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## Political Transformations: collaborative feminist scholarship in Nepal

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# Political Transformations: Collaborative Feminist Scholarship in Nepal

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Feminist theory has expanded the sphere within which politics is assumed to occur and thus can make significant contributions to research on state transition. This paper traces the development of a research project wherein we combined our expertise and feminist commitments to explore the current political transition in Nepal. The project conceptualized market formation and resource governance to be important sites of political contestation and the formation of citizen subjectivities. Within these sites, we sought to understand what 'democracy' looks like at different scales, especially where, when and how people make claims and build critical accounts of established social systems in its name. Here we reflect how on our feminist political and intellectual

commitments helped develop a collaborative methodology and approach to state transition that integrates 'politics' across scales. The insights include the role played by spaces of social reproduction in everyday processes of state and political transformation, and the analytical opportunities opened up when research collaborations take the form of a community of inquiry within the field itself. We found ourselves turning back to traditions of feminist scholarship to show how the household is the origin of inequalities and how such relations transmit into wider contestations over 'democracy.'

**Keywords:** conflict, fieldwork, governmentality, Nepal, political change, positionality, social natures.

## Introduction

The topic of political transition presents many challenges for researchers not least because of the need to tackle issues that are rapidly changing at multiple scales, and yet are also embedded within more entrenched forms of social and political inequalities. Given these challenges, feminist theory is particularly well suited to linking processes happening within households and communities to processes at regional and national scales (Hartsock 1990; Gibson-Graham 1996; Katz 2001; Tsing 2005). Previous work on gender and political subjectivity shows clearly that the spaces of social reproduction are foundational to the production of wider social and political inequalities (Kruks 2001; Krause and Schramm 2011; Shah and Shneiderman 2013). Indeed, feminists have long insisted that the ‘personal is political.’ Yet, in much of the thinking on political revolution and transition, gender and households are typically treated as secondary ‘social problems’ that need to be addressed down the line once the core business of establishing institutions of liberal democracy is achieved. We argue, however, that they have a more foundational role to play in the everyday processes of state and political transformation.

In this paper we trace our experience with the project, *Landscapes of Democracy: The Cultural Politics of Governance in ‘Naya (New) Nepal,’* which sought to investigate the emergence of ‘democracy’ after the restoration of peace in 2006. We reflect how on our feminist political and intellectual commitments helped develop a collaborative methodology and approach to state transition that integrates ‘politics’ across scales. We outline our theoretical and methodological approach and illustrate it with a few examples from our empirical findings. The research was conceived in partnership between two scholars committed to the practice of feminist engagement and methodologies in relation to a topic not explicitly tied to women and gender. Rather, the core focus was on the formation of political subjectivities and the performance of democracy. It was motivated by the sense of optimism and rapid political change that characterized the period immediately following the 2006 Peace Agreement. Building from our previous work on markets (Rankin) and forestry (Nightingale), and feminist theories of social inequality within and beyond the household, we wanted to explore how the spaces of socioeconomic exchange and environmental governance are crucial contexts wherein a wider sense of citizenship and belonging is contested and established. We combined these insights with an interest in the practices and subjectivities of ‘democracy’ to pose a set of questions that help illuminate whether contentious politics can transform entrenched social inequalities. In

this paper we focus specifically on how this conceptual approach was linked to a methodological commitment to collaboration, a practice which in itself provided rich insights.

Feminist commitments to the practice of research were always implicit in our approach to conducting fieldwork, yet we were impressed by how important they became while *doing* the work. We found ourselves redefining ‘the field’ to encompass not just the public sphere, civil society, state and market, but also the household and the interpretive community formed by our collaboration with Nepali and Nepal-based scholars, graduate students and mid-career practitioner-academics. This redefinition of ‘the field’ emerged as crucial to our analysis and the insights the project was able to generate. We thus join our voices to others who insist that feminist approaches are appropriate not just to understand gender and its intersectionalities, but also to probe other topics of deep political significance in Himalayan studies today. Feminist perspectives ensure exploration of the roots of social and political inequality, and they foreground debates about provisioning, sustainability and redistribution of resources that are crucial not only for the study, but also the realization of political transformation. Below, we first outline the context of the research, and then specify how our feminist genealogies shaped our approach to the research in terms of the kinds of spaces and practices that drew our attention while in the field. We conclude by demonstrating the significance of such genealogies for developing an approach to the study of political transformation.

