Between Space and Place in Mountaineering: Navigating Risks, Death, and Power

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Abstract

The liminal status of mountains makes them attractive destinations for adventure and related tourism and recreation activities. Stemming from critiques of Nepal's growing adventure tourism industry (cf. Payne & Shrestha, 2014; Schaffer, 2013), and recognising the centrality of Sherpas' roles within it, of interest are the ways Climbing Sherpas experience liminality in mountaineering. Liminality, an anthropological concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1960), becomes transformative as Sherpas use encounters with death and periods of uncertainty to take stock of the purpose of their lives. Moreover, analysis of narrative findings reveal that Sherpas assert individual freedom and collective agency in response to the dangers and demands of Nepal's commercial mountaineering industry, thereby shifting power relations on the mountainside. These findings challenge assumptions of immobile host populations that underlie some of the current understandings within tourism scholarship. Additionally, exploring the liminal landscapes of the mountainside draws attention to critical concerns regarding tourism (and its associated industries) as a mechanism for economic development.

Key words: *Liminal landscapes, adventure tourism, mountaineering, death, Sherpas, Nepal*

Introduction

Liminal places and spaces are tied to both physical environments, and the landscapes of our mind. Hereby place embodies a sense of human familiarity, while space represents geographical uncertainty and those coordinates of interaction which are not yet known (Downey, Kinane, & Parker, 2016; Seamon & Sowers, 2008). In many ways liminality connotes these spatial dimensions, whereby a threshold becomes "a boundary, a border, a transitional landscape, or a doorway in Simmel's sense of a physical as well as a psychic space of potentiality" (Andrews & Roberts, 2012, p. 1). The in-between nature of liminality represents freedom from traditional constrictions, but can also imply an unsettledness in which nothing really matters (Downey et al., 2016). For example, works by Shields (1991) and Preston-Whyte (2004) highlight how the ill-defined margin between land and sea contributes to the unterritorialised and liminal status of the beach, and thus marks it as a place for temporary escape.

Like the beach, mountains can be experienced as liminal landscapes. Situated at the borders – often between countries, mountains are spaces of uncertainty. They are wild and rugged places, often defined by their unpredictable weather patterns and objective dangers, making them inherently risky (Apollo, 2017; Attard, 2003; Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Thus mountains are particularly attractive destinations for adventure and related tourism and recreation activities. Beedie and Hudson (2003) contend that the locations themselves are steeped in "actual and symbolic representations of adventure" (p. 626). For instance, the summit is a feature significant to mountaineering culture, and the perils and uncertainties of reaching this limit create a fascination for many to visit mountainous landscapes. Frohlick (2003) connects the Himalayas, specifically Mt. Everest, with Löfgren's (1999) notion of the "global beach"; Everest captivates the public's imagination as a "truly global iconography" (p. 215). Although there are countless beaches (mountains in the case of this research) a select few "capture the mind's eye as *the* quintessential beach" (Frohlick, 2003, p. 529, emphasis in original). As the tallest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest was and continues to be, *the* mountain to climb, a final frontier and "popular vacationscape for extreme adventure seekers" (Frohlick, 2003, p. 529).

The mountaineering and adventure tourism industries of Nepal have seen remarkable growth since the successful summit of Mt. Everest in 1953 by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, a Nepali native, and Edmund Hillary, a visiting New Zealander (D'Aliesio, 2012; Rogers & Aitchison, 1998; Schaffer, 2013). Over 37000 visitors endeavour the popular Mt. Everest Basecamp Trek

annually, while there have been 8306 successful summits of its peak (Arnette, 2017; Mu & Nepal, 2016; Schaffer, 2013). However, critics argue that the boundaries between mountaineering and tourism are increasingly blurring, contributing to the popularity of mountains as well as the ways that mountaineering is understood and practiced (cf. Apollo, 2017; Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Pomfret, 2006). Indeed, "Mountaineering expeditions are no longer the preserve of experienced mountaineers" (Beedie & Hudson, 2003, p.632). Today, a typical expedition up one of Nepal's mountains may include seasoned-mountaineers and tourists side by side: simply those who are willing to spend significant amounts of money for the pursuit of adventure, regardless of prior experience (Beedie & Hudson, 2003; Swarbrooke, Beard, Leckie, & Pomfret, 2003; Williams & Soutar, 2009).

