

Book Reviews

Christopher Howard. 2017. *Mobile Lifeworlds: An Ethnography of Tourism and Pilgrimage in the Himalayas*. New York: Routledge

This book examines Western tourists traveling to the Himalayas, particularly attending to how their imaginaries, experiences, and memories shape such journeys and intersect with late modern selfhood. It should be stated early that this is unapologetically a book about tourists rather than about the region itself. As such, it will only appeal to a subset of the readers of this journal—specifically, those with a particular interest in tourism and/or Western representations of South Asia.

After introducing various theoretical literatures in the Introduction, Chapter One specifically attends to travel in a more focused way. Howard “critically engages with the notion that tourism is necessarily a superficial activity of modern consumers” (p. 18). Drawing on both popular mythology and scholarly treatments of pilgrimage, the chapter challenges the rigid tourist/pilgrim binary, presenting these as “categories on a continuum” rather than qualitative differences in kind (p. 26). In so doing, it compellingly positions tourists as a community worthy of ethnographic study.

Chapter Two charts the historical (re)production of representations of the Himalayas. The argument is not terribly new: the Himalayas serve as “a kind of utopian antidote to modernity and its discontents” (p. 55). Unlike many other scholars, the author explicitly resists reducing these imaginaries to mere “Orientalist projections” (p. 40), showing instead how they also overlap with historical Asian representations. On the one hand, his discussion is refreshing in that it does not simply reiterate the postcolonial critique of Western knowledge/power. On the other hand, the book never really states that many of these tropes were utter fantasies, nor does it sufficiently attend to the sinister political-economic effects of colonial knowledge production. While the author notes that such knowledge emerged in a power-laden imperial context, he does not adequately reflect on the way in which it also justified and reproduced that colonial project. Unfortunately, this lack of critical edge pervades much of the book.

Howard chose five tourist-trail destinations for his multi-sited project, two in Nepal (the Kathmandu Valley and Pokhara) and three in India (Sikkim, Dharamsala, and Darjeeling). In total, the author spent three months between these sites, supplementing this with interviews conducted before and after his time in the field. On the plus side, he offers a thoughtful discussion of the difficulties involved in studying an inherently mobile, ephemeral community. However, there are also notable problems with the methods. First, a mere three months in the field is brief for any ethnographer, but particularly so for one with a multi-sited, transnational research agenda. This leaves much of the empirical data feeling “thin.” Second, this begs the question of why the project required a multi-sited approach in the first place. Breadth and diversity are self-evident justifications, but Howard does not really compare/contrast the sites. The five locations are crosscut by various political and cultural geographies, and attending to these differences would have been productive and interesting. Unfortunately, such discussions never come. Third, and perhaps most importantly, there appears to have been no significant attempt to interview Nepalis and Indians, whether as intra-regional tourists themselves or as workers in the tourism industry. To be fair, this was not the stated goal of the project. Nevertheless, Howard critiques earlier scholarship that “ignores the local contexts in which actual tourism is performed” (p. 37), and he notes that “getting involved in local life” and “entering the lifeworlds of Others” were recurring themes among tourists (p. 83). As such, the lack of attention to South Asians themselves seems strange and problematic.

The ethnography really begins in Chapter Four, which explores “the interconnections between virtual, imaginary and corporeal mobilities” (p. 69). In particular, the chapter examines the role of media in producing pre-departure expectations. Unsurprisingly, Himalayan journeys frequently revolve around Eastern spirituality, encountering local communities, and seeking self-transformation (p. 69). The author describes the media assemblages that inform travelers’ imaginaries before and during a visit, from *Indiana Jones* to magical realist novels. Howard’s ethnographic interviews are very human and tangible. One gets a clear sense of the subtle, often unconscious way in which media drive tourists to Asia (even decades after consuming such media). As throughout the book, the author could have maintained a more critical perspective on these mediated imaginaries. Many of the representations discussed are replete with patently colonial tropes, yet the author hardly discusses this. We are told of tourists for whom Tibetans in

Dharamsala represent timelessness, peace, and “all that was good and right with the world” (p. 81). Of course, one has no trouble accepting that tourists *believe* this about Tibetans, but more critical distance and reflection from an anthropologist seems appropriate and, regrettably, lacking.