### Landscapes of Democracy: Researching Political Transition in Nepal

The *Landscapes of Democracy* project sought to capture the political transition in Nepal and its broader significance for so-called ‘post-conflict’ societies more widely. The Maoist People’s War (1996-2006) and its violent attack on the Hindu monarchy surprised the world community by culminating in the popular overthrow of the King (2006) and the formation of a Federal Democratic Republic (2008) (Gellner and Hachhethu 2008; Hutt 2004; Thapa 2004). A coalition led by the Maoist party (CPN) won a strong electoral presence on a platform of redistributive justice in the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections. Yet after this optimistic start, the Constitution process has been repeatedly stalled, further elections were delayed until November 2013, and the transition period has been characterized by political infighting and competition for power among a shifting array of political parties.

Meanwhile, the country is still considerably dependent on multilateral development agencies promoting neoliberal economic models that are often at odds with some of the stated socialist reforms favored by the political center in Nepal. In view of these changes, the overall research question animating our project—*how is democratic governance understood and performed*—encompasses socioeconomic and geopolitical dimensions of inequality as well as aspects most conventionally understood to constitute democratic polities, such as political parties and civil society organizations.

The present transition needs to be placed within the political changes that began during the conflict when the Maoists operated a ‘parallel state’ (Hutt 2004; Shneiderman and Turin 2004; Lund 2006). These *jan sarkar* (People’s Governments) shaped how people believe governance should be done in many places (Shneiderman and Turin 2004; Lecomte-Tilouine 2009) and have lingering consequences as local governance is rebuilt. At the same time, donors and civil society groups within Nepal have energetically promoted particular understandings of ‘democracy’ through community programs and popular educational campaigns. Other processes of political-economic transformation continue to be significant as well, including: the wide-spread out migration of young people from rural areas, many of whom go abroad to earn money and send remittances back (Seddon et al. 2002); the promotion of micro-finance and small scale enterprise through a variety of development mechanisms (Rankin 2001); and the decentralization of development budgets vesting significant planning authority with District and Village Development Committees.

Given this context and our joint intellectual histories, we formulated two distinctive features for rethinking approaches to political transition and development in conflict-ridden states: a starting point in rural communities, and an exploration of the socioeconomic and geopolitical bases of political inclusion. The first, a focus on grassroots communities in rural districts, implicitly emerged from our long-standing engagement with feminist theories that seek to understand the relationship between social inequality in everyday contexts and its manifestation in ‘public’ domains (Massey 1994; Hanson and Pratt 1995; Kobayashi 1995; McDowell 1999). This focus allows us to explore how democratic polities are built from the ground up, through the everyday practices of ordinary people in civil society. Nepal has long been a highly centralized state, and in the post-conflict transition, tensions between governance at the center and interpretations and resistance of state projects by rural populations is critical for understanding the roots of conflict as well as prospects for long-term political in/

stability. *Landscapes of Democracy* thus began with field research in three agrarian districts, Khotang, Mugu and Morang, and traced governance processes to the center in Kathmandu.

The second distinctive feature was a focus on the socioeconomic and geopolitical as well as political bases of democracy. This focus derives from a critique of the ‘desire called civil society,’ as it has been construed in development (Goonewardena and Rankin 2004). Most international donor funded development programs are currently underpinned by considerable faith in the capacity of community-based organizations to hold political actors accountable to standards of efficiency, fairness and inclusion. Yet, this quest to engage civil society is premised on a separation of political from economic dimensions of inequality (Wood 1995). As such, these programs fail to confront the link between extreme socioeconomic inequality and the lack of effective representation in political spheres (Wood 1995; Karki and Seddon 2003; Thapa, 2004; Dahal and Bhatta 2008; Madsen et al. 2011). They also ultimately obscure the democratic deficits that are generated from geopolitical relations of dominance and through which donor economic conditionalities shape and constrain the political field (Ribot 2003).