In the confines of commercial Himalayan expeditions, relationships on the mountainside are deeply rooted in financial power. For instance, foreign mountaineers pay tens of thousands of dollars for the privilege of climbing Mt. Everest, and Sherpas, an ethnic population of Tibetan descent (native to the highland regions of Nepal) are paid to help them reach its summit. Acting as high-altitude guides and porters, Climbing Sherpas commit themselves to securing and saving the lives of their clients by doing much of the dangerous labour like fixing ropes, setting up camps, and carrying supplies high into the mountains (Davis, 2014; National Public Radio [NPR], 2013; Peedom, 2015). Despite their efforts, it is impossible to completely eliminate the danger that is ever-present in these liminal landscapes. Every year deaths among climbers and guides continue to occur. To date, over 288 mountaineers have lost their lives attempting the Everest summit; approximately 40% of these deaths represent Sherpas and other Nepali natives (Brown, 2014; Himalayan database, 2017 as seen in Arnette, 2017).

While mountains are playscapes to some, they remain a place of work for others. Thereby the continued growth of Nepal's mountaineering and adventure tourism industries calls attention to the ways in which these liminal spaces are experienced. Of interest is not only the experiences of foreigners who come to climb, but also the local communities whose difficult and often dangerous labour facilitates the development and operation of mountains as commercial spaces. Drawing on fieldwork observations and interviews from a larger research project (Miller, 2017), this paper explores the dimensions that exist *between* space and place in mountaineering. Specifically, the concept of liminality is used as an apparatus for exploring Climbing Sherpas' narratives to glean insights about the interplay of pride, risk, power, and death in experiences of

freedom on the Nepali mountainside. To begin, the spatial dimensions of liminality are examined before an unpacking of Climbing Sherpas' experiences. Therein, key narrative findings are woven together with secondary sources in an attempt to explore, and problematize mountains as complex, contested, and power laden spaces.

Liminal Dimensions of the Mountainside

Liminality, an anthropological concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and further conceptualised by Victor Turner (1969) may be regarded as a cultural apparatus characterised by heightened reflexivity, in which individuals are able to reflect on and critique normative social structures as well as explore new possibilities. The concept first appeared in van Gennep's *Rites de Passage*, what he understood as "rites that accompany every change of place, state, social position, and age" (Turner, 1969, p. 94). These rites were often enacted within tribal initiation rituals, provoking "transition" through three distinct phases: separation, margin, and aggregation (or reincorporation) (van Gennep, 1960). Turner (1969) further developed understandings of the second, margin phase, what he called a "liminal period," recognising that the characteristics of the individual undergoing the ritual become ambiguous as she or he "passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of past or coming state" (1969, p. 351). In these moments it is as though individuals are reduced to a universal or uniform condition to be transformed, emerging from their symbolic ceremony with "additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (Turner 1969, p. 351). Correspondingly, moments of liminality foster space for an individual to actively consider the possibilities for constructing new cultural resources and altering strategies of action (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011).

The application of liminality has often privileged the abovementioned temporal dimensions, and though these ideas are referred to later it is relevant to first recognise the spatial dimensions of liminality (Thomassen, 2012). The term liminal derives from the Latin word *limen* meaning "threshold" (Turner, 1969). According to Thomassen (2012), van Gennep himself saw thresholds as structurally equivalent to the margin phase of a ritual passage, indicating that the physical passage of a threshold is as integral as, and often precedes, the rite of a spiritual passage. A threshold can be concrete, such as a doorway or portal, as well as extended areas or zones like monasteries, airports, countries themselves, or even borders between nations (Thomassen, 2012). Landlocked between the Chinese region of Xizang (Tibet) and India, Nepal's borders help to

define it politically. However, these nations share another kind of border – a threshold unmatched by any other place on earth: the Himalayan mountain range. Nepal houses eight out of fourteen of the world's highest peaks, each reaching elevations above 8000 metres – the tallest of these is Mt. Everest (8848 metres).

