their religious outlook; Everest is revered by the Sherpa as the seat of Jomo Miyo Lang Sangma,⁸ one of the five sisters of long life in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism and a mother goddess of wealth and sustenance, and the Khumbu itself is an encompassing sacred landscape (Spoon 2011). However, such profound connections to the mountain environment does not mean that they identify as “mountain men” or similar larger-than-life characters, nor do they feel that their physiological adaptation to altitude defines who they are or what they can become. Instead, the Himalayan superman is considered to be a recent invention by outsiders superimposed on existing history and culture, and has done little on its own to alter the foundational institutions or identities that define the people of the remote Himalaya as Sherpa, Tamang, Gurung, or others.

Nevertheless, this image has proven useful in more immediate and practical ways. The ready recognition of Himalayan peoples in the popular Global North imagination nearly single-handedly fuels a massive adventure tourism industry, which provides substantial opportunities for employment in hospitality, on expeditions, and in many other related lines of work in both remote and urban areas. It has created a cult of celebrity around the Sherpa, to the point where there is a strong economic basis for impersonation by members of other ethnic groups. This “Sherpaization” process at work throughout the Nepal Himalaya, as reported by Fisher (1990), has achieved its goal so far as its many ethnic groups are now thought of by many collectively as the “Sherpas.” Hospitality and high altitude work generates valuable cash income for education,

8. In the Tibetan and Sherpa languages Everest is known as *Jomolungma* or *Chomolungma*, a contraction of Jomo Miyo Lang Sangma. The official Chinese name for Everest, *Qomolangma*, is derived from the Tibetan. The Nepali name for Everest is *Sagarmāthā*, coined only in 1956, and in English the mountain is named for Sir George Everest, the Surveyor General of India from 1830 to 1846. It is interesting to note how varying imaginaries of Everest are reflected in these respective names.

and interactions with foreign mountaineers who tend to be connected and wealthy can easily be parlayed into scholarships, international travel, and future employment. Such interactions, or fantasies of a better life abroad passed along through the grapevine, can provide a pathway permanent emigration to the Global North, though the promise of a better life in a country like America for indigenous Himalayan peoples can prove illusory, per Craig (2011).

For a few, the ideal of the Himalayan superman has actually become a become a way of life. No guesthouse or museum in Khumbu is complete without faded summit photographs and expedition relics depicting the exploits of family members, friends, or famous Nepali climbers among mountaineering memorabilia. Everest climbs are seen among the Sherpa as rites of passage; even one successful attempt is an important resume-builder that assures stable employment for years to come. Just as mountaineering becomes a ready path to fame for Global North mountaineers, many Nepalis have become well-known nationally and internationally for their rags-to-riches stories and high-altitude achievements. Over 30 Nepalis now hold credentials from the International Federation of Mountain Guides Association (IFMGA), a rigorous international standard for professional mountaineering guides, and a growing proportion of Nepali industry participants now have some level of formal training. Increasing professionalism, as well as a fledgling sport climbing tradition, is perhaps an early sign that the persona of the Himalayan superman is being reclaimed and reimagined by a new generation of Nepali mountaineers, a shift acknowledged by many of the Nepali guides I interviewed.

Somewhat ironically, these Nepalis are essentially attempting to become the mythic figures Global North visitors already believe they are in their pursuit of advanced objectives. While these people climb for many of the same reasons Global North commercial clients do, such as overcoming personal obstacles or seeking a worthy objective challenge, their

achievements in the mountains are variously portrayed in Global North accounts as either a natural consequence of their proper and ordained role in the industry or as a subversive ploy against an exploitative industry. For Nepalis, it reinforces individual, ethnic, and national pride and provides a strong economic incentive. In any case, such visible accomplishments reinforce the relationship between indigenous peoples and the sport of mountaineering. Importantly, this portrayal of Nepali mountaineers makes it appear as if all such climbers are highly skilled and climb not because simply they are poor and desperate, but because mountaineering is just as much an aspirational pursuit to them as it is to Global North commercial clients. While such climbers represent a tiny fraction of the Nepali mountaineering community, their exploits have become a standard to which all others are held and conditions Global North adventure travelers to expect those they encounter in the Himalaya to be both poor and to love climbing.

There is a growing sense among many Nepalis that, for better or for worse, Himalayan peoples have become such an integral feature in the current Everest paradigm that they are both indispensable and inextricable. Unable to substantially alter the structural calculus of power, they instead concentrated on maximizing their impact within their specific niche in the industry and working quietly to build prestige, leverage personal contacts, and strive for incremental changes or improvements. These activities simultaneously seemed to reinforce longstanding Global North perceptions of the indigenous people of the Himalaya as underprivileged but exceptional mountaineers while providing a way for Nepalis to turn it to their own ends while maximizing economic benefit. Together, this consensus, built on a specific intersectionality of place, people, and social and economic hierarchies and roles, constituted the public transcript of Everest that incentivized compromise and deferred judgement on critical points of contention.

It is important to note that the so-called “Global North” and “Nepali” transcripts

presented here should not be considered absolute. While they wield significant discursive power, they are not universally accepted by either Global North or Nepali actors, whose positionality in the industry has a strong effect on individual opinions. Indeed, this lack of continuity and incomplete or selective acceptance of these narratives highlights a significant weakness in how Scott's transcript theory is commonly perceived as a binary relationship between dominant and subordinate discourses. In his traditional model these exist in parallel and in constant conversation, but the reality is rarely so clear-cut. Indeed, scholars such as Adams (1996) note the great difficulty in concretely unraveling the dialectic processes by which Global North and Nepali narratives create and define each other and concede that such a task may be impossible. Just as Global North narratives create "virtual Sherpas," so too do Nepali narratives create "virtual Westerners." The existence of multiple and interlocking discourses not only allows for a multitude of viewpoints, but the possibility for consensus discourses to be substantively challenged from multiple angles when dissident actors are provided an opening by a public rupture like a major traumatic event.

By April 2014, the necessary conditions for a major reckoning of the Everest industry were in place. A century of expedition reporting had conditioned many Global North actors to view themselves as the torchbearers of a noble and heroic enterprise, handed down to them by the generations of famous explorers and mountaineers that preceded them. They viewed Nepal through something of an Orientalist lens, more interested in engaging with the seductive image of Nepal as a Himalayan Shangri-La than with the complexity and contradictions of the physical place before them. For the most part, they considered the indigenous people of the Himalaya supermen whose purpose was to support their adventure travel aspirations. The indigenous people of the Himalaya, whose reality was rather more nuanced, alternately used these

perceptions to their advantage to build a massive industry that brought great wealth to some people in some areas and maximize the opportunities that participation in the industry provided while quietly contesting certain features. This arrangement persisted because it proved mutually beneficial to both Global North and Nepali actors, who saw their ideologies validated, their sense of identity reinforced, and most importantly the Everest industry maintained through compromise and stability.

Despite these developments, and the latent contradictions and compromises written into Everest's public transcripts, conditions were not yet sufficient for a full rupture and revelation of dissident transcripts. Instead, it would take the combination of the tragic serac fall in 2014 that profoundly shook both Global North and Nepali confidence in the Everest consensus and an appropriate new narrative of Maoist involvement that seemed to fit the prevailing gestalt and embodied longstanding dissident readings and anxieties. I now turn to the question of why these rumors encapsulated the anxieties of Global North and Nepali hidden transcripts that had developed in parallel and in opposition to the public Everest consensus so cogently.

Political Economic Roots of Hidden Transcripts: Governance, Democratization, and Education

The previous sections present a chronology of the 2014 incident and explore the foundational elements of the public transcript of Everest. While Dorjee Khatri's link to the CPN (UML) and the supposed appearance of Maoist sympathizers provide important clues, this evidence is circumstantial at best and insufficient to explain why rumors of Maoist involvement became the favored explanation for rationalizing a traumatic and incomprehensible event.

In the following sections I will explore how rumors of Maoist involvement encapsulated the latent tensions and contradictions present in the public Everest consensus. Traditionally, this

has portrayed the Everest industry as an unproblematic economic system that exists in a vacuum apart from the Nepali state or the broader political landscape of South Asia and in which the economic roles of various actors was self-evident. Despite dissent from both Global North and Nepali counternarratives, the consensus persisted because it facilitated Everest climbing and strongly de incentivized conflict in favor of maintaining a flawed but workable status quo. This blind spot in Everest's public transcript was revealed in 2014 when disaster provided a rupture that revealed dissident opinions and interpretations. The two main hidden transcripts that emerged – a Global North imaginary of Everest as a chaotic sociopolitical arena filled with hostile actors and a Nepali vision of government neglect – not only contrasted sharply with the existing public transcript but became the proximate causes of social conflict at Base Camp in which the Maoists became implicated.

Whereas Himalayan cultural encounters backdrop the 2014 incident, I now turn to Himalayan mountaineering's political economy to explain why Maoist involvement became the favored theory. While scholars such as von Furer-Haimendorf (1964; 1975; 1984), Fisher (1990), Adams (1996), and Ortner (1999) have written extensively on the traditional political economy of the Everest region, they do not devote significant attention to the presence of the Nepali state in Khumbu or the way in which the adventure travel industry is governed by formal or informal institutions and practices. Here I situate the contemporary tourism-based political economy of the Khumbu against a larger backdrop of Nepal's governance paradigm, democratization, and education and how perceptions of these are reflected in public and dissident transcripts. Understanding the interplay of governance, democratization and education is essential for providing additional depth to this analysis of the Himalayan mountaineering industry's structural features, but also provides important clues as to why Maoists – rather than other actors – became

central to 2014 incident.

Governance

In the past half-century, Nepal has undergone a fitful transition from absolute monarchy to multiparty democracy. The fall of the Rana regime in 1951 ended a century of autocracy and deposed a line of hereditary Prime Ministers, but ushered in the Panchayat system where the monarchy reassumed power and political parties were intermittently banned (Gellner 2007). With the advent of the Cold War Nepal became a key piece in America's global anticommunism strategy because of its geostrategic location between India and China; a government backed by Global North interests would deter a Chinese invasion and a strong economy would prevent a popular communist uprising (Khadka 2000). These efforts to mold a pro-Western government and keep communism at bay were largely successful, but created an artificially weak state highly dependent on foreign aid and a relatively strong civil society dominated by international NGOs and other development organizations.

Disaffection with this fractured political environment created the necessary conditions for the Nepal Civil War. While a full exploration of its causes and consequences is beyond the scope of this investigation⁹, what is important to note is that the Maoist insurgency – intended to dethrone the monarchy and see Maoist parties and policies come to dominate the Nepali political agenda – largely achieved its goals. By the end of the war, Adhikari (2014) notes, the government had ceased to become an effective governing force. Combat operations intensified after Gyanendra declared the State of Emergency, leading to increased reports of atrocities on both sides and turning many against the regime. By the end of the war in 2006, the

9. The Nepal Civil War has generated a great deal of scholarly and popular work. Readers interested in overviews of the conflict may be interested in the accounts by Hutt (2004), Gellner (2005), and Adhikari (2014).

government had lost control of large portions of the country and was on the brink of collapse. Government ineffectiveness in the face of national crisis created a power vacuum that was exploited by Maoist rebels during the war and by Maoist political parties in its direct aftermath, and by 2014, Maoist domination of a weak central state defined the Nepali political scene.

Among my interviewees the GoN was nearly universally perceived to chronically ineffective, with a corrupt and impotent central state contributing to Nepal's ongoing political turmoil. Foreigners and Nepalis alike ridiculed it for its supposed pettiness and infighting, the brazenly corrupt dealings of its politicians, and dependency on foreign development aid. According to Metz (1995), the institutionalized diversion of foreign aid to Nepal's elite – often with what amounts to collusion with foreign aid donors – serves to consolidate their power, and the resulting “corruption” is not accidental but essential to the Nepali system. Further, Onta (2004) argues that such perceptions of financial, intellectual, and moral corruption throughout Nepali society have been fueled by the intense politicization of both the public and private spheres; within commercial and civil society sectors most professional societies and organizations simply serve as fronts for political parties and their activities.