Our desire to develop a relational approach to exploring the socioeconomic and political aspects of the current transition also derives from Rankin’s work on market formation. This work emphasizes the everyday socio-political milieu within which markets develop (Rankin 2004). It is further linked to Nightingale’s work on Community Forestry, within which economic identities and positionings of community members directly shape the politics of forestry governance (Nightingale 2005, 2006, 2011). In other words, we were predisposed from our previous work to theorize relationships between political transformation and socioeconomic injustice, and to remain skeptical of programs that hold them as separate agendas. This stance of course reflects our common background in the political economy of development where such a linking of economics with politics is a core theoretical move of Marx, Polanyi, Bourdieu and other key thinkers (Gramsci 1971; de Janvry 1981; Resnick and Wolff 1982; Harvey 1996; Bourdieu 1998). At the same time, it also reflects a feminist commitment to finding ‘the political’ in spaces and relationships that lie outside formal political institutions of the state. In the next section we turn to a more detailed description of those commitments and how they informed the *Landscapes of Democracy* project.

## Approaching the Research through Our Feminisms

While not all of our research questions were framed in explicitly feminist terms, our feminisms were a key epistemological orientation anchoring our approach to political transition. In this section we work through the core research questions and position them within feminist scholarship to highlight how feminists can contribute to studies of political transition. We formulated the following three questions to capture our interests in understandings and performances of democratic governance: [1] What competing governance projects are evident through local-scale governance practices? [2] What kinds of political subjectivities do these practices seek to produce? and [3] How do differently positioned people enact, subvert, resist or otherwise inhabit these practices?

The first question maps the institutional terrain of local governance by drawing on relational approaches to understand the state as a collection of competing governance projects (Jessop 2007). It builds from Doreen Massey's contributions to debates on space, place and gender (1994) by tracking 'governance beyond the state' through horizontal and networked arrangements generated in the wake of the 'decentralizations' associated with both neoliberal development and the Maoist revolution (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Swyngedouw 2005; Ferguson 2006). In Nepal, these encompass users groups, NGOs, political parties, and caste- and ethnic-based social movements, which have been newly empowered in the literal absence of the local state. Recent scholarship on authority and state-making in anthropology suggests that such variation in governance regimes manifests at the level of everyday practice through competing claims to authority, as local institutions seek to constitute and reproduce themselves (Lund 2006, 2008; Berry 2009).

Similar insights also underscore feminist theorizing on the multiple sites and agents of political-economic processes, including informal economies, households, transnational migrant networks, local scales of everyday political practice, and the lives of people who are marginalized by economic globalization (McDowell 1991; Mohanty et al. 1991; Nagar et al. 2002; Pollard 2013). These sites/agents are typically excluded from accounts focusing on undifferentiated institutions operating at national or supranational scales. Particularly likely to be overlooked are household and community-scale relations, wherein processes of social reproduction occur and which shape the everyday ways in which people participate in political transition. Others have aptly documented the significance of new migration and remittance economies for the dynamics of consumption and production in agrarian

households (Seddon et al. 2002; Sharma 2008). These village-scale household economies articulate with the Maoist insurgency, state security forces and 'post-conflict' governance arrangements, to forge the place-specific socio-political dynamics that we were interested in studying (Shneiderman 2003, 2009; Hutt, 2004; Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004; Bonino and Donini 2009; Sharma and Donini 2010).

Given this theoretical orientation, we paid special attention to local-state actors and low-level bureaucrats—social subjects who are fully integrated into the socioeconomic and cultural life of the communities where we conducted our research (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). These actors have been shown to be particularly influential in the establishment of authority at the grassroots (Lund 2007; Sikor and Lund 2009). A feminist perspective highlights links to everyday practices of social reproduction, not only through local bureaucrats' own social positioning within the community, but also through the claims made upon them as embodiments of the local state (Ghertner 2011). By attending to who, how and where different institutions and actors engage the local state (and other sites of governance), we illuminate the mechanisms of struggle for authority. We found multiple actors asserting new modes of political subjectivity and seeking a greater stake in managing local affairs, and regard such claims-making practices as a key part of constituting the new Republic. These dynamics are the foundations of political in/stability and point to the basis upon which new forms of political legitimacy will emerge.

As we attended to the social location of political actors and the spaces within which 'politics' occurred, we were increasingly drawn back to earlier feminist theorizing on the importance of gender in shaping political economic relations (Sassen-Koob 1984). In particular, we found ourselves attentive to the household-based limitations for women's participation in politics. Meetings were often held during the day when women needed to be working in the forest or the fields. In more urbanized areas such as bazaar towns, the meetings are often held in the evenings and women consistently noted that it was considered unsafe and inappropriate for them to be outside the home at these times (Ninglekhu and Rankin 2008). These familiar and hardly surprising findings highlighted to us the need to 'place' institutions and governance in order to understand how social exclusions continue even as political reforms seek to undo such exclusions.