Mountains are sometimes wild yet civilized; they indicate passage but also assent, and thus expressions of liminality in such spaces are various (Attard, 2003). The unspoiled nature of mountains becomes a source of inspiration, revelation, and transformation – a reprieve from the stresses of daily life (Bernbaum, 1997; Godde, Price, & Zimmerman, 2000). In turn they evoke feelings of fear, reverence, and awe, perpetuating notions of romantic idealism amongst urban-dwelling populations (Cooper, 1997; Monz, 2000). Mountains are also perceived as a kind of limbo, a waiting place for the dead, and not dead (Attard, 2003). Thereby, they become a symbolic threshold – the *limen* – a transitional space. Moreover, many travellers and writers (see for example, Percy Shelley's *Mont Blanc*) have likened mountains, and more broadly wilderness terrains, to ruins of an ancient castles, residuum of forgotten cultures – a world that became before people (Attard, 2003). Sublime and beautiful in such Western contexts, mountains "became a potential point of access to the new world and the old" (Attard, 20013, p. 9) and further contributed to narratives of lost or fabled civilisations (cf. Hilton, 1933).

In the case of the Himalayas, mountains often represent spiritual centres; places of power and worship; and houses of deities (Bernbaum, 1997). Historically, the native populations of these highlands understood them as the home of their gods. Thus, when they engaged these spaces they did so with utmost respect, trying to refrain from polluting or profaning the mountains in hopes of keeping the gods happy (Ortner, 1999). According to Sherry Ortner's (1999) ethnographic work on Sherpas' religious values, actions that constitute mountain pollutions included:

> Going high on the mountain or stepping on the summit; killing animals or otherwise shedding blood on the mountain; dropping human excretions on the mountain; burning garbage on the mountain or otherwise creating bad smells; and finally, having women on the mountain at all, having women menstruating on the mountain, or having people engage in sexual relations on the mountain. (127)

Behaviours like these are said to increase the potential for angry gods, followed by negative consequences (e.g., sickness, bad luck, accidents, death, etc.) (Ortner, 1999; Pemba Sherpa,

personal communication, April 14, 2015). As early as the turn of the twentieth century, *lamas*, trained and authorised Tibetan Buddhism specialists, warned against climbing the peaks of the Himalayas (Ortner, 1999).

Yet, these sacred landscapes, with their remote and majestic beauty, are increasingly sought after as tourist destinations as they can foster spaces for reflection, as well as provide opportunities for stimulation, excitement, and adventure (Apollo, 2017; Beedie & Hudson, 2003). Indeed, mountains exert a "fatal power of attraction on the human mind" as places to explore the limits of the human body (MacFarlane, 2008, p. 16). Douglas (2007) contends it is the "brilliant world of dazzling snow and ice and cobalt skies beyond" that appeals to individuals who aspire to climb mountains (p.11). Within such limits exist the excitement of new experiences, physical challenges, and confrontation with "otherness" (Beedie, 2008; Christiansen, 1990). In the 1950s the Himalayas became the place to go for the global climbing elite. In part this was due to the re-opening of the Nepali border in 1951, but also because many of these mountains had yet to be summited (Bhattarai, Conway, & Shrestha, 2005; Hansen, 1995). The summit can be understood as a final frontier, the last point between solid ground and the sky above, and as such a "metaphor for the limits of our quotidian comfort zone" (Beedie, 2008, p. 175). Found at the fringes, Thomassen (2012) reminds us that liminal landscapes implicate the existence of a boundary, and such limit "is not simply there: it is there to be confronted." (p. 21). Correspondingly, the famous George Mallory quote still rings true for many mountaineers and adventure tourists as they assess their own motivations to conquer some of the world's highest peaks: "Because it's there." (New York Times, 1923; Guggleberger, 2015).

Spaces of Self-Making & Risk-Taking

Mountains and their summits are exemplars of in-between spaces, zones of liminality steeped with adventure. With adventure comes uncertainty, and undeniably it is this uncertainty, and risk of personal harm (or even death) that generates excitement for individuals who pursue activities set in challenging or adventurous contexts (Cater, 2006; Lepp & Gibson, 2008; Robinson, 2004). According to Ibrahim and Cordes (2002), simple involvement in 'adventurous' or 'extreme' activities is enough to present inherent aspects of risk. Risk, as it relates to adventure, is often linked to fear and contributes to narratives of hedonism, whereby participants of these activities "*play with* their fears" (Cater, 2006, p. 322, emphasis in original). Indeed individuals acceptance of risk is complex and underpinned by a myriad of socio-psychological

factors (cf. Ryan, 2013), but the dangerous nature of mountaineering is admitted to be, by many mountaineers, part of the attraction of – and the fun in – climbing (Ebert & Robertson, 2013). Furthermore, Ortner (1997) explains that risk of a serious or fatal accident produces a high payoff in meaning. She describes the meaning Western mountaineers, whom she calls *sahibs[1]*, gleaned from the sport:

> It's about the moral fiber of the inner self, about the nature of bonding and friendship, about the peace and calm of high cold places against the noise and bustle of modern society. All of this makes the risk of accident and death worthwhile. (p. 139)

Seemingly, adventurous individuals are "searching for something within themselves" and it is through giving themselves up to the "vagaries of nature" that they may confront realities that are not otherwise encountered (Palmer, 2004, p. 67). Thus, mountains as liminal landscapes can become spaces for "suspensions of quotidian reality […] privileged spaces where people are allowed to think about how they think, about the terms in which they conduct their thinking, or to feel about how they feel in daily life" (Turner, 1987, p.102). Reflecting this sentiment, Kelly's (2000) research around alpine exploration in the Canadian Rockies (between 1885-1925) recognises that "Mountains were not something looked at or even merely scrambled over, they were a place for self-expression and self-discovery" (Kelly, 2000, p. 272).

Mountaineering and the desire to stand on the top of the world were not always significant to Sherpas' lives (cf. Adams, 1992; Ortner, 1999). Rather, the thirteen Climbing Sherpas' stories collected in Nepal in 2015 (see Miller, 2017) contribute to a discourse of development. Indeed, the allure of Mt. Everest and the decision to attempt to stand on its summit are inextricably linked with the meanings attached to climbing and successfully reaching the top. Just as foreign mountaineers chase their Everest dreams, the motivations for Sherpas to climb are increasingly related to notions of pride, conquest, and self-expression. Mingma, a Climbing Sherpa and one of the research participants, suggested that Sherpas feel proud to stand on the world's tallest mountain. "That's why it's good for me too," he confirmed. Many Climbing Sherpas confessed that they took on their first few pursuits as a personal challenge or goal. Ang Phurba, recalled, "That [first] time I don't look the money, just the top. That time I'm thinking just one time, one day I climb the Everest." Similarly, Rinchen reminisced, "First time top is important for life. Important for life, record also, that time I'm very happy. And next many times climbing is my job." These emergent storylines disrupt previous research understandings of

money being the key driver for Sherpas' participation in mountaineering expeditions (Bott, 2009; Ortner, 1997, 1999). Instead, Sherpas' stories have begun to converge with those of their foreign clients in terms of cultural meaning and identity (cf. Beck, 1992; Neale, 2002), and are enmeshed with narratives of risk.

The Sherpa participants discussed the risky nature of climbing in the Himalayas, as they told stories of camps being swept away by avalanches, clients running out of oxygen, and friends slipping off cliffs or falling into crevasses. Many Climbing Sherpas engage these liminal spaces, and their associated bodily risks, because of perceived meaning and implications for identity and self-making. In these instances, climbing can be understood as an individualised "project of self," which is connected to the reproduction of social identities through risk performance (Bott, 2009; Palmer, 2004; Rhinehart, 2003). As discussed in Elsrud's (2001) work on behaviours of backpackers, acts of risk-taking are used as tools for, and symbols of, distinction between *self* and the *self of others*. Within their experiences of risk on mountains like Mt. Everest, the Climbing Sherpas distinguished themselves through interconnecting stories of risk, pride, and conquest. This nexus is illuminated by a discussion had with Tashi about summiting Mt. Everest ten times. He explained:

> My dreams when I've done ten times then I stop, I'm thinking that. If I done it ten times, I also might be counted as the famous one…My plan is that last year [2014], that if I've done [the summit ten times], then I'd stop, and after I have to go guiding, just basecamp and below.

At the time of his interview (March 24, 2015) Tashi had already successfully summited Mt. Everest nine times. As a result of the 2014 avalanche, he did not achieve his dream, and therefore planned to attempt the summit again during the spring 2015 climbing season. Unfortunately, this also proved to be another failed attempt due to the April 25th 2015 earthquake.

