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Himalayan Journeys

A mobile ethnography and philosophical anthropology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

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ABSTRACT

Based on a mobile, multi-sited ethnography conducted in 2011 in Nepal and Northern India, and employing a phenomenological and philosophical anthropological approach, this thesis explores contemporary journeys to the Himalayan region as a form of pilgrimage. Situating the phenomenon in a historical framework, I explore how the practices, performances and narratives of contemporary travellers in the Himalayan region reveal broader socio-historical and recent cultural trends with regard to modernisation and global mobility. Reflecting the realities and perceived deficiencies of contemporary life, the attitudes, ideals, experiences and stories of global travellers as 'embodied cosmopolitans' expressed numerous overlapping themes. These included, for example, movement and reflection, disaffection and leaving alienated life, ideals of authenticity and utopian imaginaries. Through semiotic and phenomenological analysis and interpretation of interviews and participant observation, this thesis unfolds and critically discusses the relational politics inherent in contemporary journeys in the Himalayan region.

As a performance blending yet surpassing traditional genres of mobility such as tourism and pilgrimage, contemporary journeys in the Himalayas are viewed as a meta-social reflection of salient concerns of our times, including alienation, technologization and hyper-connectivity, relations between nature and culture and notions of 'the good life'. Such journeys are explored as reflexive quests for re-orientations or re-understandings, as well as travelling into imagined pasts and possible (alternative) futures. Being typically critical of

Western culture, travellers often demonstrated positive yet uncritical appraisal and nostalgia for all things perceived as exotic, non-modern and natural. Set against a perceived inauthentic, disenchanting and destructive West, the Himalayan region was often idealized for its natural and cultural purity and its aura as a spiritual, utopia. It is in such moral projections and utopian yearnings that we may read contemporary journeys such as those to the Himalayas and perhaps other global 'power places' as a paradoxical meta-critique and enactment of late modernity.

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