

Laura Kunreuther. 2014. *Voicing Subjects: Public Intimacy and Mediation in Kathmandu*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

In this work of beautifully theorized ethnography, Laura Kunreuther demonstrates persuasively that “we ought to attend more closely to these moments when people talk explicitly about voice or speech, for it is here where we see social conflicts and diverse subjectivities at play” (p. 246). Kunreuther’s anthropological engagement with Nepal began with her first visit in 1989–1990 and has continued through the intervening years of political and social upheaval. She is thus well supplied with ethnographic material which she uses to build her argument that

a political voice (associated with democratic participation, consciousness, and agency) and an intimate voice (associated with interior feeling, emotional directness, and authentic communication) are mutually constitutive, since both are important aspects of modern subjectivities emerging and present in contemporary Kathmandu. (p. 11)

While voice and speech have become dominant metaphors for both democratic political action and liberal self-realization, Kunreuther pushes back against the notion that voice provides direct access to consciousness and agency by highlighting “the processes of mediation that take place in and through the voice” (p. 35). Each one of her five substantive chapters traces this mediated interplay between political voice and intimate voice through extended exploration of some aspect of the everyday practices and ideologies of communication that she observed in her fieldwork.

The first chapter, focused on the controversy over whether daughters should inherit parental property (*amśa*), is located squarely at the intersection of the personal and the political, the family and the nation. The metaphor of voice was used by both proponents and opponents of daughters’ inheritance,

although in different ways. Those who argued that women were entitled to *amśa*, regardless of their age or marital status, encouraged others to “raise their voice” (*āvāj uṭhāune*) in the name of promoting women’s equal status as full citizens; on this side of the argument, *āvāj uṭhāune* came to stand for an ideal of women’s empowerment and liberal democratic citizenship. However, those who opposed women’s right to *amśa* focused on the metaphor of voice as mediating relationships between married sisters and their brothers, who are obligated to call/summon (*bolāune*) their sisters back to the family home from time to time. This practice of *bolāune* is closely tied to the persistence of loving relationships between brothers and sisters. Thus, those who opposed giving *amśa* to women often framed their position by expressing concern that giving *amśa* would result in the breakdown of these familial relationships. Kunreuther uses the *amśa* debate and the practice of *bolāune* to ground her argument that metaphors of voice are a crucial key for understanding how people conceive of themselves and others in the field of social relations. She explains *bolāune* as an example of interpellation, or hailing, a concept developed by Althusser (1971) and Butler (1997):

The process of interpellation continuously transforms individuals into subjects, even though individuals are always already subjects the moment they enter social life.... The practice of *bolāune* compels the recognition of a sister by her brother, thereby creating their differences, their identities, and their subjectivities. (p. 70)

In the second chapter, Kunreuther extends her analysis to include the metaphor of seeing another’s face, or *mukh herne*. Like metaphors of voice, the metaphor of seeing another’s face is associated with a dense cluster of expressions and practices of intersubjective interaction. To refuse to see someone’s face is a means of expressing moral judgment and breaking off relationships. Kunreuther gives many excellent examples of how personal relationships are maintained and managed through practices of *mukh herne*: to mention just one, she tells the story of a young woman whose parents refused to see her face for years after she eloped with a young man from another caste. Eventually her parents relented and were willing to see her again, but she was able to visit them only late at night, approaching their house only through alleyways and not on the main street. By not letting her parents’ neighbors see her parents welcoming her home, the young woman was able to duly uphold to

her parents' *ijjat* (honor), which she had seriously damaged when she eloped. The logics of *mukh herne* which govern such intimate family interactions are also evident in the political realm, as Kunreuther shows in her discussion of royal portraiture and of the practice of taking *darśan* from kings and political leaders.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters of the book are primarily focused on FM radio as a means of transforming subjectivities and creating public intimacy in Kathmandu. While Radio Nepal existed as a government mouthpiece from 1951 onward, privately-owned FM stations first emerged in the mid-1990s. These privately owned stations were, in their initial contracts, forbidden to broadcast news or religious or political programming; they were to be strictly for the purpose of entertainment. Nevertheless, by supporting a high degree of interaction between radio hosts and listeners, unlike the one-way communication style of Radio Nepal, FM radio quickly became a symbol of the participatory democratic politics of the 1990's. Kunreuther identifies several aspects of FM radio that led its listeners to regard it as a "transparent," "direct" form of communication. These include the sensory quality of radio broadcasts, relying only on speech and hearing; the informal, unrehearsed nature of the speech, which was in sharp contrast with the formal register of scripted Radio Nepal reports; and the emphasis on personal-life stories and the sharing of private thoughts and feelings. Although explicit discussion of political issues was initially prohibited on FM radio, Kunreuther demonstrates that "the kind of subjectivity FM broadcasting cultivates ... ultimately paves the way for a particular kind of political and intimate subject" (p. 159).

Kunreuther's in-depth case study of the FM program *Mero Kathā, Mero Gīt* (my story, my song) demonstrates what she means by the cultivation of subjectivity. The program consisted of a host, Kalyan Gautam, reading letters written by listeners of the show. The letters which were selected and edited for presentation on the show are personal narratives, usually tales of love and *duḥkha* (suffering). Gautam viewed the show as being not merely entertainment, but also an important avenue for education, *vikāś*, and raising consciousness because the show effectively taught people how to present their private thoughts in a public forum. Kunreuther explains the program as an example of what Bakhtin (1981) has called "double voicing," where the voices of the letter-writers are mediated through the voice of Gautam, who smooths out the stories of individual letter-writers to present them as the kind of passionate individual subjects that he wants them to be. By highlighting the stories of some of writers whose work Gautam chose not to present and

giving more contextual details about some of the stories which he did present, Kunreuther reveals the substantial degree of editing that shaped this program, despite listeners' perceptions of its "direct" and "unmediated" qualities.

Rumpum Connection, an FM program which featured live phone calls between Nepalis at Kathmandu and abroad, is the subject of another case study. By mediating phone conversations between distant family members and friends, the program contributed to an imagined Nepali diaspora by literally calling such a diaspora into being. The show, limited by the technological and temporal difficulties of connecting people on different continents, only aired from 2001–2005, but the sense of diaspora which it evoked is still relevant: "This ghostly presence of the diaspora, constituted through technologies of voice, evokes a pervasive sense of what it means to be Nepali within urban Nepal today" (p. 241).

My only substantial complaint about this book is that there is not more of it. In particular, I would have been happy to read a more sustained analysis of the newer technologies that mediate connections between Nepali people both within Nepal and around the world, such as Facebook, video chat, and many others. Kunreuther does make several passing references to the Internet and social media, but the relative absence of these topics from the book is likely due to the fact that the majority of her fieldwork took place before their use became as widespread as it is today. Fortunately, there are many researchers currently studying social media in Nepali society, and this book will be an excellent resource for them. It should be required reading for anyone interested in contemporary studies of Kathmandu and Nepal and will also be very useful to scholars interested in ethnographically-grounded theories of communication, semiotics, and mediation.

References

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