Tashi's mention of stopping and his vision of "guiding below basecamp" once he achieved the ten summits illuminates understandings of the risks involved with his high-altitude mountaineering job, while the disastrous avalanche and earthquake that stopped him from reaching this goal further emphasise the risky and potentially fatal nature of his continued attempts. Conflicting with these risks however, were Tashi's desire to stand on the summit ten times to be recognised as famous, his subsequent decision to climb Mt. Everest again in the Spring of 2016 (which was successful), and his eventual travel to the USA in June 2016 to climb

Mt. Denali. Emerging from Tashi's risk-taking were tales of meaning that illuminate a process of identity construction, to distinguish himself from other Sherpa mountaineers. This finding aligns with Elsrud's (2001) notion of participants' tales of risk and adventure, whereby novelty and difference were storylines told in their own efforts to narrate identity. This is further echoed in a recent interview conducted by *Independent* media with Kami Rita Sherpa as he prepared for a record-breaking summit attempt during the 2018 Everest season. Kami explained, "I want to set a new record not just for myself but for my family, the Sherpa people and for my country, Nepal" (Gurubacharya, 2018). Kami Rita is now the world record holder for most successful ascents of Mt. Everest with twenty-two summits.

Understanding the conquest of mountains as sport rather than solely as work illuminates complexities of Sherpas' stories and how negotiations of their place within mountaineering challenge the relationship between "us" and "them" in these liminal spaces. Moreover, Climbing Sherpas' narratives of risk-taking for record-setting achievements advance adventure tourism discourses, which recognise danger as a new element of the "tourist gaze" (Bott, 2009, p. 289). While such aspects of risk strengthen the appeal of mountain pursuits for Sherpas, it should be briefly emphasised that the effects of money continue to pervade these spaces, contributing to complex dynamics of risk, which according to Bott (2009) are affected by the "economic power imbalance" implicit in the relationship between commercial expeditions and their hired support (e.g., Climbing Sherpas and porters) (p. 288). Undeniably, financial incentives still compel some Sherpas to assume greater responsibilities (e.g., carrying heavier loads), and consequently an increased level of risk.

Encounters with Fear and Death

The complex dynamics of risk within these landscapes draws attention to Climbing Sherpas' physiological and mental capacities. There is a widespread perception of Sherpas as "superhuman" with regard to their physical capability at high altitudes (cf. Adams, 1992, 1996; Neale, 2002). While Sherpas do possess a tremendous level of strength and aptitude for the mountain environment, they are also invariably human, and as such are equally susceptible to human emotions, including feelings of fear and anxiety when faced with situations that pose extreme risk or danger (as any other mountaineer might be). This human side of Sherpas is seemingly one which the industry (e.g., mountaineering outfitters) as well as Climbing Sherpas themselves, strive to suppress from their public image and identity; perhaps in part because the

perception of "strength" plays a critical role in Sherpas' employability. In Carnicelli-Filho's (2013) work around "emotion management" of adventure guides, he proposes "a guide who loses the ability to manage emotions such as fear and anxiety can be seen as inadequate for real or perceived risk activities" (p. 193). This would, of course, have major implications for business prospects for Sherpas as professional guides and experts, whose industry relies on clients placing their trust and lives in Sherpas' hands. Therefore, the performance of emotional strength by Sherpas is often bolstered.

When risk is perceived as being higher than competence and skill, fear and anxiety ensue (Cater, 2006; Mu & Nepal, 2016). Fear feels dangerous (cf. Buda, 2015), and if not properly managed can itself add increased risk and danger to an already dangerous situation. Therefore, a large part of Sherpas' roles on the mountainside is, in a sense, to minimise risk through the mitigation of fear experienced by their clients and themselves (Carnicelli-Filho, 2013). Effective management of fear becomes a necessity in an industry situated in a hazardous environment where bodily risks can easily lead to fatalities. For instance, Da Gelje recalled the fear that accompanied one of his first expeditions on Mt. Everest:

> When I'm climbing to Camp III, first time. Very, very, very difficult. I am very afraid…Before, I was never a climbing guide there. Very danger. 'How do I go down?' Very difficult for my body and my mind. So just I'm thinking after that, 'Okay not only me. I have many friends, many people here. What are they doing? I must also follow that.'[That's] my thinking.

As Da Gelje inwardly manages his emotions and thoughts, he watches fellow climbers perform the necessary skills, and mimics them to appear outwardly competent and capable. Similarly, Dorchi recalled a slow and dangerous climb he endured with limited vision, a result of snow blindness or *ultraviolet (UV) keratitis* (Boyd, 2015): "My eyes were swollen from 6:00pm onward. I couldn't shout or cry. It's a shame to cry." The deliberate acts of Da Gelje and Dorchi can be understood as "emotional work", which is used to actively control the degree and quality of emotions or feelings to achieve a particular impression (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). Drawing on Goffman's understandings, Elsrud (2001) explained, "a strong character is not generated through facing the risk whining, shivering, and crying," rather, risk and fear are managed with courage, composure, and "gameness" (p. 603).