The second question explores the productive linkages between governance and political subjectivity, which have long been a terrain for feminist scholarship in critical

development and Himalayan studies (Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Gururani 2000; Rankin 2004; Bondi and Laurie 2006; Nightingale 2006, 2011; Shneiderman 2009). Certainly we detected some familiar political subjectivities associated with ‘development.’ The ‘social mobilizers,’ for example, designated by donors to help forge local partnerships, and enlist villagers in horizontal modes of local self-management. And the ‘empowered woman entrepreneur,’ who invests productively, mitigates risk, and cares for households (Rankin 2001). Tracking the mobilization of these subjectivities in contemporary governance projects is critical for understanding how political and economic differentiation is (re)produced and mobilized by institutions across the Himalayas today.

And yet the subjectivities commonly associated with ‘Naya Nepal’—the new yet-to-be federated Nepal—are not limited to these tropes. They also encompass, for example, the *bipanna*, the disadvantaged, a designation that emphasizes intersectional marginality; *dalit*, a caste-based term that signifies shared oppression, solidarity and subaltern agency (Cameron 2007); and the *chetana badeko*, politically conscious rights claimant. These are less familiar and quite specific to the moment of political transition and donor activity in Nepal today. We thus traced the proliferation of political subjectivities in our research sites, as well as their significance for the way democratic governance is understood and performed by people in multiple social locations.

Our feminist training and epistemic commitments meant that to some extent we took for granted the need to explore how political transition occurs in the everyday and household scale, rather than seeking to find it only in the more organized spaces of political party offices, democracy training events or street protests. What was perhaps less clear to us at the outset was the importance of early feminist theorizing on development and agrarian change. This tradition emphasizes the importance of unpacking the household and recognizing that individuals engage in a variety of class processes as they go about the business of securing their livelihoods (Resnick and Wolff 1982; Deere 1990; Agarwal 1992; Gibson-Graham 1994). These ideas came back to us strongly in our fieldwork. We anticipated that access to the political process would be differentiated, likely reflecting historical relations of domination such as gender, age, caste and other forms of social difference, but we also expected the political transition to influence how such social inequality was (re)produced. Thus we needed to understand the extent to which social relations continued to refract the political process or whether the radical ambitions of ‘Naya Nepal’ were in fact transforming

these relations. These insights were particularly evident in relation to our third question.

The third research question turns to positionality and the cultural-political domain to ask how differently positioned people enact, subvert, resist or otherwise inhabit competing governance projects. This question explicitly drew from feminist theory on development and its articulations with antecedent relations of power (Nicholson 1990; Young 1990; Mohanty et al. 1991; Laurie et al. 1999). In feminist theory, the subject is formed by ‘the effect of power in recoil’ (Butler 1997), requiring an exploration of how individuals internalize and resist power. The kinds of subjectivities promoted through state projects are not simply internalized by the subject. Rather, the subject emerges from the process of resistance, collusion and ultimate transformation of such subjectivities. From previous research we knew that how successful people are in making claims on the ‘everyday state’ depends crucially on social positioning, cultural meanings and their articulation with broader political-economic currents (Nightingale 2003; Rankin 2004; Jeffrey 2010).

A key trope that emerged in the findings is that democracy is predicated upon the achievement of equality for women and *dalit* in the words of most people (Nightingale and Rankin 2012). Given our understanding of subjectivity, we were interested in where, how and with what consequences people animated these discourses of ‘equality’ in everyday practice (see also Tamang 2002). What do they think is required to achieve equality and to what extent do we see real transformations in behaviors and expectations? Our feminist backgrounds suggested we would see these transformations in everyday practices (McDowell 1992; Massey 1994; Hanson and Pratt 1995; Laurie et al. 1999; Bondi and Davidson 2003). While it is important to analyze policy and the extent to which women are represented within political parties (Bashevkin 2009), we argue it is equally important to recognize how conceptions of equality are enacted in everyday practice, and the social struggles and subjective transformations that result.