More serious than allegations of mere corruption are claims that Nepal's problems make it, as several Global North members claimed, a “failed state.” It is difficult and contested to make such as designation, though Nepali commentators such as Shrestha (2005) claim that during the Nepal Civil War Nepal met many of the possible criteria for being a failed state – intrastate conflict, limited provision of public services, infrastructure deterioration, weak rule of law, and worsening inequality – and so Nepal deserved to at least be in contention. The ease with which the GoN can be criticized makes it a ready scapegoat – deserved or not – for all of Nepal's problems, contributing to the Global North perception that on balance Nepal is, as one Global

North member claimed, a “fucked-up country.” Such sentiments not only present a far less romanticized vision of chaos than the one portrayed in the public Everest transcript, but embody openly arrogant and ethnocentric attitudes held by some Global North members.

Though the politics and state figures little into the public Everest consensus, Nepal’s current governance paradigm has several significant effects on the Himalayan adventure travel system. First, the GoN’s selective participation in the Everest industry has led to criticism by Global North actors for its apparent unwillingness or inability to further regulate the Everest industry, and by Nepali actors for providing HAWs with an insufficient social safety net. Second, its relative absence has created a governance vacuum that has been filled by informal and private-sector actors that now hold almost complete control over the Everest industry. The lack of formal governance fuels conflict over scarce resources and the unclear bounds of state power opens the possibility for intervention by outside political actors, both factors that contributed to the unrest on Everest in 2014 and underpinned rumors of Maoist involvement.

The GoN has never played an especially active role in regulating adventure travel systems. However, it does fulfill two important functions beyond providing security and administrative services for Sagarmatha National Park: collecting climbing royalties and developing and enforcing legislation governing Everest climbing. The GoN’s execution of both these functions has been problematic, and this has led to disputes with both Global North mountaineers and HAWs and negative perceptions of the GoN’s seriousness of purpose in maintaining the Everest industry for anything besides short-term economic benefit. While this has united these two sides in mutual derision of the government, attempts to work around the GoN on intersecting issues put them on a collision course to conflict on 2014.

In the Global North hidden transcript, the GoN’s management of the Everest industry is

seen as problematic at best and ill-intentioned at worst. As a developing country with rich adventure travel potential, Nepal's tourism sector is a highly lucrative industry worth up to US\$370 million per year (Schaffer 2013). The GoN takes its cut in the form of a US\$11,000 per-climber royalty fee collected by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MCTCA), which nets the GoN about US\$3 million annually.¹⁰ In Global North countries climbing fees generally pay for professional climbing rangers and rescue squads, waste disposal, and environmental programs, but Everest royalty fees fund no such programs. The only tangible presence the GoN has on Everest itself is the much-maligned liaison officer program, which has largely failed in its stated goal of providing a direct government link to each expedition.

Similarly, the GoN has taken a largely laissez-faire approach to Everest regulation. Unlike China, which has set age limits for summiteers, bans extreme record-setting attempts, and has begun requiring medical documentation for mountaineers, the GoN leaves decisions about who can climb to individual outfitters. To the Global North guides and mountaineers who consider it the paramount duty of the government to establish a basic experience and/or technical expertise baseline for Everest climbers in the interest of safety, the GoN's inability or unwillingness to act is an indication of lost legitimacy. Fairly or not, many outsiders see GoN's policies toward the Everest industry as little more than a cash grab by the government of a poor country concerned with reaping its benefits while assuming few of the obligations of sustainable stewardship or moral responsibilities towards international and national climbers.

While Global North mountaineers object to the lack of amenities, the Nepali hidden transcript is defined by dissatisfaction at institutionalized inequity. In recent years, the GoN has

10. In 2015, the GoN reports collecting US\$2,481,000 in royalty fees from Everest climbers (Government of Nepal 2016). This is a substantial amount of revenue and greater than the royalties collected for all other mountains in the Nepal Himalaya combined, but hardly the immense fortune that Everest industry critics claim. This amount is dwarfed by the revenues collected by other parties in the Everest industry.

come under fire from the HAW community and their international advocates for failing to legislate or enforce adequate protections for HAWs. For years, many Nepalis have complained privately about the low mandatory insurance minimums for HAWs, a concern shared by many Global North guides and advocacy organizations. At the time of the 2014 incident, per Schaffer (2014) the health coverage requirement was about US\$4,000, and the rescue insurance and death and accident insurance requirements were each about US\$10,000. These amounts had been dramatically increased after several accidents the previous year, but were still seen as wholly inadequate; the rescue insurance requirement of US\$10,000 is not even enough to cover helicopter evacuations from Khumbu. The death and accident insurance requirement of US\$10,000 represents about roughly two seasons' compensation for the average HAW, a low amount that creates undue hardship for families that have lost breadwinners and is considered an insulting devaluation of life even in a dangerous industry. Yet in a highly competitive industry the minimum has become the standard, and enforcement of even this standard remains difficult.

In 2014, the GoN initially refused to compensate HAWs at all. Though they were eventually offered Rs. 40,000 (about US\$400), this was seen as a pittance and galvanized a small but vocal core of veteran Nepali guides and HAWs advocating for higher compensation and increased insurance requirements. Seeing an opportunity in the fractured political environment at Base Camp and with the eyes of the world upon them, this small core of activists was instrumental in drafting and circulating the 13-point charter that was eventually presented to the GoN. This negotiation process became the basis for the highly visible display of public agitation after the 2014 incident and revealed the Nepali agenda embedded in the Nepali hidden transcript.

To Global North actors, however, agitation seemed to validate hidden transcript anxieties about the lack of formal governance and the extent to which Maoist sympathies had permeated

Nepali society. Political organizing, led by a few vocal activists seizing a particular political moment and a worldwide spotlight, took on a threatening character since it was perceived to be directed towards Global North Everest industry participants. From the outside, the unrest seemed to be a Maoist-directed popular movement for worker's rights against an international conglomerate, a particular brand of pro-labor political action in that they were known to have carried out in other times and places. Indeed, from a crude Marxist perspective, efforts by HAWs to gain greater control over the Everest industry was merely a logical means of seizing control of the means of production. While these workers did gain some concessions – the GoN eventually acceded to many of the demands outlined in the 13-point charter, including raising the death and accident insurance minimum to US\$15,000 – the political damage had been done. As one Nepali guide said, “We were working against the government but trying to stay out of politics...we were badly blamed for things we didn't have in our hearts and minds.”

The historical absence of the Nepali state in Khumbu is likely a product of the weak centralized Nepali state supported by the Global North anticommunist program, paired with the relative strength of local authorities. This absence has created a governance void where nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an outsized role in creating both legal and normative realities. As Fisher (1997) describes, the rise of NGOs in the neoliberal period was enabled by shifting interdependencies among political actors. These groups have undertaken a large range of activities, often ones that had previously been ignored or done by the state. Although NGO operations come at some cost to state capacity, they are claimed to be less encumbered by bureaucracy, more open to innovation, and better able to respond to grassroots needs. This trend is reflected in development efforts throughout Nepal, including in the Khumbu. Unlike arrangements in most other countries, state-like regulatory powers to control climbing

routes and provide training and credentialing to HAWs have fallen to a loose coalition of semi-governmental and nongovernmental organizations. These organizations provide such a vast range of public and private goods on Everest – from the construction of climbing routes on the mountain to private medical care and air rescue services – that the political economy of Khumbu appeared to many Global North interviewees as little more than a corrupt, free-market kleptocracy in which foreigners are continually nickel-and-dimed by local operators.

In the absence of government, the ways in which governance and economic functions become institutionalized blur traditional boundaries between public and private. A case in point is the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee. Established in 1991 as a registered NGO to deal with Everest's growing waste problem, the SPCC is the closest Everest Base Camp has to a governing authority. The SPCC's waste disposal mission was the sort of collective project that provided a sociopolitical focal point, and subsequently the organization became a kind of town hall for different climbing parties to both collaborate and settle disputes.

In 1997, the SPCC gained a new mandate: fixing the route up Everest. Each climbing season, an elite team of mountaineers called the Icefall Doctors install an elaborate highway of ladders and fixed lines from Base Camp up through the Khumbu Icefall to Camp II that are used by nearly everyone climbing Everest (Loomis 2015). Before the creation of the team, individual climbing parties would meet to determine the route and contribute staff to the effort under the SPCC umbrella, but as the industry grew this collaborative enterprise has mostly given way to a centralized authority with near-absolute power to fix the route as they and their team members see fit, and charge a royalty fee of US\$500 per climber thanks to their monopoly.

Without fixed lines ascending the Khumbu Icefall would be virtually impossible, so the SPCC provides a necessary service. Yet the SPCC's existence is contentious because it straddles

the boundary between the functions of the state and the private sector. While Nepalis admire the difficult job of the SPCC and praise its efforts, it is widely seen by Global North guides and members as an enigmatic organization that operates with little oversight. It provides a public good, but a number of Global North guides contend that the fees collected by the SPCC seem to be disproportionate to their output. Several who work closely with the Icefall Doctors note that they seem to be poorly equipped for such a well-funded team, and allege that the quality of the ropes and ladders used in route construction have declined in recent years and that poor route placement and lack of oversight contributed to the 2014 disaster.

Likewise, despite having no official power, it is often criticized for an inability to maintain order in Base Camp or serve as a stabilizing force and is even often seen as a destabilizing force. During the 2014 incident, for example, the fact that important community meetings were constantly held in the SPCC camp, and the 13-point charter was developed and announced there, made it appear as if the SPCC was endorsing or directing agitation, perhaps as a front organization for the Maoists. SPCC staff I spoke with emphatically deny playing any such role. “We don’t know anything about the politics,” one SPCC employee told me. “The Icefall Doctors’ job is to fix the route, to keep it open and free for anyone to climb.” Though Maoist connections to the SPCC seems doubtful, especially since the Icefall Doctors were supposedly among those threatened, it revealed the limits of tolerance for NGOs in Khumbu, even established ones with a key role in facilitating the industry. The perception that they may have had some role in fomenting revolt, or at least failed to prevent popular agitation, became fodder for mountaineers already frustrated by perceived politicization and corruption in the opaque Everest bureaucracy.

These interactions and perceptions also reveal the limits of tolerance for the way in which

the Everest industry is formally regulated by the GoN. Despite its supposed inefficiencies and corruption, an industry-wide belief persists that the GoN is the only institution capable of solving these problems through regulation and tighter governance. In a highly competitive free-market system that de incentivizes deviation from minimum standards, further government regulation becomes the only concrete mechanism to enforce systemic change. While this may be true from an economic perspective, the shifting of responsibility to an outside actor with little realistic inclination or capacity to act is an indication that the Everest industry is unable, or more likely unwilling, to address its shortcomings itself. The end of the 2014 climbing season highlights the limitations of relying on the GoN to act decisively despite having little track record of doing so, and the anger that results when these expectations are not met. As one Nepali expedition operator noted about the possibilities of the current governance paradigm, “Complaining won’t help. Either do something or keep quiet.” Despite a common choice to act and common wish for change, agitation by Global North and Nepali factions against the status quo instead revealed competing dissident transcripts and turned ordinary people on the ground against each other.

Democratization and Education

While Nepal’s current governance paradigm determines the character of the Himalayan adventure travel industry’s political economy and has shaped a collection of longstanding but mostly low-intensity debates, democratization and education have gained prominence in alternative narrativizations of Everest. Nepal’s recent turn to democracy and increasing access to education have altered the conditions under which social interactions play out both in the creation of new norms about what sociopolitical topics are appropriate for open debate and the shifting demographics of who is educated and who has voice and agency in these important

negations. The perceived availability of education to Nepali participants in the Everest industry, and how education privileges or disadvantages individual actors within an underdeveloped but democratizing country, are central questions. Perceptions of who is rich or poor, and who is educated and uneducated, mediates this discussion and accomplishes the important discursive work, in both public and hidden Everest transcripts, of explaining and justifying what roles and level of participation is appropriate for various indigenous actors. A growing recognition of shifting and uneven demographics of the industry, and attempts to make sense of it, are important features of the Global North hidden transcript that emerged in 2014 and found a home in rumors of Maoist involvement.