Beneath the surface of some of these performances lie narratives of fear and anxiety. For instance, in answering a question about what his job was like, Phuri let out a gasp and proclaimed, "It's a scary one, man! I'm scared, along with the foreign climbers." As he continued to describe his push towards the Mt. Everest summit, Phuri depicted his experience of feeling fear. "It's very dangerous. Look, we have to put the ladders [over the crevasses] to cross. Due to fear sometimes our body was a little bit shaky too." Moreover, when discussing their own brushes with death, many of the Climbing Sherpas retreated to laughter. This laughter and humour replaced fear, sorrow, or disbelief – reactions that can appear to be rather incongruous. For instance, Da Gelje recounted his rescue attempt of a dying Russian mountaineer. "No move. No life. So I give… CPR, breath to him... Many times I do that [Laughs]." While erupting in a bout of laughter, he continued and confirmed, "No, no. Not coming back." Within stories about death, laughter seemingly serves as a natural and nervous response to the uncomfortable-nonpareil and inevitable nature of death (Berger, 1967; Stone, 2009; Yalom, 1980) – a mere attempt to silence fear?

The fear (and subsequently the laughter, silence, or avoidance) expressed by Sherpas within their interviews can be understood as "death anxiety," "mortal terror," or "fear of finitude," all of which speak to the awareness of the fragility of our material existence (Berger, 1967; Varley, 2006; Yalom, 1980). These confrontations with mortality are propelled by urgent experiences or what Berger (1967) identifies as "marginal situations", which include but are not limited to one's own death or the collapse of some fundamental meaning-providing schema (see also Yalom, 1980). For instance, Lhakpa Dorji illustrated his own marginal situation, describing a time when clients left him stranded on the South Summit of Mt. Everest:

> …they [the clients] leave me behind, and they run before, down. Then I am alone… I'm so tired, and I get the ice in my goggle, the sweat. When I almost get to the last camp I couldn't see, then I fell down…It's about 250m, about nearly 300m I fell down, like rolling down. I don't know how long I was *dead*. I thought [it's] like a dream, like when I woke up I had no goggles. I had no ice axe… Then after that I get to [camp at] South Col at 6:30pm. Then other members, about three members in the South Col, they don't care [for] me. They didn't know where I was…When I was there I am so cold, I no can walk that time. I tried to make a cup of ice and tried to make the water. I couldn't eat anything, I didn't drink the water. The whole night I couldn't sleep.

Situations like these threaten what Giddens (1990) refers to as "ontological security." Individuals' rely on structure and security in order to make sense of their lives and daily experiences; however, while climbing, risk-taking, and more poignantly, when confronting death, Sherpas may be exposed to dread, fear, or heightened anxieties (Giddens, 1991; Stone, 2009). In Giddens' (1991) words, "Death becomes point zero: it is nothing more or less than the moment at which human control over human existence finds an outer limit" (p. 162).

Consequently, from these liminal moments come contemplations of one's own existential position within the material-physical world (Berger 1967). This is highlighted in Dawa's unexpected encounter with an avalanche while working for a commercial expedition team on Mt. Everest. He explained:

> I remember an avalanche. I tried to stop myself from being taken with an ice axe, trying to get it into snow, but it was fresh snow so it took all of us down. I was found at the head of avalanche with my body upside down. When I woke up, it was morning, and I was lying down with oxygen and glucose water on…I was pretty homesick after that accident. I wanted to go home.

Scholars who take up notions of liminality suggest that those affected by disasters, death, and the like find themselves "betwixt and between" their life prior to the event and an uncertain sense of the future (Cheung & McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Turner, 1979, p. 465). According to Jencson (2001) these moments mark the transition of an individual from one status to another, which is often accompanied by considerable stress, doubts, and fear about an uncertain future. For instance, Dawa's near miss triggered what he articulated as 'homesickness,' a longing for what he had known before the expedition while he contemplated his current position on the mountain. This sense of fear and uncertainty was emphasised in other Sherpas' narratives as well. Mingma described, "At the time when the avalanche was coming, I was thinking of where to run and how to save my life. Nothing else was in my mind." The desperation in Mingma's actions was triggered by the disastrous potential of the avalanche; survival was the only thing that mattered in those heighted moments of uncertainty.

