

Macalester College

From the Selected Works of Arjun Guneratne

2009

"Comment on Ann Rademacher, 'When is Housing an Environmental Problem?'"

Arjun Guneratne, *Macalester College*



Available at: https://works.bepress.com/arjun_guneratne/48/

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

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

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

Arjun Guneratne

Department of Anthropology, Macalester College, 1600 Grand Avenue, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55105, U.S.A. (guneratne@macalester.edu). 7 IV 09

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shubhra Gururani

Department of Social Anthropology, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario M3J 1P3, Canada (gururani@yorku.ca). 30 IV 09

At a time when global environmental anxieties about the future of the planet are being mapped onto alarmist concerns over the rapid pace of urbanization, particularly in the cities of the global South, Rademacher makes a very timely and highly insightful intervention in the ongoing debates on urbanization, urban ecologies, and informal housing. In this exciting essay, she presents a rich and textured account of the making and remaking of urban natures in the crucible of political turmoil, urban planning, and social change. Taking the case of Kathmandu, which was until recently mired in a protracted struggle for political transformation, Rademacher carefully tracks how a new cultural politics of belonging, mo-

rality, and citizenship is unfolding in this city through the discourses and practices of urban environmental improvement and river restoration. The richness of her analysis comes not only from her fine sensibility of the overlapping social, political, and ecological terrains of Kathmandu but also from her fine-grained analysis of the human and nonhuman actors (like the river), who actively carve the biosocial landscape. Weaving together diverse bodies of literature—urban anthropology, environmental anthropology, development studies, ecosystems science, urban planning, and environmental history—her essay forges a productive conversation among these literatures and presents a compelling narrative of how urban places come to be constituted at different moments in unintended, though regionally specific ways.

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

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