Nepal's democratic transition has been marked by constant political instability, continual government changes, and, until 2015, debates over the drafting of Nepal's post-monarchy constitution. Prior to the last several years, frequent general strikes called *bandhs* ordered by various political parties or coalitions caused significant disruption to ordinary people, especially in urban areas like Kathmandu. Constitutional struggles were particularly acute, with little agreement in Nepal's Constituent Assembly over Nepal's political organization or the devolution of power to ethnic minorities, especially the Tharu and the Madhesi in the Terai region who demanded greater autonomy or outright statehood amidst violent protests. These tensions eventually culminated in a de facto blockade by India in 2015-2016, which caused an eight-month humanitarian crisis (Haviland 2015, Acharya 2016).

As a result of this political instability, many of my Nepali interviewees claimed that the promises of democracy during the last decade have proved elusive. Echoing Thapa (2005), many felt powerless or incapable of intervention in a state dominated by political elites, revolutionaries and until recently the monarchy. Government neglect, lack of empowerment, and limited

avenues for entry into political debates thus became key features of the Nepali private transcript. Other offered broader explanations for the seemingly arrested development of Nepal's democracy, including that Asian cultures in general or Nepali culture in particular is fundamentally incompatible with democracy, that Nepal's ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity was too great for meaningful democratic process to take place, or simply that the new democratic regime seemed no better than previous regimes. The most common refrain I heard, though, was that Nepal was not ready for democracy because not enough of its people were educated enough to understand their rights and obligations within a democratic system.

Democracy is thus seen as a destabilizing force in a country already beset with deep divisions and a cacophonous multitude of opinions. As a result of Nepal's uncertain outlook under democracy some Nepalis remember the monarchy, which at least provided stability and predictability if not full political freedom. Others look to the example of their neighbor China, which has a strong central government and has shown a consistent willingness to get its hands dirty to preserve national unity, especially in regards to its decisive and uncompromising stance on Tibet. While rehabilitation of Maoist fighters is seen as relatively benign, some Nepalis are troubled that the high-caste politicians and commanders that led the insurgency not only escaped punishment for their crimes while ordinary people bore the brunt of the Nepal Civil War, but now enjoy prominent positions in ruling coalitions. Similarly, some foreigners are surprised to see Maoist political parties operating openly in the post-monarchy period, a seeming capitulation on the part of the GoN and evidence for the ultimate defeat of anticommunist efforts.

Hutt and Onta (2016) note that establishment of Nepal's new democratic government has taken place against a larger backdrop of social change, including increased literacy, the proliferation of print and broadcast media, and renewed discussion about human rights and

linguistic, ethnic, and regional identities. More open debate and greater freedom of speech on such topics poses a particular danger to the status quo; in the words of one Nepali expedition operator, “Democracy and freedom make people talk a lot.” The ability to share opinions and take public positions on controversial issues is a sharp departure from the days of the Nepal Civil War, where publicly expressing dissenting viewpoints or speaking out against the government or the Maoists could lead to arrest, disappearance, or worse. Dissent was driven underground, but the dissident viewpoints evolved in parallel to official or acceptable positions created a multitude of private transcripts. The re-emergence of these viewpoints within a governance paradigm too weak to suppress them has catalyzed many of the contemporary political debates now playing out in Nepal, resulting in a more inclusive public debate about the future of Nepal but at the cost of greater political instability.

The potential effects of increased freedom of speech is not lost on participants in the Everest industry, and is perhaps little surprise that HAW demands for reform have become louder since the end of the Nepal Civil War. Nevertheless, many foreigners are unprepared for political intrusions into the Everest industry. Interviewed in *Sherpa*, Sumit Joshi defended increasing politicization as a natural consequence of democratization that visitors should accept as a new reality:

We only became a democratic country in the ‘90s. People feel like they have more freedom of speech. When they say something that is a bit more bold, it takes the Western people who are at the Base Camp by surprise. They’re just saying what they think. They’re not rebels.

Along with increased freedom of speech, Nepal’s democratization has been marked by a greater focus on education and debates over the practical effects an unevenly educated populace on social and economic stability. Democratization is linked to greater access to education, and education is seen a differentiating social force that determines everything from who works in the

Himalayan adventure travel industry to who is able to exercise agency within in. Such questions are central to the substance of the hidden transcripts that emerged in 2014, and are critical to understanding why Maoists became implicated as key actors.

In Everest's public transcript, both Global North and Nepali actors describe the indigenous peoples of the Himalaya as impoverished and uneducated, and this situation at the bottom of a socioeconomic hierarchy is thought to explain or justify their seemingly marginal role in the Everest industry. After all, the vast majority of HAWs are recruited from remote areas with little economic opportunity and the high-altitude labor provides a valuable source of cash income. However, the reality is more nuanced and boast several contradictions. While many impoverished people do work in the industry, many indigenous actors have become wealthy by Nepali standards, and a few have even become wealthy by international standards, through their work in hospitality and as valuable local intermediaries. The wide variation in education, wealth, and opportunity is responsible for this growing disparity between perceptions and reality, and as a result the industry is much less monolithic than many Global North actors imagine. Whereas poverty was thought to drive uniform subservience and economic dependence on high altitude labor, education, or at least the perception that some instigators of the 2014 incident were educated and took advantage of the others' lack of education, become a central organizing principle of the theory of Maoist involvement.

In recent years, the demographics of who works in the Himalayan mountaineering industry has shifted markedly. From the 1920s into the 1960s, nearly all expeditions in the Nepal Himalaya were supported by Sherpa HAWs from Nepal's Khumbu region, the most famous of which were the members of the 1953 expedition recruited personally by Tenzing Norgay, an occasional resident of Khumbu himself, in Darjeeling, India. The wealth and fame brought by

these early accomplishments opened up many opportunities and led to a relatively rapid exit from high altitude work. Many returned to Khumbu and built guesthouses in the 1970s and 1980s to serve the growing number of trekkers entering the region, which continue to be managed by their children and grandchildren. Several interviewees identified a general demographic pattern amongst old Khumbu families: the first generation was involved in high altitude work, the second generation worked in hospitality, and the third generation is now studying in university or abroad. A common saying among the Sherpa sums this new social order up nicely: “Grandfather Khumbu, Father Kathmandu, Son New York.” Today, few Sherpa from the core areas of Khumbu are HAWs; most work in management roles or operate companies. However, several peripheral villages in Khumbu proper away from main trekking routes, notably Thame and Phorche, still contribute large numbers of support staff every year. Increasingly, large numbers of support staff are drawn from the neighboring regions of Solu, Rowaling, Makalu and regions from further afield, and from non-Sherpa ethnic groups, that tend to be more dependent on subsistence agriculture and remittances sent home by migrant labor.

The uneven growth of the adventure travel industry has led to an uneven landscape of opportunity as core regions expand organically, with some areas outside of Khumbu and other core areas a step behind the same demographic and economic arc while others remain disconnected. For those families that accumulated adventure travel wealth early and were located close to core areas, education became a valuable mechanism for social mobility. Education in one of Edmund Hillary’s schools in Solukhumbu or a boarding school in Kathmandu provided a stepping stone to university in the capital or abroad. While many trained in hospitality or business to support their family’s participation the adventure travel industry, many others chose to pursue other careers.

This exodus has led to a demographic rearrangement that has shifted a smaller number of established actors into elite roles, and required others from more marginal areas to replace them. The vast majority of rank-and-file expedition support staff are now recruited from increasingly remote and opportunity-deficient areas, making it appear as if they are exploited not only by Global North actors, but also by their fellow Nepalis. Indeed, one expedition operator told me that his company only hired Sherpa from Okhaldhunga District, to the southeast of Solukhumbu, because the Sherpa there were “hungrier” for the chance to prove themselves, had not yet been “spoiled” by success like other Sherpa had, and were generally more subservient and deferent to their employers. The Nepalis, both Sherpa and non-Sherpa, that play leading roles in the Everest industry constitute a small, affluent, well-educated, and well-connected elite, reinforcing this perception. While scholars such as Adams (1996) have long observed this, Everest’s public transcript assumes that support staff do their dangerous work because they lack the qualifications or connections to do anything else, and this perceived economic incentive being a key reason why Global North actors assumed that climbing would eventually resume, and why HAWs must be under coercion if they chose not to continue.

However, this image too boasts obvious contradictions. The figure of the wealthy, cosmopolitan “Sherpa” coexists uneasily and often without reconciliation in popular narratives with the figure of the poor, subservient, and ignorant “Sherpa”. These polar opposites that exist simultaneously create a kind of cognitive dissonance that many foreigners have difficulty processing and were conveniently left unreconciled in Everest’s public transcript. However, this dualistic reading of “Sherpa” culture provides two ready characters that can be deployed for different discursive purposes. When they were included in the same narrative to read Maoists into the 2014 incident, they become necessary foils for each other in rationalizing why public

perceptions of Everest could have been so wrong and why the same evidence actually supports an entirely different, dissident, interpretation rooted in hidden transcripts.

While Nepal's democratic experiment is thought to be failing, access to education, particularly private English-medium education, has increased in recent years (Whelpton 2005). Gellner and Karki (2007) found while Nepal's activist community tends to be young, affluent, and often higher-caste, they are most distinguished by their level of education. 63.4% of the people they defined as activists held graduate or postgraduate qualifications, as opposed to 1.5% of Nepal's general population, and as many as 39.4% held a Master's degree (384). After attending university in Nepal or abroad, many of these activists have gained footholds in business, media, government, and other fields, especially in urban areas. They have tended to be disruptive to the status quo, and active in their pursuit of liberal social causes and protests against longstanding institutions like government corruption and the international development regime. They tend to be well-acquainted with international social and youth movements, and this connectedness is thought to have a direct influence on internal Nepali politics. When queried about the unrest at Base Camp in 2014, for instance, Russell Brice noted in *Sherpa*, "I dare say they look at the Arab [Spring] and things like that and think that they can do the same sorts of things." While youth and student movements are hardly new, such advocacy is perceived to be externally motivated – rather than the product of organic, homegrown Nepali activism – and their growing influence is seen as both a consequence and cause of political instability.

The last decade has also seen increased activity by youth arms associated with major political parties, including the CPN (M)'s Young Communist League (YCL). Founded in 2006, the group borrowed much of its leadership from the upper echelons of the CPN (M). According to Adhikari (2014), they rose to prominence in the politically fragmented post-war period to

deliver quasi-governmental services, such as brokering property and development deals and taking advantage of demoralized government police and military forces to establish an alternate law enforcement apparatus. Their chief weapons were intimidation and coercion, and their activities made a great deal of money for party and consolidated their political control. It would not be far-fetched in the minds of many to imagine that Maoist activists following the YCL blueprint could step into Khumbu's political vacuum and attempt a similar intervention.

It is little surprise, then, that the flag-waving, red bandanna-wearing Maoist cadre occupied a central role in narrativizations of the 2014 incident. Maoist activists were explicitly distinguished from HAWs by their apparent youth, affluence, and education, and the volatile juxtaposition of these two groups – a small group of agitators and a large group of uneducated people harboring grievances – provided the proximate social genesis for the belief that Everest climbing was being externally and deliberately influenced. Combined with Dorjee Khatri's and Pasang Bhote's links to the CPN (UML), this was enough to convince many climbers at Base Camp that a Maoist connection was real. The pervasive belief that such forces were at work on Everest provoked strong reactions and evocative comparisons among Global North members who feared for their safety and braced for a full-scale devolution into what Russell Brice described as "mob rule"; one American member noted in *Sherpa*, "When people demand change and threaten it by violence, that's a terrorist," while Schaffer (2014) quotes American member Cleo Weidlich as defiantly saying "I refuse to give in to the pressures of the Everest mafia."

Democratization and education are thus seen as a double-edged sword. On one hand, it was perceived to have emboldened existing political factions and infused them with a generation of young, educated activists newly inculcated with disruptive ideas waiting for the right moment to make their entry into Nepal's confused political arena. On the other hand, the continued lack

of education for so many, especially impoverished indigenous people from remote areas, meant that the HAW community was seen as manipulable and open to revolt if anger over longstanding grievances could be properly directed. In effect, HAWs became seen as naïve and gullible, manipulated against their will to stake their futures on a cause not really their own. One of the common themes I heard from some interviewees, mostly Global North members, is that the HAW community had no one to speak on their behalf with their true interests in mind – which was to continue climbing – and in the end picked the losing side because they did not know what was good for them. The reaction by HAWs was perceived to be so irrational that it became difficult to imagine that the political unrest – which appeared to be strongly pro-labor and anti-imperialist – could have been directed by anyone besides the Maoists.