Chapter Five discusses the importance of “authenticity” for tourists in the Himalayas. Howard distinguishes between two versions of authenticity: “object-oriented” and “existential.” The former has dominated scholarly thinking about tourism, where “the focus tends to be on perceptions and projections onto objects, places and even peoples believed to be pure, original, in natural or unchanged states” (p. 97). Meanwhile, the latter connotes a “self-determining freedom” and “being true to oneself” (p. 97). This second sense is the book’s main concern, enabling Howard to interpret tourists’ journeys as “both critical meta-commentaries and enactments of late modernity” (p. 94). He demonstrates how Western tourists (and some anthropologists) attempt to escape the trappings of urban, capitalist modernity—disenchantment, *anomie*, alienation, etc.—by journeying to the region. One wonders, however, how these two modes of authenticity relate to each other, given that the “existential” type in this case seems directly predicated on the “object-oriented” type—namely, imagining Himalayan landscapes and peoples through exoticizing gazes. To his credit, Howard briefly discusses the “legacy of European colonialism” and “imperialist nostalgia” (p. 104), but I would have welcomed more.

Howard’s generally uncritical perspective is justified only insofar as it leads to novel critical insights, and the author does accomplish this to some degree. By suspending a direct critique of tourists’ imaginaries, the book is able to engage with the implicit rejection of modernity that many tourists *believe* they are performing. This raises various paradoxes and contradictions at the heart of Himalayan travel: the quest for the anti-modern via modern means, the ideal of anti-consumerism being consumed, ecological harmony sought through environmentally unsustainable mobilities, etc. On this score, the book succeeds in opening new ways of thinking. However, there is some relevant scholarship on tourism in South Asia that Howard does not mention. In particular, the work of Moran (2004), Edensor (1998) and Liechty (2005, 2010, 2012) all remain absent from Howard’s discussion and reference list. Given that such previous treatments deal directly with some of the issues raised in *Mobile Lifeworlds*, engaging with them would have sharpened and strengthened the analysis. Indeed, if one could read only one work on tourism

in South Asia this year, Mark Liechty's (2017) new book deals with similar themes in a more comprehensive, "deep," and critical way.

Howard makes his most significant theoretical contribution in Chapter Six: "Accumulated travel experience, I argue, expands somatic knowledge and generates an embodied cosmopolitanism" (p. 116). Contra treatments that view tourism only as a break from the structures of everyday life, this chapter sees tourism as a means of deliberately moving beyond one's *habitus* in pursuit of expanded cultural horizons. Within a discipline that frequently casts tourists as cultural ignoramuses, Howard presents them as (self-)conscious agents. It is a nice counterbalance. More generally, it is a welcome step toward understanding the way in which mobility continuously transforms embodied subjects. However, after the lack of critical perspective in earlier chapters, the rosy portrayal of tourists here feels a bit like a loaded deck. There are only passing references to the vast inequalities structuring global (im)mobilities (e.g., p. 120).

This is not to say that the book lacks any critical consciousness. In Chapter Seven, the author discusses the increased role of communication technologies among tourists. These can "disrupt the liminality and anti-structural qualities of travel by cancelling out the possibilities of truly disconnecting" (p. 132), thereby undermining the *attempted* challenge to capitalist modernity. Following this, he describes how technological connectivity and neoliberal logics converge to render all destinations "mere exchangeable and consumable backdrops" (p. 148). The Himalayas become "one among many" possible locations "by making everywhere and everyone appear within reach" (p. 152). In addition to the well-known criticisms of tourism (e.g., objectifying Others), this welcome critique emerges from a slightly different vantage point.

Overall, *Mobile Lifeworlds* admirably attempts to take Himalayan tourists seriously on their own terms. Unfortunately, in so doing, the author misses many opportunities for critical interpretation and reflexivity. The Conclusion does offer a more critical stance, discussing such topics as the environmental, economic, and cultural impacts of global tourism. Frankly, this feels a bit disconnected, tacked on, and too-little-too-late. At less than 200 pages, *Mobile Lifeworlds* offers a unique conceptual framing that is (at least) worth considering. One hopes, however, that critical commentary and the politics of representation will feature more prominently in future editions/publications.

References

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