A glimpse of death or a taste of risk illuminates the mutability of human beings (Lewis, 2000). Moreover, the uncertainties that accompany Climbing Sherpas' encounters with death foster potential to radically challenge social constructions within mountaineering (Berger, 1967).

In Yalom's words, "though the physicality of death destroys an individual, the idea of death can save him (1980, p. 159). These ideas are explored next.

Moments of Agency and Potentiality

As a moment of liminality, a close encounter with death encourages individuals to return to their fundamental priorities and thoughtfully deliberate what is truly important and meaningful (Cheung & McColl-Kennedy, 2011; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999). Death enacts a vast influence upon existence and our conduct, in which we can understand the way we live and grow (Yalom, 1998). Thereby, individuals emerge from their marginal situations – their run-ins with death or the idea of it – with "additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life" (Turner 1969, p. 351). From devastating and uncertain moments, the Climbing Sherpas expanded their sense of self and community, and mountaineering accidents became purpose-revealing experiences producing moments of transformation and survival. For instance, Dawa indicated a change in his own conduct after his brush with death. His homesickness led him to eventually walk away from his position on the mountain, forfeiting his income from that particular expedition. Dawa remembered:

> The next morning, I walked down to my home in Phortse through Pangboche, where I had a cousin. I got to my cousin's home and at the same moment they were talking about me being taken by the avalanche. One of my cousins was crying thinking I was gone forever. They were happy to see me back… After that I didn't return up.

According to Oliver-Smith and Hoffman (1999), "Disasters take people back to fundamentals" (p. 1). In devastating moments 'victims' expand their sense of self, community, and purpose-revealing experiences of transformation and survival (Jencson, 2001). Undeniably, chaos, irrationality and death are most often evoked in what Varley (2011) calls 'Dionysiac experiences'; however, he argues that the sense of community, stillness and tranquillity that settles afterwards is of equal importance.

Encounters with death impel Sherpas to actively consider the possibilities of constructing a new life. It is from these liminal moments that some Sherpas began to understand the meaning of life differently, while others exercised their power more freely. For instance, Rinchen discussed a time when a paying client, against his recommendation, resumed climbing towards the Mt. Everest summit during a storm – a dream that could not be stopped by hazardous risks or a knowledgeable guide. In response to how he navigated this scenario, Rinchen declared, "Not

going I…People not listening. Why I do this? 'No, go yourself.' Life is for life, I don't go, I don't go. Please, money is nothing." Similarly, Lakpa confirmed that when clients "don't listen" this becomes "their own responsibility." When faced with a sufficient level of risk (of death) on the mountain, despite the presence of various forms of power (e.g., money, client gaze, etc.), Sherpas take responsibility for their own lives. Hereby, the Climbing Sherpas' individual agency, their actions and words, disrupt the power and structures that have traditionally contributed to their actions and relationships on the mountainside.

In liminal moments on the mountainside, power is shifted and new freedoms and actions are enacted. Mälksoo (2012) recognises, "the strength of liminality as the phase of pure possibility underscores the potential power of agency in the liminal process", in which existing realities are restructured to create new ones (p. 489). Narratives of agency emerge within the Climbing Sherpas' navigations of death. For example, Lhakpa Dorji, who was left by his clients and fell nearly 300 meters while descending Mt. Everest, explained his reactions during a subsequent mountaineering expedition. He exclaimed:

> I thought that time, no more…I was in Camp II, and they pressured me [to join] another team for another summit. I said 'NO!' Then they bring me to Basecamp and they talk a lot of questions. 'Please go do another summit.' And I said, 'NO!'

The positive and transformative aspect of death and disaster is illuminated in the power and agency enacted by Lhakpa Dorji. As he navigated away from the undesirable trajectory of the mountaineering industry, despite the potential economic loss he might have incurred, Lhakpa Dorji created a new reality for himself. Death (or the idea of it) fostered a space to evaluate his continued involvement in the mountaineering industry: an industry that so often places Climbing Sherpas' lives at risk.

The prevailing agency and freedoms of the Sherpa participants of this research can also be seen on a larger, community scale. For instance, in 2014 the mountaineering industry was effectively blamed for the deaths of sixteen Sherpa and Nepali climbers. Mingma explained, "Lots of Sherpas died on the same day, so everyone decided not to continue… Since that route was not safe, we were not ready to risk our life." In his interview, Kaji expounded upon why expeditions on Mt. Everest were halted in 2014: "After that, Everest was closed. Not by the government, by the Climbing Sherpas. They all said 'let's not climb this time'…in the mountain we have to respect for tourist, and tourist also have to respect Sherpa." Therein, the climbing

community (in particular the Sherpa and Nepali climbers) moved from the initial shock of the disaster through a liminal moment, which constituted a formative experience for the collective.