Placing Maoists at the center of the 2014 incident, as many Global North accounts do, relies on a concerted effort to portray the unrest as externally motivated by political operatives or connected to global dissident movements. In denying that such unrest may have been externally generated, it denies the agency of HAWs to have some say in their economic fortunes and solidifies Global North interests at the top of Everest's sociopolitical hierarchy. Although it inverts many of the narrative features of the traditional Everest consensus, this new hidden transcript achieves the same discursive objective of rationalizing Global North superiority in the Everest industry and offers a sociopolitical explanation for why this may no longer be the case.

Fundamentally, the 2014 incident was seen by many of the Global North guides and members I interviewed as a disruption of the natural order of the Himalayan adventure travel industry. Unwilling to acknowledge there may have been some measure of popular support for structural changes, the rumor of Maoist involvement created for them an alternative narrative where HAWs' lack of education made them vulnerable to manipulation by sophisticated political

activists who convinced them to take drastic action. Threats of violence and ran totally counter to prevailing images of smiling “Sherpa” and instead spoke to a darker vision of contested political negotiation that became ready fodder for rumors of Maoist involvement.

Conclusion

In this section, I have established Global North and Nepali hidden transcript perceptions of governance, democratization, and education in Nepal as key catalysts of the 2014 incident. The perceived weakness and corruption of the Nepali state was seen to manifest itself in an apparent disregard for the governance of the Everest industry and an inability to exercise expected state powers. While collecting huge climbing royalty fees, it had failed in its ability to regulate Everest climbing or provide adequate protections for HAWs, creating an atmosphere of discontent and distrust among Everest’s shareholders that problematized political blind spots in the public Everest consensus and allowed grievances to fester. Nepal’s democratic experiment was seen as a destabilizing force, one that enabled dissident voices and political movements such as Maoism to move above ground. It was believed that education, coupled with a more open society, had emboldened political activists, including those inspired by Maoist ideologies and methods, seeking to disrupt the status quo in pursuit of unclear ends while others remained vulnerable to external influences because of their lack of education.

Maoist rumors provided a vehicle for Global North hidden transcript anxieties by succinctly mobilizing certain features of both Everest’s public and private transcripts to explain rapidly-unfolding and ambiguous events. Some features of the public transcript, such as the poverty of HAWs and opposition to the government, were reinterpreted to support a new narrative. Others, such as perceptions of a culture of corruption and kleptocracy, emerged from

offline debates that had been minimized until they rose to a certain level of significance. For many Global North actors, reading the 2014 incident as the product of Maoist intervention did specific discursive work. It attempted to rationalize the downfall of Himalayan mountaineering as a noble and heroic pursuit and their lack of power in the new paradigm by blaming unrest that removed both indigenous and foreign actors from their proper and ordained places on shadowy forces they could neither understand nor control.

Sociocultural Roots of Hidden Transcripts: Technicalization as Relational Practice

The previous sections have focused on the structural features that define the Everest industry and how recent developments have altered perspectives of the Everest industry's political economy to explain why Global North and Nepali hidden transcripts – embodied by rumors of Maoist involvement that proved influential in ending the 2014 climbing season – subverted the public Everest consensus. In this fourth section, I discuss some of the technical features of the adventure travel industry bound sociocultural interactions on mountains like Everest and the increasing technicalization of Himalayan mountaineering.

Echoing Lenk (2005), I define technicalization as an increased focus and dependence on technical innovations to facilitate social processes. The modern commercial Everest industry would not be possible without technicalization, but this reliance on innovation has created dependence on specific technical features and institutions and makes them contested spaces. Certain technical features and systems – reliance on standard routes and fixed lines, Everest reporting, the growth of Nepali outfitters, increasing professionalism in the Nepali climbing community, and relentless recruiting of, and expansion of duties for, rank-and-file HAWs have all contributed to the Everest industry's ability to keep pace with ever-growing demand by

international mountaineers. However, the effects of increasing commercialization of adventure on the Everest industry's participants remains largely unknown. In this expanding economy, technicalization has become a relational practice in the sense that it has and continues to alter preexisting social relationships and hierarchies with unknown consequences.

While the public Everest consensus portrays Himalayan mountaineering as a collaborative pursuit between Global North and Nepali actors, the current commercial paradigm on Everest instead reinforces social and cultural segregation. The vastly different motivations for climbing influence the ways in which risk and reward is experienced by differently-situated actors, which colors proximate sociocultural interactions. In the face of these challenges, Global North and Nepali hidden transcripts find their power to rationalize the features of the new Everest. The Global North hidden transcript views the growing influence of Nepali expedition operators, guides, and HAWs with suspicion, their seeming insularity, unpredictability, and newfound penchant for action a threat to their summit aspirations and traditional Global North control over the Everest industry. The Nepali hidden transcript, by contrast, hinges on a growing recognition of the risks incurred by many Nepali participants in the Everest industry but manifests itself in an increasing inability to exercise power and influence in a system that they increasingly perceive themselves to be dangerously dependent on but inextricable from. Against the backdrop of concurrent and related political economic reorganizations, the fragmented and volatile social conditions on Everest proved the genesis of Maoist rumors in 2014 that spoke directly to the anxieties of Everest's hidden transcripts.

Standard Routes, Fixed Lines, and Everest Reporting

As with most mountains that are climbed commercially, Everest concentrates climbers

onto a relatively small number of standard routes that present the least objective difficulty. The vast majority of Everest climbers attempt either the North Col route from the Tibet Autonomous Region or the South Col route from Nepal, the first two routes on the mountain to be successfully ascended. Although numerous variations and alternate routes exist, their objective difficulty makes them difficult for even skilled climbers. It is not surprising then, that these routes became the most commonly climbed routes for international teams in the expeditionary period because they offered the best chance for summit success, nor is it surprising that they have become routes climbed almost exclusively in the commercial period.

The vast numbers of people ascending Everest by these two routes creates a number of problems, among them overcrowding and dangerous delays on popular summit days. However, concentrated climbing has allowed the development of a semi-permanent physical infrastructure in fixed lines. In their simplest form, they are little more than a length of climbing rope attached to the mountain by oversized snow stakes called pickets. Everest boasts the most impressive collection of fixed lines on any mountain in the world; each year the SPCC's Icefall Doctors set thousands of meters of fixed lines between Base Camp and Camp II. In the Khumbu Icefall, they add 35 to 40 ladders each year to allow climbers to bypass crevasses and other hazards. Clipped into the fixed lines with an ascender, climbers can navigate dangerous terrain quickly in relative safety while following a virtual superhighway to the summit. From a technical perspective, though, fixed line operation is rarely so straightforward. Because the mountain moves beneath it, it requires daily adjustment to prevent it becoming impassible, necessitating dozens of hazardous trips for the Icefall Doctors and others into the Icefall to adjust ladders, pickets, and lines. From a social perspective, it plays a large role in how proximate and social relations play out on the mountain itself, as well as how Everest climbing is perceived in the international media.

On large mountains, fixed-line soling has replaced traditional methods where entire teams climb roped together for safety. Most of the terrain on Everest makes this kind of climbing impracticable, so the Everest industry depends heavily on fixed lines. While anyone is theoretically free to climb any route on the mountain with the proper permits, the complex logistics required to do so mean that foreign mountaineers depend almost solely on organizations like the SPCC and the routes they establish. Whereas ascents of other faces were common in the days of small teams and fast climbers, they are only very rarely attempted today because the standard routes offer the safest and most efficient path to the top and best chance of summit success. This individualistic, objective-driven climbing perfectly mirrors the individuality of the commercial era in the sense that it largely absolves climbers of accountability to others and enables diffusion of collective social responsibilities. It also creates great difficulties when the use of the fixed lines is taken away, as this renders Everest climbing virtually impossible.

Additionally, some mountaineers argue that the fixed lines are a form of cheating that allow relatively inexperienced people to climb, and their difficulties in doing so create hazardous conditions for other climbers. On some days, hundreds of climbers can wait for hours to traverse sections of fixed lines because of slow climbers, climbers in distress, or other problems. Traffic jams on or below the fixed lines have caused or exacerbated a number of incidents on Everest, including the 1996 disaster. The sociotechnical problems related to use of the fixed lines creates problems on the mountain itself, but images of traffic jams and incidents broadcast around the world also become symbolic of troubles on Everest and easy fodder for the industry's critics.

On April 27, 2013, Everest's now-infamous brawl both threatened the viability of the fixed line system and generated international controversy. Although accounts conflict, it appears that three notable foreign mountaineers – Ueli Steck, Simone Moro, and Jonathan Griffith –

ascended above Camp II, apparently in violation of a community agreement not to climb while the fixed lines were being set. Ice dislodged by the climbers subsequently injured one of the HAWs, and when the HAWs demanded that the climbers come down Moro shouted Nepali profanities into his radio that were broadcast to teams all over the mountain. When the trio arrived back at Camp II, they were greeted by over a hundred angry HAWs at Camp II. Further profanities were exchanged and a violent confrontation broke out that left Steck and Moro injured and eventually had to be broken up by bystanders, including American guide Melissa Arnot. The trio beat a hasty retreat back to Kathmandu, and Steck, shocked by the violence and condemnation they encountered, vowed to never climb in Nepal again (Neville 2013).

The 2013 incident exacerbated divisions between many Global North and Nepali actors. First, it established the fixed lines a sacrosanct community property. Many Global North mountaineers believe it was within the rights of the foreign climbers to bypass the fixed lines, but that the HAW worker response seemed to indicate that anyone not following the “proper” route would be dealt with harshly. No such prohibition actually exists, but the strong response created the belief that the HAW community has the ability to halt climbing at will and enforce moratoriums as they see fit. Often overlooked is the fact that Steck, Moro, and Griffith were probably at fault of precipitating the incident, regardless of the subsequent reaction. Many Global North members resent the choice between paying to use fixed lines on standard routes and hoping they remain open, or risking the natural perils of Everest and the wrath of the HAW community. Stuck in this conundrum, several Global North members I interviewed described themselves as “hostages” of the Everest industry and the commercial paradigm.

Second, the retreat of Steck, Moro, and Griffith was generally portrayed as a moral victory for the HAWs in media accounts as a defiant statement against foreigners, who were

characterized as villains in this new narrativization that ran counter to the public Everest consensus. When queried about whether the brawl was an isolated incident or symptomatic of some deeper resentment, participant Tashi Sherpa told Adikari (2014):

The resentment was always there. But incidents like this didn't occur before because Sherpas didn't take offense to trivial matters. But this time around, it was different. Earlier, most Sherpas were uneducated and they would grin and bear it. Earlier, we had suppressed our feelings. ...this incident was waiting to happen, and it will happen again as long as Sherpas are humiliated...Now they have become more confident.

Coverage and reaction to this event elicited predictable responses. Many of the Nepalis I interviewed viewed the 2013 incident, as Tashi Sherpa did, as a justifiable, if extreme, reaction stemming from the general mood among HAWs on Everest. Conversely, the actions of the HAWs were criticized by nearly all of the foreign guides and climbers I spoke as either entirely inappropriate or disproportional to the perceived offence. Video of the incident shot by bystanders later circulated among the Global North climbing community and later made the film festival rounds in the short documentary film *High Tension* (2013), which graphically depicted HAWs physically and verbally assaulting Steck and Moro. While the documentary's coverage was generally balanced, optics of the incident were poor and appeared to depict simple lawlessness rather than the culmination of longstanding tensions and several preceding incidents.

The worldwide attention the 2013 brawl attracted highlighted the growing prominence of dissident narrativizations of Everest in the Global North. These viewpoints, perpetuated primarily through outside media, are difficult to classify as either a public or hidden transcript; they increasingly originate from people not affiliated with, or in the same hierarchy as, Everest industry participants, and their emergence is not particularly hidden or secret. Nevertheless, they play a significant role in defining the bounds of debate over the Everest industry's systemic features. In a sense, this ideological struggle pits an outsider dissenting transcript against an

insider Global North hidden transcript in a race to replace the failing Everest consensus.