This theoretical stance also brought us to our understanding that ‘democracy’ is something that is produced and transformed in the everyday, through the kinds of resistances and internalizations of the subjectivities we named above. Feminist theory, in combination with other scholarship on the state and subjectivity (Ruud 2001; Spencer 2007; Strauss and O’Brien 2007; Krause and Schramm 2011), demands that

we explore how people come to reflect the ‘democratic subject.’ What elements of the normative discourses around democracy do they think are important? Which ones do they imitate in their everyday practices? How have the *jan sarkar*, the teachings of the Maoists, and the promotion of ‘governance’ by donor projects shaped how people understand key ideas like ‘the state,’ ‘equality’ and ‘New Nepal’? What are the conditions under which new political formations at the local scale might create openings for destabilizing existing caste, gender or class-based identities? Can such destabilization give rise to the formation of new political subjectivities and public sphere politics (Gibson-Graham 2002; Shneiderman 2009)?

These questions also drew our attention to the contradictions between well-educated, politically connected men (and in a few cases women) who vigorously advocated for social equality in political domains and yet enforced strong hierarchies within their own household (see also Cameron 2007 on contradictory caste politics of high caste revolutionaries). Our methodological commitment to in-depth, qualitative and personally engaged research was key to illuminating these insights. Our Nepal-based collaborators particularly noted our encounter with a widely known and respected man who had been a headmaster and responsible for promoting education across large sections of eastern Nepal. When introducing his wife he told us that “she does not have a name. She won’t say her name so I just call her Manisha.” We were of course familiar with the gendered politics of names, but this comment served to publicly erase the woman’s identity in a manner that surprised all of us and prompted much animated debriefing. This interpretation was subsequently reinforced in a discussion with the man’s daughter-in-law. She revealed that she was seeking means to distance herself from her father-in-law’s oppressive stance toward women in the household by setting up her own business that would require her to shift residence to a different hamlet altogether.

There are two ways in which this encounter highlighted the importance of our feminist stance towards political transition. First, this household dynamic contrasted strongly with the discourses of equality, education and ‘awareness’ the man eloquently articulated in our formal interview with him. Clearly, he did not see the household as a domain that required reform. It was only the external, public world of ‘politics’ (and development) that needed to be accountable to the mandate of a Naya Nepal. Second, for women positioned in relations of dependency within the patriarchal, patrilineal household, political emancipation requires nothing less than transformation

of household relations. Individual women practice modes of informal subversion that serve to diminish gendered modes of authority and blur the hegemonic boundaries between public and private even if they are not engaging in more overt collective protest. On the latter point, we noted the transformative role that cell phones seem to play, by enabling women to keep closer ties to their natal kin on a daily basis and giving them support outside the otherwise often alienating marital home.

In other words, our feminist commitments in many respects led us to redefine our field of investigation. We need to look for political transformation not only at organized user-group meetings, municipality (VDC) meetings and other more ‘public’ forums, but also within the everyday space of social reproduction. Our theoretical stance brings our attention to the ways in which new forms of consciousness about equality and democracy motivate those who feel oppressed to take bold steps, and endeavor to carve out new spaces for personal, social, economic and political engagement in villages and small market towns.

We found people from all walks of life attempting to capitalize upon the new openings presented by the ‘peace’ and new state resources flowing into rural areas in creative ways. For example, in Khotang, the bazaar town was a buzz of activity. We were nearly run over by a team of men carrying a new electrical transformer on a bamboo stretcher. The bazaar and its services were expanding so rapidly that the previously well-paved (with flagstones) road through the center of the bazaar was an obstacle course of trenches. Also, all along the trail from the Tarai to Khotang, we met entrepreneurs returning from the Gulf and Malaysia with capital to invest in new businesses—most often small shops and in one case, beef cattle for the lucrative Indian markets. While some of these attempts are deeply entrenched in older forms of patronage and barely disguised appropriation of state and development resources (money) for personal gain, others exhibited more encouraging political possibilities. For example, local women rallying to stop rampant deforestation in favor of a longer-term strategy of cultivating medicinal herbs in Mugu, in open opposition to the men in their user-group who were responsible for selling off timber and firewood at unsustainable rates. As we attempted to contextualize these promising as well as deeply distressing trends, we wondered aloud at whether significant political transformation could occur in the absence of transformation in the most fundamental relationships of the household and the community.