Cheung and McColl-Kennedy (2015) suggest that during periods of disaster and displacement, a strong collective bond is formed. Lakpa reflected on how the climbing community transitioned from this tragic accident, recognising some of the reasons why Climbing Sherpas collectively decided to stop climbing in 2014:

> That year, you know it's so many accidents, so all the climbers they decide to close. It was black year, bad luck, so many friends lost…You lose some business, but sixteen, seventeen people died, and after if you continue, you know people psychologically affected, not good feeling.

Those affected by a difficult event may be stripped of their familiar institutions, routines, and resources, a grim situation that entails individuals to come together to find new ways to deal with the challenges of the circumstances of their new emerging worlds (Cheung & McColl-Kennedy, 2015; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman, 1999). Collective agency was activated as the Sherpas disregarded the pressures of commercial climbing teams. Rinchen acknowledged that working on Mt. Everest is not the only employment opportunity in the Solukhumbu region. He proclaimed, "Money is pay, okay, but safety is life…Life is important. Money we will make next year. Next day. Another job, many jobs, not only mountaineering Everest." Evoked by the very act of imagining new boundaries, liminality can help communities find a source of renewal, as they begin to acknowledge the power of their collective agency to create a new setting or 'structure'; one that can be regarded as better than the old (Mälksoo, 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

Liminality, as taken up here, highlights the challenges in the way we engage with mountainous landscapes – the way they are developed and managed – recognising the allure they have, but also the power they hold. Mountaineers, and their desire to derive meaning from their adventures, paved the way for emerging niches of adventure tourism in the Nepali Himalaya. Moreover, Mt. Everest presents the ultimate boundary – the border between the earth and the heavens – and thousands of people, mountaineers, adventurers, and tourists alike, have been drawn to this liminal space to test their own limits. Within these spaces Climbing Sherpas are also proud risk-takers, and accomplished mountaineers in their own right. They admittedly take on some of their own Everest pursuits as sport, rather than solely as work. Such narratives of

risk-taking and self-making contribute to the complexities of these liminal landscapes, challenging the oversimplified claims that Sherpas climb primarily for moneymaking efforts; thereby disrupting oppositional binaries of East/West and us/them and the problematic tendency in tourism studies to render tourism's "hosts" as static and immobile.

Nevertheless, we are reminded "spaces mean different things to different people at different times and represent, reinforce, idealise and naturalise socio-cultural power relations" (Morgan & Pritchard, 2006, p. 763). Sherpas are paid to help foreign mountaineers to the summit, and thereby mountains as liminal landscapes can be experienced quite differently. For Climbing Sherpas, there is a balance between providing the service expected while managing the responsibility of safety, and navigating the significant risks that accompany these extreme endeavours. As discussed earlier, the mediation of their emotions is instrumental to Sherpas' navigations of risks and danger; research findings that further support work put forward by Carnicelli-Filho (2013) and Hochschild (1983) around the performance of emotional labour. However, more salient to this work is the transformative potency of liminal moments, as they created space for Sherpas to reconsider power imbalances on the mountain, and thereby their continued involvement in an industry that so often places their lives at risk.

Though experienced as destabilising and life threatening in the moment, confrontations with death create *a pause* in the everyday, rupturing the status quo. Within this pause, individuals and communities may take stock of their lives, and often consider new trajectories and future possibilities. Therein, death, as the ultimate boundary, reveals insight into freedom, power and development. Rather than being static, vulnerable, and powerless, Sherpas assume active roles in mountaineering and adventure tourism. Power relations shift on the Nepali mountainside as Sherpas demonstrate agency to say "no" to commercial industry interests. From moments of liminality presented by confrontations with mortality, come opportunities for reflection, consideration, and the questioning of development – challenging the way forward for the people and industries that thrive within the Himalayas.

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[1] Sahib is a Hindi term meaning "boss" or "master" or (in address) "sir." Sherpas used this term to both refer to and address the international climbers, namely Western climbers, up until the 1970s. Thus, Ortner used this word throughout her work to identify the international climbers. She believed it signalled the lingering colonial influence, and the continuing inequality in the Sherpa-Climber relationship (Ortner, 1997, 1999).