The emergence of critical narrativizations of Everest can be traced to Jon Krakauer's reporting on the 1996 Everest disaster, which was first published in *Outside Magazine* and formed the basis for his book *Into Thin Air*. Krakauer, a climber himself, was sent specifically to investigate the increasing commercialization of the Everest industry by the mid-1990s, and his critical treatment inspired a large number of subsequent works were published by people both on and off the mountain that fateful day that offered alternative interpretations of events. The 1996 disaster, which killed eight international guides and members from several teams, represented a traumatic event that provided a rupture that allowed for Everest's public transcript to be substantively questioned for the first time. Democratization of Everest reporting replaced the official expedition accounts of the expeditionary period and opened the door for many commentators to offer judgments based on personal experience, perceptions, and opinions. Nepali perspectives were notably absent from these debates, though Everest critics claimed they gave voice to their longstanding grievances by questioning what they saw as the industry's exploitative commercialization. Such critical narrativizations of Everest were ignored by rank-and-file Global North members, who largely continued to advance a heroic vision of Himalayan adventure that, from their perspective, left Everest unpoliticized and unproblematic.

What reporting of the 2013 brawl apart from previous criticisms of the Everest industry was the emphasis placed on ordinary actors accused of perpetuating the industry's perceived social, economic, and moral failings. With memories of the 2013 still fresh, it is no surprise that opinions of, and reporting on, the 2014 incident was divided. Among the sources I analyzed, for instance, *Sherpa* is strongly pro-HAW, Schaffer's account is moderately pro-HAW, and Arnette's is not so much pro-member as is it anti-media and anti-"hater."

Such sentiments have grown increasingly common among Global North members, who tend to spend a great deal of time defending the conduct of themselves and other Global North members on Everest, or the commercial paradigm more generally. Many of these arguments revolve around claims that outsiders are not qualified to comment on Everest affairs, or that the media reporting is unbalanced because reporters have an ideological axe to grind. For example, Arnette (2014b) directly addresses the “haters” in his account of the 2014 incident:

Haters need to calm down...Most haters don't have a clue about Everest or climbing. They are just repeating tired old lines like a parrot. If you want to join the discussion, become informed, get some experience and then climb Everest. Only then are you qualified to join a conversation on how to “fix” Everest.

Similarly, an American member summed up his view of the media's reporting agenda:

The Western press has zero time for stories of people pinching pennies to get to Everest. All they want to talk about is stepping over dead bodies and exploiting the Sherpa.

Such sentiments point towards a rejection of “official” accounts of Himalayan mountaineering, represented here by the mainstream media, and the creation of a hidden, dissident one that better reflects the proximate realities of Global North members, many of who make great personal sacrifices to get to Everest only to be criticized for their roles in a much larger system whose structural features they have little individual control over.

The 2013 incident itself, and its aftermath, strongly foreshadowed important discursive features of the 2014 incident. It caused many Global North guides and members harden their stance against the HAWs, who they came to see as violent and unpredictable, and dimmed hopes that Everest climbing could proceed peacefully in the future. It also caused many to double down in defense of the Everest industry, viewing widespread negative media coverage and criticism as an attack on the legitimacy of their aspirations to climb Everest. And it highlighted the key role of sociotechnical infrastructure in precipitating intense debates over control of what amounts to

Everest's most prominent means of production.

The 2013 brawl did not cause a full rupture of the public Everest consensus because the rest of the climbing season proceeded peacefully, which limited public debate and demonstrated the situation was salvageable. However, intense debates on and off the mountain indicated that the information environment had become cacophonous, highlighted the difficulties in establishing the factual bases for events, and renewed debate over whose interests and which discursive agendas were served by various kinds of reporting. The brawl was perceived by many First World actors to have emboldened indigenous actors and shaken the balance of power upon which confidence in the public Everest consensus rested. Disorder and suspicion towards Nepali actors had become a major feature of the Global North hidden transcript; the Everest industry was no longer predictable and its participants could no longer be counted on to play out their ordained roles in the Everest drama. The Maoist rumors of 2014 provided a plausible explanation for this change, sewn up into a traumatic event that demanded closure.

Nepali Outfitters and Professionalization

Whereas Everest climbing in the expeditionary and transitional periods was primarily undertaken by small, elite teams of foreign mountaineers and their indigenous support staff, the primary goal of the contemporary commercial paradigm is to allow the maximum number of people possible to climb the tallest mountain on Earth. This orientation, which has thrived in Nepal's unregulated market and is fed by constant demand by foreign mountaineers, has necessitated the creation of a massive physical and social infrastructure to support this burgeoning industry. Demand for Everest climbing has far outstripped the ability of longstanding Global North outfitters to provide services and the ability of traditional mountaineering methods

to support ever-increasing numbers of mountaineers.

In the early commercial period, spanning roughly the early-1980s to the 1996 disaster, nearly all Global North climbers climbed with commercial outfitters based primarily in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. Seattle-based companies Alpine Ascents International (1990), Mountain Madness (1991), and International Mountain Guides (1991) were all founded during this boom, and remain, along with Rainier Mountaineering Inc. (1969) some of the most influential players in Himalayan and international mountaineering today. Leveraging local connections and fostering local talent in the Global North, these and other companies navigated the challenges of assembling ad hoc teams and scraping together sponsorship funds. Veteran guides and climbers from this period that I spoke with regard themselves as part of a special fraternity where the “rules of the game” were well-understood. An unofficial code of conduct – based on ideas of mutual cooperation, fair play, and independence – was widely regarded as the industry’s defining characteristic. Though these rules were not always followed, commercial mountaineering was seen, much as it had been during the expeditionary period, as a sort of genteel sport played among gentlemen (Isserman and Weaver 2008)

The 1996 disaster had several key effects on the industry. Intense media coverage, far from discouraging people from climbing Everest, instead created huge worldwide demand from would-be climbers, a shift dubbed the “Krakauer Effect” by several guides and observers I spoke with. The deaths of Scott Fisher and Rob Hall in the disaster, along with several other commercial pioneers during the same period, was thought by many veteran climbers to precipitate a culture shift in the industry. With many of the big names gone and people flocking to the Himalaya in ever-increasing numbers, the industry became more fragmented and frenetic as new players emerged. While Fisher had valiantly died trying to save his clients, longtime

climbers believed that such chivalry had given way to cutthroat commercial competition and summits at any cost. Whereas the 1990s were dominated by a handful of key companies and individuals, the 2000s saw dramatic growth in the proliferation of foreign commercial outfitters. Around this time, the Nepali commercial outfitter emerged as a major force in the industry.

As of the end of 2016 Nepal had over 2,400 registered expedition operators, some of which have been around since the 1960s. Of these, according a Nepali journalist I spoke with, most exist only on paper but perhaps 200 run regular mountaineering trips and up to 50 offer regular major mountaineering expeditions. Most of this growth has come in the past decade, with a huge proliferation of new companies joining what was a small cadre of respected, established outfitters. Cost and capacity are the two most common reasons cited by veteran guides and mountaineers for this booming industry and the increased numbers and prominence of Nepali outfitters. Where most Global North expedition operators charge between \$65,000 and \$80,000 for a full-service climb, and costs can rise as high as \$120,000 or more, these expedition operators claim to deliver Everest summits for less than half of that while providing similar amenities. Because they are less discerning about the clients they take on, and because their staff is often not as experienced as their counterparts working for established companies, their safety margins are considered to be lower than Global North expeditions. Despite this dubious reputation, Arentte (2014b) reports that the 2014 Everest season marked the first where the majority of Global North climbers climbed with Nepali companies, a figure that will only increase as the hundreds of summit hopefuls that converge on Everest each year demand commensurate expansion of industry capacity

The public Everest transcript was slow to account for this shift. The hidden truth however, long unacknowledged in the public Everest consensus, is that Global North outfitters

have never actually operated openly in Nepal in the commercial period. By law, most foreign companies are legally barred from operating in Nepal, including foreign expedition operators. As a result, Global North companies must contract with local expedition operators, who essentially serve as docents and conduct ground operations their behalf. Some of these partnerships date back nearly 30 years, to the very beginning of the commercial period. For the most part these arrangements tend to work well; international expedition operators have the proximity and familiarity to market and recruit clients in Global North countries, and local operators have the connections to navigate bureaucracy, hire expedition staff, and facilitate the complex logistics that major expeditions entail.

While this arrangement works well on the back end, it sometimes creates confusion of the ground. In some cases, local companies operate under their own name; in other cases they operate under the name of their foreign counterpart. They may work for different international operators from year to year, and they may work for multiple operators simultaneously. Many of these companies run expeditions or provide other services independent of their relationship with international operators, creating further confusion and making identification of who is actually in control very difficult. Crucially, this dynamic also creates a kind of plausible deniability in which both sides can reasonably assume they are operating in good faith while others are failing, a handy escape clause in the case of accidents or incidents that dissipates responsibility and accountability on the part of expedition operators and implicitly shifts it to HAWs. Critics of the industry contend that this arrangement, while economically expedient, is further evidence of increasing corruption and moral ambiguity on Everest.

Increasing professionalization of the Nepali adventure travel industry is also a point of contention. Thanks to the proliferation of basic mountaineering trainings offered by such

organizations at the Nepal Mountaineering Association and the Khumbu Climbing Center, many HAWs now have at least some formal technical training. This training is generally perceived by both Nepali and Global North actors to have increased the overall level of technical ability and professionalism in the industry. At the same time, other Nepalis have pursued advanced trainings both in Nepal and abroad, and over 30 are now certified IFMGA guides. These guides have formed the nucleus of an emerging indigenous sport climbing tradition increasingly independent of Global North funding, support, and motivation.

The increasing proliferation of Nepali outfitters and the increasing professionalism of Nepali mountaineering has been met with mixed reaction among the guides and veteran mountaineers I interviewed. While some interviewees expressed admiration that Nepalis are reclaiming Everest for their own, others expressed concern that the proliferation of cut-rate, fly-by-night operators are responsible for some of the more flagrant safety and environmental violations. Further, the Nepali character of the industry is seen as increasingly cosmopolitan and educated, a departure from traditional images of HAWs as simple mountain people. Similar to the arguments that connected educated activists to the Maoists, many Global North mountaineers believe the ultimate goal of this new generation of Nepali guides is to take control of the Everest industry. Why should they be content making a few thousand dollars a season, when they have the skills to run expeditions themselves? They see a rift between older HAWs who have made a living supporting Global North expeditions and a newer generation of mountaineers who seek their own destiny, and they feel that the “hotheads,” as Brice describes them, are winning. Indeed, all but a few IFMGA guides are either Sherpa from marginal areas or non-Sherpa, further evidence of a demographic shift that is only beginning to be appreciated. But many other Global North climbers who care little for such distinctions and are willing to overlook any such

qualms in return for paying the lowest price possible for an Everest shot.

The Nepali guides that I interviewed, however, point to a different reality. Their level of skill has indeed increased dramatically in recent years, and only continues to grow with the cumulative effect of training programs and more years of experience. However, their overseas travel has indicated to them not that they are being underpaid, but that the Nepali guiding industry and standards of professionalism still lag well behind similar economies in places like the United States and Europe. Even large and established Nepali companies remain at a significant competitive disadvantage in every area except price; their ability to manage global logistics, retain trained and experienced staff, and recruit international clients remains rudimentary. Several opined that that Nepali outfitters are at least fifteen to twenty years away from being able to compete directly with Global North outfitters, even as partnerships between Nepali and Global North outfitters have proved beneficial to both sides.

One of the pervading currents of the hidden Nepali transcript is a persistent fear that Global North companies and mountaineers will at some point leave Nepal *en masse*, something that they think would prove devastating to the country's economy and the development of the industry, and reveal the extent to which many Nepali actors have become deeply dependent on the current system. As soon as Global North actors stop believing that Nepal is Himalayan Shangri-La they seek, they believe, the mystique of Everest is finished. Growing numbers of mountaineers from India and China may make up some of the difference, but there is a strong incentive to retain dependable clienteles from nations with more established mountaineering traditions. Despite the role of Global North actors in creating systemic inequities, they are simply seen as too valuable in the current paradigm to lose. The prevalence of cut-rate Nepali outfitters with little regard for professionalism, and unpredictable events like the 2014 incident, are seen as

the primary threats to the Nepali mountaineering industry's long-term survival and development. This desire to protect the industry's future was the driving force behind both agitation for worker's rights and informal outreach efforts of many Nepali guides after the disaster, and a catalyst for the collective and largely unsuccessful effort to dispel rumors, recall appealing images, and reassure climbers as the season veered toward chaos.

While many Global North guides are well aware of how far the Nepali industry still has left to go and the benefits of collaboration, these subtleties are lost on most Global North climbers. When members sign up for expeditions they expect a classic Himalayan mountaineering experience where their climb is run by Global North guides accompanied by Nepali support staff. Instead, they are likely to encounter members of their expedition staff with equal or even greater experience than their guides, who exercise decisive control over their staff and serve as powerful social and logistical facilitators. The fact that they seem to wield the real power is a discomfiting development, one that upends stereotypes about the passive Himalayan superman and opens the possibility that Global North actors do not play so dominant a role in the industry as they are perceived to in the public Everest consensus. Despite the uneasy acceptance of this growing role that characterizes the Nepali hidden transcript, it becomes easy for the Global North public transcript to characterize growing professionalization as a political threat, and imagine that educated guides and *sirdārs* could play foreign mountaineers and HAWs against each other. Labor activism and pro-worker advocacy on a large and very visible scale was unwelcome, and the fact that some of the key figures involved were distantly associated with the CPN (UML) was enough to suggest Maoist involvement. For both First Nepali and Global North actors, fundamental questions of power, control, and influence are deeply inscribed in hidden transcripts.

High Altitude Labor

This investigation has repeatedly touched on the role of HAWs on Everest and the ways in which they were supposedly involved in the 2014 incident. However, what exactly what their duties entail and how their situation in the industry mediates their outlook and participation has not yet been explored. While broad structural features and interactions between elites are useful for developing and maintaining public transcripts and broad consensuses, the dyadic relationship between Nepali HAWs and Global North commercial clients is perhaps the most important for both reinforcing and subverting them. While Global North and Nepali elites likely seem interested in maintaining the Everest industry's status quo, it seems likely that HAWs and commercial clients have both little interest in doing so and that their viewpoints on opposite sides of the industry's front lines would pit them in direct opposition to each other. The discursive effects of public and hidden transcripts are felt most acutely in these proximate personal interactions on Everest, and it is here that both Global North and Nepali hidden transcripts become apparent. The specific hidden transcript anxieties of rank-and-file HAWs becomes particularly important for understanding why rumors of Maoist involvement were adopted by Nepali actors.

Himalayan mountaineering has always required a massive labor input; the 1953 Everest expedition, for instance, employed 33 climbing Sherpas and over 400 porters to support a small team of European climbers. Expeditions in the commercial period are not nearly so large, but on the expeditions I participated in it was not unusual for there to be a 1:1 or greater ratio of support staff to expedition members. Of the roughly 2,000 people that assemble at the Nepal and Tibet Base Camps over half are Nepali or Tibetans, with many working as porters, cooks, and kitchen boys. While HAWs are essential to expedition, they are outnumbered by those in low-prestige

positions. Amongst expedition staff there is a strict social hierarchy based on tenure and experience; recruits serve as porters, and progress up through the ranks until they eventually become a HAW or a *sirdār* in charge of a cadre of support staff. A lucky few, with the benefit of further training and the right connections, might become owners of their own companies someday, a path that a number of my interviewees took to becoming key figures in the industry.

The recruitment of expedition staff usually happens in an organic and informal manner. Often single individual (or several individuals) employed by an expedition operator will serve as a sort of village recruiter, and it is not unusual to see several members of extended families employed on a single expedition. In this way, kinship and other strong social relationships have become institutionalized in the Himalayan adventure travel industry. The fact that many people on an expedition are often related challenges the notion that these employment relationships are inherently exploitative. Instead, it can create a sense of unity and shared purpose among teams of expedition staff¹¹ and constitute an imposing social faction in the eyes of Global North expedition operators, guides and members. It is also important to note that these close relationships also magnify the effect of deaths and injuries in the mountains.

Outfitters claim that having a large and experienced staff is essential to expedition success, as it means that climbers receive maximum support during their climbs. Many outfitters now offer climbers the chance to hire one or more personal HAWs for additional expense, claiming this increases the chance of a successful summit, especially for inexperienced climbers, because they receive more personalized attention and additional support staff can help to carry the climber's personal equipment and be ready to assist with daily tasks. One Nepali expedition

11. By contrast, social cohesion among members of trekking expedition staff generally seems to be far weaker. Because the trekking industry has fewer barriers to entry than mountaineering, who works in the industry, especially at its lower levels, tends to be much more a matter of economic convenience and proximity rather than deliberate recruiting. This, and the lack of kinship ties, creates greater opportunities for exploitation.

operator recommends inexperienced climbers “take two Sherpas instead of one, ten bottle of oxygen instead of five” for an increased safety margin. The need for large numbers of support staff who have at least some technical skill has created intense pressures on the market to deliver a labor force with the necessary qualifications, and although the NMA and the KCC graduate dozens of students every year the demand for HAWs still far outstrips this supply.

The acute shortage of skilled labor is compounded by several factors. Many of the most experienced HAWs now serve in management roles, either as *sirdārs* on the mountain, as administrative and executive staff of outfitters, or as NGO employees or consultants. No small number have been killed or injured, or have retired from climbing. While no solid data exists on turnover, it is generally believed to be relatively high. Despite the fact that many HAWs intend to work in the industry for decades, and some do, stress and physical demands of the job often catch up quickly. Many others retire due to social pressure and the desire to spend more time with their families and pursue less-risky professions. Those who remain tend to be younger and less experienced than the staff they replace. While more HAWs than ever complete high-level trainings or go on to become highly-credentialed guides, they represent a smaller segment of the industry than ever before, likely leading to a net decrease of expertise in the industry.

The pervasive belief that many of Everest’s problems can be fixed simply by “taking more Sherpa,” as one Nepali expedition operator believed, reveals a great deal about the mindset of many expedition operators and expedition members. In its basic form, this indicates belief in a system where expedition support staff have been generally reduced to mere economic inputs, even accessories. One American member practically stated as such, telling me “You almost need a private Sherpa. Avoid stress and add it to the credit card. It’s just money.” Just like fixed lines and oxygen, a HAW serving as a personal assistant has become a necessary prerequisite for

climbing Everest. While they do provide valuable assistance to many climbers, dependence on high altitude labor has weakened team cohesion and a sense of self-reliance on the part of climbers. Rather than look for new and innovative ways to approach the sport of mountaineering, there has by and large been a retrenchment into methods that are flawed but offer the best chance of summit success. In the commercial period where most teams are simply a group of individuals sharing logistical support with little else in common, it has become essential. Many climbers will work more closely with personal support staff than their guides or expedition members, often to the point where it creates interpersonal problems and negatively impacts team dynamics. On summit days, when individuals are essentially left to their own devices, relationships between Global North members and their HAWs can mean the difference between life and death.

For this reason, many Global North climbers become deeply attached to their HAWs, regarding them as equals and climbing partners rather than hired helpers. Several veteran mountaineers who I spoke with climbed with the same HAW on multiple expeditions at special request to expedition operators. Many have become highly involved in the lives of their newfound friends halfway across the world, paying to send their children to school and covering other expenses, and trekking to their home villages to meet their families. Some of these relationships stretch back decades, even spanning multiple generations. Sixty years ago, Hillary and Norgay reached Everest's summit together and rarely appeared apart not only in the celebrations that followed but in later years when their paths across the Himalaya continually crossed. Their shared experiences bonded them together in the so-called "brotherhood of the rope," a hallowed community of climbers who have conquered the tallest peaks on earth. It is only fitting that latter-day adventurers following in Hillary's footsteps also have someone similar to share their adventures with them. For them, a HAW becomes an essential companion in the

pursuit of Himalayan greatness, defined by their cheerfulness, strength, and above all loyalty.

Similarly, many Global North expedition operators and guides believed that they shared a special relationship with the HAWs they had worked with for years.

Most HAWs, by contrast, do not share in this idyllic and romanticized vision of mountaineering. While many recognize the important role of Global North patronage in enabling social mobility, the relationship is still seen as fundamentally unequal. There are reasons why Global North climbers come to the Himalaya to climb instead of the other way around, and although many are unaware of the complex geopolitical realities that enable these disparities they nevertheless recognize they are disadvantaged in an unequal system. While guided clients may only make two or three trips through the Icefall, it is not unusual for support staff to pass through it dozens of times, driven by the financial incentive of being paid by the kilogram or load to take numerous trips. While they risk their lives in the Icefall, or die as they did in 2014, their clients drink tea back in base camp or update their expedition blogs. These behaviors are perceived by many HAWs to be selfish and self-centered, and many cannot understand such frivolities while they risk their lives and livelihoods on their behalf. While many will smile in public, they complain privately to each other about problem clients or onerous requests they feel compelled to carry out. Most genuinely want to do a good job, but they cannot understand why they have to accommodate needy clients who demand too much attention after coming unprepared, why employers garnish their wages, or why they are the target of continual acts of disrespect that cause them to question their motivation. They feel that they are fundamentally misunderstood; one Nepali guide confided to me that this fuels frustration toward Global North members: “What makes us upset is that [the Global North members] don’t understand what the Sherpa do.” Time and again, I listened to similar conversations play out in back rooms and mess tents, the type of

archetypal place where hidden transcripts develop out of the public gaze.

Though Nepal is slowly developing an indigenous sport climbing tradition, mountaineering generally lacks the aspirational value it holds for international climbers. It is simply a job invented for them by outsiders that many pursue because they see it as their only realistic financial option. Virtually every HAW knows someone who has been injured or killed in the industry, and the constant threat of danger weighs on them. Their Buddhist religious beliefs and the supposed promise of reincarnation does not make them immune to pain or grief as so many outsiders believe. They fundamentally reject the Global North conception of them as heroic and stoic individuals; they are mountain people who happen to be mountaineers and they celebrate the accomplishments of Nepali climbers, but they insist that it is the place and not the profession that defines them. The mountains have always provided the means for their livelihood, and although it may take a different form than in generations past it continues to do so today. Such disquiets characterize the Nepali hidden transcript.

Many Global North members have trouble making sense of this ideological disconnect. Deference to authority, shyness, and natural aversion to conflict are perceived traits of Himalayan peoples according to both Nepali and foreign interviewees. These cultural traits, along with a strict hierarchy among expedition staff, are seen as the reason front-line support staff often show extreme deference towards both their employers and their clients and reinforce the public transcript perception of subservience. However, many Global North climbers privately consider this behavior to be standoffish or antisocial, and ultimately a negative impact on expedition dynamics. Several Global North members I talked to expressed frustration that support staff seemed to shun invitations for tea and conversation, and mainly kept to themselves even when encouraged to interact more with members. More experienced mountaineers,

however, recognize that this is usually wasted effort. Because expedition support staff seem to have no interest in interacting with members, why should members make an attempt to?

This dynamic leads to several interesting consequences. First, segregation is perceived to have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships. Despite being on a commercial expedition where most clients meet for the first time on the trip, many mountaineers seek camaraderie and a sense of belonging as part of their experience, and failing to find companionship with other members and are often surprised to see their overtures to expedition staff rebuffed. As the divisions between members and staff are hardened, factionalism and the potential for ingroup-outgroup politicking within expeditions increases.

Second, this factionalism places disproportionate responsibilities on senior expedition staff like *sirdārs*, and thus disproportionate control over expedition operations. Several Nepali expedition operators argue that this arrangement is deliberately perpetuated by some expedition operators in an attempt to maintain order and prevent fraternization and untoward incidents between expedition staff and members. While harmful to team cohesion and generally against the wishes of many expedition leaders, they note that it also deprives high altitude workers of opportunities for social mobility because they cannot easily befriend Global North members. Nearly all of the Nepali expedition operators I interviewed got their start as porters, but were able to gain the training, experience, and travel opportunities to become full-fledged guides and eventually run their own company only because they met some expedition member or other and were to use the resources and connections of their Global North patron to help them climb the ladder. Regardless of whether segregation is enforced or incidental, it leads to the perception that local intermediaries and senior expedition management have nearly absolute control over support staff who are relatively powerless, and that the two groups tend to share certain ideological or

cultural perspectives that pit them against Global North guides and members.

Language, too, becomes a barrier to meaningful communication between Global North climbers and Nepali actors. As Zuckerman and Padoan (2012) note in their exploration of K2's deadliest day in 2008, the world's tallest peaks have become virtual Towers of Babel where people of many cultures speaking many languages are thrown together in stressful, often dangerous situations and expected to communicate cohesively and coherently. Because few Global North climbers speak local language and many front-line staff do not speak English, senior expedition staff and local expedition operators become translators for members and support staff linked together in essentially a drawn-out game of telephone. In an environment where communicating while affected by extreme-altitude hypoxia is difficult and physical and technology-aided communication is unreliable, speculation, conjecture, and rumors become useful vehicles for transmitting information in ambiguous contexts. For people immersed in confronting cultural contexts, language, narrative, and discourse also become important ingroup markers and mechanisms for self-preservation.

Together with cultural encounters themselves, the social mechanisms that allow or disallow certain kinds of cultural encounters to occur shape both the public and hidden transcripts of Everest. Curated interactions between expedition support staff and Global North members reinforce that public transcript vision of poor, smiling, and subservient Sherpa whose sole purpose is to facilitate their summit bids and ensure that expeditions run smoothly by serving as loyal and trusted companions. The flip side of these interactions, often stemming from the same observations, is the perception that HAWs are economically desperate, antisocial, standoffish, and where senior expedition staff and local intermediaries suddenly become powerful and omnipotent social and logistical facilitators, all discomfiting anxieties held by the

Global North hidden transcript. In this reading, the ability of Global North climbers to dictate terms and imagine themselves as latter-day explorers above the fray of petty cultural or expedition politics becomes lost, threatening the constructed identities of Global North mountaineers. The physical, cultural, and ideological disconnects with both local expedition operators and expedition staff, and the social conflict that results when they are perceived to be working in concert against them, is a key feature of the Global North hidden transcript.

The seeming insularity and power of local actors thus became a strong foundation for rumors of Maoist involvement. The hidden transcript established a disenfranchised class with antisocial tendencies that provided a popular base for revolt, a compact social organization that was well-understood by ingroup members but inscrutable to outgroup members, and a dominant and easily identifiable social class with the institutionalized power to organize and direct rebellion. It married this set of social arrangements to a dissident political ideology in Maoism with several tenuous links to the Everest industry, and from there rumors spread rampant.

It is important to note that these categorizations are not absolute. Some international climbers are indeed remorseful and introspective, especially after disasters. After a HAW was killed on her 2010 Baruntse expedition, Melissa Arnot noted “My passion created an industry that fosters people dying. It supports humans as disposable, as usable, and that is the hardest thing to come to terms with” (Schaffer 2013). But for the most part, Global North climbers have little knowledge of their role in perpetuating what many outside observers consider to be structural inequalities. Because of a vastly different imaginary of mountaineering, they also lack a clear understanding of the messy realities that HAWs face in their course of their regular duties, much less in the aftermath of tragedy.

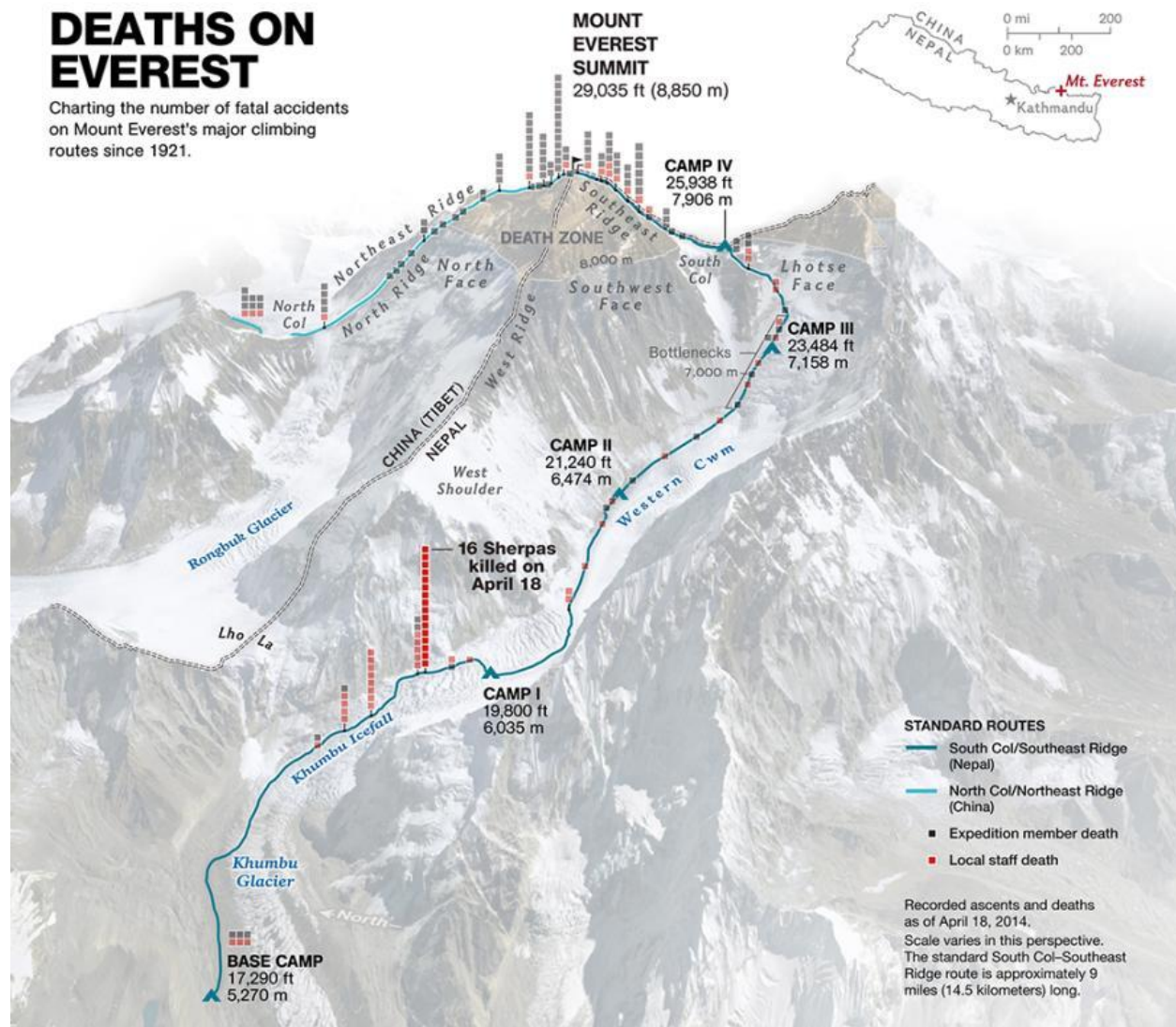


Figure 2: Between 1921 and 2014, 70 HAWs and 104 expedition guides and members died on Everest's South Col and North Col standard routes. Superimposing fatality data onto a map of Everest supports Firth et al.'s (2008) assertion that foreign climbers tended to die of illnesses and injuries at higher altitude (HAPE, HACE, fatigue, and exposure), while HAWs tended to be killed by objective hazards at lower altitude (avalanches, rockfall, and other natural occurrences). Almost twice as many HAWs (1.18 vs. 0.54) died per incident involving objective hazards than members. The greater number of deaths per incident was attributed the greater amount of time spent by HAWs transporting equipment through dangerous areas, or otherwise carrying out hazardous tasks in exposed places (National Geographic 2014).

For many Global North climbers, the risk that HAWs face is abstract because they do not face the same risks or experience the same consequences. Many of the Global North members I spoke with considered the risks that HAWs assumed no different than the risks they assumed.

One American client in *Sherpa* noted, “There’s an inherent risk in mountaineering, there’s an inherent risk in Everest, there an inherent risk in the Khumbu. I know it, and I’m willing to assume that risk.” An American member I interviewed echoed that sentiment, saying “Everyone assumes responsibility for being here, so they have a right to be on the mountain.” But clients who pass through the Icefall two or three times do not actually assume the same level of risk as a HAW who passes through it 30 times, nor is the risk calculus the same for clients who climb voluntary and HAWs whose participation in the industry may be less so. It matters who the dead are; only Global North guides and members were killed in the 1996 disaster, and only Nepali HAWs were killed in the 2014 disaster. While tragic for the entire Everest community, these events sparked intense questioning, anger, and demands for change only among the affected faction. The fact that problems are viewed as discrete rather than collective limit opportunity for dialogue and collaboration and reinforce social, political, and economic segregation.

This discussion of the Himalayan adventure travel industry’s turn to technicalization provides the final piece of the puzzle for understanding why rumors of Maoist involvement proved influential in forcing the end of the 2014 climbing season. The decision of many HAWs not to continue climbing was, in the words of one American NGO worker, “bewildering” to both Global North members and expedition operators. After all, accidents had happened before and climbing had always resumed once the initial shock and grief of the incident had been overcome and the objections of concerned family members allayed. Some of the reasons for the confusion were social; members believed that their personal relationships with HAWs were reciprocated, and expedition operators believed that they had a special relationship with their long-tenured and tight-knit local staff who were uniquely motivated to return to work for them. Other reasons were cultural; in the wake of the tragedy many Global North members insisted that carrying on was

the best way to honor the dead, while HAWs lost all motivation to return to the mountain. Still others were economic. For people who supposedly needed the money so badly, the decision to turn around would prove costly financially. Their unwillingness to climb made them “ungrateful” in the opinion of several of my Global North interviewees, who saw their actions as a rejection of one of the most lucrative opportunities in Nepal. This was seen not only as a betrayal of trust, but a clear challenge to their preconceived notions of the proper role and disposition of expedition staff that threatened a public Everest consensus built on Global North superiority and unquestioning loyalty of the system’s Nepali actors.

Based on my conversations with Nepali guides and HAWs, it is clear that the decision by many to not continue climbing was not made as rashly or lightly as many Global North members believed. While many stood to lose money most HAWs on the mountain had already received their base salary, making the financial hit more palatable. But the social repercussions of the deadliest disaster in the Nepal Himalaya up to that point were far more powerful. The loss of relatives and friends weighed heavily on many, as did the pressure from their families not to continue. However, despite the tragedy, many Nepali guides and HAWs believed that refusing to climb outright to climb would destroy the credibility of Nepali actors, harm their future employment prospects, and damage perceptions of Nepal as an attractive adventure travel destination, all key anxieties Nepali hidden transcript. Just as importantly, such a decision would also cause them to lose face. Many HAWs had decided not to continue climbing soon after the initial incident, but needed a way out that would allow them to do so. Once Maoist rumors began to spread, the appeal of claiming that the end of the season was a result of external forces rather than their own reluctance to continue became obvious.

The possibility that HAWs had an incentive to perpetuate Maoist rumors is first put

forward by Schaffer, who postulates that many expedition operators believed what their staff told them because they had no reason to assume otherwise. *Sherpa*, however, depicts a curious sequence of events that hints at a deliberate – though not necessarily conscious – process of collective narrative building by both Global North and Nepali actors and a deliberate decision to promote and perpetuate a certain vision of Maoist rumors.

The scene begins as Russell Brice breaks the news of the end of the season to his clients after Minister Acharya's visit failed to quell unrest, relating a dark narrative that speaks to common anxieties and conveys a sense of helplessness:

Yes, we had one avalanche. Unfortunately it killed a lot of people. That's no reason to stop the expedition... We know that there's only four or five guys that are causing this problem, but then they incite 300 odd guys. When you have mob rule, what can you do? Effectively, what these militant Sherpas are saying is if our Sherpas go through the Icefall, they'll beat them up.

Brice's statement neatly encapsulates the many of discursive features of the alleged Maoist involvement discussed so far, such as belief that the unrest's origins were external, that its leadership is small but its following large, and that its threats are directed at not at members but at expedition staff. Apparently unconvinced, someone in the crowd asks, "Who told them?" Brice responds, "That's the word that comes to them," suggesting an indeterminate origin.

In the next scene, Brice is seen in his mess tent with his staff. He tells them that believes that they want to climb but wish to respect the dead. Noting that "We're all afraid," Brice tells them that he knows they are being threatened, and that he understands the gravity of their position. "Before it was always friendly, smiley Sherpa, always helping. These guys have spoiled your reputation," he says. The group gathered remains silent, their heads down. No one says anything when Brice asks if anyone has heard anything about the threats. "I'm afraid for you, so we have to stop expedition." Brice's tone and language seems deliberate, as if he is trying to lead

them to this inevitable conclusion.

Later, over a montage of camp being broken down, Phurba Tashi deliberately says, “I didn’t receive any threats from other people,” suggesting that there was a deeper reason for apparently acquiescing quietly to Brice’s interpretation. As helicopters whisk clients away, Sumit Joshi shares a telling quote:

I think the expedition organizers knew in their hearts what their Sherpa want, but they couldn’t tell that clearly to their clients. It’s just the excuses they are using to draw the blame on somebody else.

While this sequence of events depicts the decision-making process and interpersonal and intercultural dynamics of a single team, it is not difficult to imagine a similar process of rationalization taking place simultaneously in others. Blaming the threats of others, whether real, exaggerated, or fabricated, provided not only a concise narrative that rationalized the ragged end of the Everest climbing season, but also the opportunity to make a relatively clean retreat from a situation in full disarray. Whether he was reading his own interpretation of events onto his staff or implicitly proving them a way out, or both, Brice clearly believed the agitation and the threats were real and this became the official reason for Himex suspending its expedition. There was a clear benefit to him as an expedition operator to lay the blame on external forces, but there was also clear benefit to both his clients and his staff in believing the same thing as it doing so ultimately absolves them, in their eyes and the eyes of others, of personal responsibility of the 2014 incident and provides a level of plausible deniability.

At the last, perpetuating Maoist rumors ultimately accomplished the same discursive work for expedition operators, guides, members, and HAWs. The 2014 incident, apart from being a devastating human tragedy, created deep financial and social consequences that reverberated throughout the Everest industry and beyond. But though it revealed painful fissures

and longstanding divisions among various factions as blame was directed to many different parties, the implicit consensus that shadowy forces beyond the control of any of the Everest industry's participants may have actually blunted feelings of acrimony towards any particular group and shielded the commercial paradigm as a whole from greater scrutiny. The anger of members unable to make summit attempts was real. The anger of HAWs towards the government was real. These and other storylines are indeed real, and the problems they raise legitimate, but more powerful was a near-universal belief that for all its flaws the Everest industry is too big and too important to its participants to fail entirely. By blaming agitation on the Maoists, fringe players who could plausibly have been involved but otherwise played no regular role in Everest industry, it became possible to claim that the political unrest that resulted in the end of the 2014 climbing season was somehow anomalous or unlikely to be repeated. The implication of distancing the instigators from the Everest community is that the genesis of the 2014 incident were not intrinsic to the industry itself and thus there were no pressing problems that would prevent it from continuing in the future. "Clinging to ghosts," as one Nepali journalist put it, thus absolved the industry's participants from responsibility for the situation that had been created. The adoption of a common Maoist scapegoat, in essence, both a vehicle for a diverse set of Nepali and Global North hidden transcript anxieties and represented a novel effort to conceal the Everest industry's major underlying structural problems in a moment of crisis, was in some sense a calculated characterization that would allow ultimately climbing to continue in subsequent years. Out of chaos and confusion, a new public Everest consensus had been born.

Conclusion

In this section, I have discussed the role of sociocultural interactions in creating the

fragmented and volatile conditions that allowed Maoist rumors to take hold. The increasing technicalization of the Himalayan adventure travel industry, especially on Everest, has altered proximate social interactions through the creation of technical features and institutions and should be considered a relational practice as it has altered preexisting social relationships and hierarchies. The consequences of such technical innovations in the contemporary commercial period, such as reliance on standard routes and fixed lines, the growth of Nepali outfitters, increasing professionalism in the Nepali climbing community, and growing demands placed upon rank-and-file HAWs, remain poorly understood. Yet it is apparent that these have become contested spaces, and that the industry's heavy reliance on innovation to drive sustained growth has created a set of practices built on a diffusion of collective responsibility, a lack of meaningful avenues for communication and cross-cultural understanding, and starkly differing philosophies of self-determination, agency, reward, and risk. These anxieties define the hidden Global North and Nepali transcripts of Everest.

This orientation set the stage for confusion and conflict during the 2014 climbing season. Thanks to the brawl on Everest the year before tensions between Nepali and Global North actors were already high, fueled by divisive media coverage. When Maoist rumors emerged, they were adopted by Global North guides and members who had long sought to rationalize the rise in the prominence of Nepali outfitters, increasing professionalism in the Himalayan adventure travel industry, and alienation from the HAWs they worked with who no longer appeared as the cheerful and loyal companions of legend. Likewise, Maoist rumors were adopted by HAWs and other Nepali actors as means to preserve appearances of an unproblematized Everest industry, cover their reluctance to continue climbing, and save face. The wide adoption of Maoist rumors across the spectrum of Everest industry participants points to a vested interest seeing the industry

endure by blaming the unrest on external forces and diverting scrutiny from both industry participants and the commercial paradigm itself.

Conclusion: What Transcript Analysis Reveals

In this investigation, I have sought to explain why rumors of Maoist involvement proved influential in ending the 2014 climbing season on Mount Everest. Although these rumors seem incongruous and out of place in a country mythologized as a Himalayan Shangri-La, they emerged as the favored explanation by Global North actors for the political unrest at Everest Base Camp immediately after a serac fall killed 16 Nepali HAWs in the Khumbu Icefall because they succinctly and cogently encapsulated a specific set of anxieties and preconceptions about the Everest industry deeply rooted in the Nepali and Himalayan experiences.

The 2014 disaster, the deadliest in the Nepal Himalaya up until that point, came as the Everest industry was in the midst of a rapid and fitful transition. The traditional narrativization and appealing images of Himalayan mountaineering as a heroic enterprise undertaken by valiant mountaineers and their impoverished, smiling, and loyal “Sherpa” companions corresponded little to the realities of the contemporary commercial paradigm, where the increasingly cosmopolitan character of the industry and the growing power of Nepali actors made such traditional characterizations untenable. The Everest industry, long considered to be a collective enterprise between Global North and Nepali actors, had instead become a lucrative economic machine where a focus on sustained growth led to diffusion of collective and individual responsibilities, decreasing possibilities for cross-cultural understanding, and polarizing ideologies of self-determination, agency, risk, and reward. The so-called Everest consensus, jointly created from Global North and Nepali discourses long presented as unpoliticized and

unproblematized, found itself increasingly beset by political unrest, well-publicized incidents, and the growing number of dissident viewpoints enabled by new media and popular reporting, which hardened ideological stances across a broad spectrum of the industry's participants. The public Everest transcript's discursive project of justifying the continuation of the industry in its current form and reflecting what Global North and Nepali actors wanted to see rather than what was actually there was in jeopardy.

This commercial Everest paradigm, and its attendant contestations, had come of age against a backdrop of a turbulent Nepali state-building process. The Nepal Civil War, which lasted from 1996 to 2006, led to end of the constitutional monarchy and the establishment of multiparty democracy in Nepal. The Maoist insurgency, waged by the CPN (M) legitimized strategies of coercion and intimidation in the Nepali context and catapulted parties like the CPN (UML) to ruling coalitions and solidified many of the social transformations Maoists sought as the Nepali national agenda. But the continued weakness of the central Nepali state even in the democratic period – ironically the product of Global North anticommunist efforts and dependency on foreign aid – provided an important opening for non-state political actors to fill governance voids and deliver both public and private services. The unclear bounds of state power manifested itself in frustrated expectations of governance in Khumbu among both Global North and Nepali actors. At the same time, increasing democratization and education were seen as both destabilizing political forces and social differentiators, which was perceived to have created and emboldened a new generation of Nepali dissidents and activists. In an environment of intense politicization where official accounts were distrusted and the elites could not be relied upon to tell the truth, rumors and speculation became important mechanisms for narrative-building and sense-making.

The 2014 Everest disaster catalyzed the creation of Maoist rumors that spoke to both Nepal's volatile political sphere and the fragmented social sphere on Everest. A traumatic and seemingly incomprehensible event created an ambiguous space where dominant discourses could be anonymously engaged with and challenged, the hidden transcripts embodied by Maoist rumors revealing those aspects of the Everest industry that are normally inconvenient or irrelevant but quickly take on significance when mobilized to explain anomalous events. Aided by the unusual ferocity with which Everest narratives distills intersectionalities and a traumatic and ambiguous historical moment, hidden Global North and Nepali transcripts that attempt to rationalize Everest's new social, political, and economic landscape emerged as credible challenges to the jointly-constructed public Everest transcript.

It is ultimately impossible to determine whether Maoist involvement was real, exaggerated, or simply the product of Everest's relentless echo chamber. However, the actual existence of Maoist activists or Maoist threats is secondary to their utility to rationalizing the 2014 incident. After all, rumors are vital vehicles of information not because they are necessarily true or false but because they neatly package the prevailing gestalt of a concept or situation for transmission and consumption. When Global North actors saw political agitation seemingly precipitated by a few key figures with tenuous connection to the CPN (UML), they could have connected the dots in any number of ways. But because of the prominence of the Maoists in Nepal's recent political history, their interest in labor agitation, their anti-imperialist worldview and rhetoric, and their ability to rally disaffected peoples and garner popular support, the events of 2014 seemed to check all the boxes of Maoist involvement. There are many other compelling explanations why events may have played out as they did, and certainly other theories have greater grounding in history and orientation of the Everest industry, but none were nearly as

succinct as a Maoist connection for explaining why the Everest industry suddenly faced a revolt that ran counter to nearly everything it was portrayed to be.

The selection of Maoist rumors has other, wider-reaching discursive effects. It, and the disaster itself, revealed quite dramatically the existence of hidden Global North and Nepali transcripts that had developed in parallel to the public Everest consensus and only emerged in the aftermath of a traumatic event. Nepali actors abandoned the public Everest transcript because they are far more dimensional than their faded portrayal as Himalayan supermen suggest, and because their dangerous and often thankless reality remains underappreciated by both the government and many Global North actors. Global North actors abandoned the public Everest transcript because the apparent revolt by HAWs revealed to the extent to which their conceptions of themselves atop the social hierarchy of the Everest industry no longer reflected their actual place in it. Collectively, these anxieties constitute, respectively and in very broad terms, the essential features of the hidden Global North and Nepali transcripts.

Maoist rumors gained wide acceptance because they encapsulated and addressed the anxieties of both hidden transcripts. They allowed Global North actors to rationalize the end of Himalayan mountaineering as a heroic, unproblematized, and unpoliticized pursuit, and Nepali actors to rationalize their shifting role in an industry where they found themselves both essential and expendable and save face amidst a difficult choice to continue climbing or head home after the deaths of 16 of their compatriots. Just as the public Everest consensus was jointly adopted by both groups – albeit for different reasons – so too were rumors of Maoist involvement seized upon by Everest’s diverse shareholders. Ascribing responsibility for the events of 2014 to external forces beyond control implicitly absolved all parties actually in the Everest industry from responsibility and allowed the current commercial paradigm to persist largely

unquestioned. Despite short-term acrimony, the collective acceptance of a less collaborative and more troubled vision of Everest that nevertheless facilitates the continuation of the industry in the long term in its current form is remarkable. The emergence of Maoist rumors suggest that a new public Everest transcript is being born from this process of recontextualization.

Just as the 1996 disaster brought Everest into the worldwide spotlight, the unrest of the 2014 climbing season has done little to slow the relentless growth of the Everest industry. If anything, and despite a second consecutive season cancellation after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, it has only contributed to its popularity as intense debates continue to rage over the industry's equity and sustainability and record numbers of mountaineers continue testing themselves against the tallest mountain on Earth each successive year. In many respects the Everest industry is too big to fail and will endure as long as there are mountaineers who want to climb and expedition operators, guides, and support staff willing to help them do it, and the public Everest consensus will always be inextricably tied to accomplishing this goal. But as long as this is the case alternate and dissident readings of the industry will continue to be negotiated in the back rooms of Khumbu teahouses and in the mess tents at Base Camp, ready to emerge above ground at the hinge moments of history to rationalize disaster, reorganize longstanding systems of belief, and lead the Everest industry to a new and equally contested equilibrium.

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