## The Field and Feminist Praxis

As we recounted above, our feminist theoretical stance had significant methodological implications and our approach to feminist collaboration was no less crucial for the insights *Landscapes of Democracy* was able to generate. Our research methods encompassed a qualitative toolkit including interviews, non-participant observation, and content analysis of relevant primary sources. While these methods were certainly familiar to us, engaging them in collaborative fieldwork with our team presented challenging and generative opportunities for research practices. We sought to engage Nepal-based researchers from different levels of training and experience as well as to use our different styles of working to our best advantage. In other words, we had a strong commitment to collaborative learning and understanding the research process itself as a tool for reflection and transformation of the very practices and relationships we were trying to explore. In this section, we critically assess our approach and discuss both how it helped to enrich the research findings, as well as producing some limitations.

The core team included two Nepal-based research associates, Tulasi Sigdel and Pushpa Hamal. During one field period, a Nepali Canada-based doctoral student, Sabin Ninglekhu joined us. We were also accompanied in the field for a few days by our co-investigator, Dr. Hemant Ojha, and a recent University of Edinburgh PhD, Dr. Fraser Sugden. Another co-investigator, Dr. Bishnu Upreti, helped to select our research associates and was an important resource for understanding the national context. In many ways the collaboration felt cumbersome. We were a large and imposing group—two *kui* (the derogatory designation for white people in Nepal); three highly educated, cosmopolitan Nepalis with limited social connections in our research sites (with the exception of Hamal in Mugu); Rankin's four-year old son; a Nepali friend of Nightingale's retained as a nanny; and four porters. When we had Ojha and Sugden with us, we were even more imposing and found it next to impossible to be anything other than 'an NGO' in the eyes of our research participants (Burghart 1996).

We traveled by foot to our agrarian district field sites, even though most of the district headquarters were accessible by plane or motor vehicle, in order to build an understanding of the trade routes and other paths of connection linking places within and beyond the districts. On the one hand, traveling in a large group offended our long-cultivated ethnographic sensibilities. 'Good' ethnography requires at least more discreteness and ideally a longer-term engagement with a particular

research site to allow for participant observation and an intersubjective basis for engaging with research participants. On the other hand, traveling as a team afforded some opportunities to pursue feminist commitments that proved essential to the research objectives in the following ways.

First our research collaboration created an interdisciplinary arena of practice and analysis that brought together Nightingale's background in sociocultures with Rankin's interest in the cultural politics of markets, Sigdel's deep knowledge of formal political institutions and Hamal's core concerns with social justice. Ninglekhu's attention to caste and ethnic relations and how they articulate in everyday political dynamics rounded out the team's expertise on complex intersections of subjectivities and political transformation. Nightingale continually broached questions about how social and political inequalities are reflected on the landscape (for example, through the differing uses of forests by men vs. women, or between different caste groups), as well as how the landscape itself functions as an active agent in shaping possibilities for social inclusion and exclusion (Rocheleau et al. 1996; Haraway 1997; Gururani 2002; Sundberg 2003; Peluso 2009). Rankin foregrounded the culturally inflected dynamics of power that come into view through nuanced attention to the multiple sites and agents of market formation. While probing community forestry as a site of contested governance, for example, Rankin emphasized the significance of 'value-chain' logics of economic integration, through which the 'local' articulates wider regional economies and is incorporated into commercial relations.

Sigdel, meanwhile, devoted field time to tracing the specific configuration and histories of political parties and bureaucratic practices in each site, paying special attention to how they intersect with local practices of class, caste and gender to mediate access to political participation and economic opportunity. Hamal brought his wide ranging experience from across Nepal to help contextualize the relationships and contexts we were seeing, and, along with Ninglekhu, added a crucial interpersonal element through outstanding abilities to form easy relationships with research participants. Ninglekhu's deep understanding of ethnic politics helped to contextualize relationships which had not been so strongly present in either of the authors' previous research sites. Sugden brought his work on agrarian change into conversation with the research, by emphasizing issues of land use that underpin livelihoods and are a source of much political conflict. Each of these perspectives proved important for developing approaches

to understanding political subjectivity, and the everyday practices, material opportunities and socio-natural conditions through which it is constituted.

Ojha's extensive work on the politics of resource governance and the possibilities for radical social transformation contributed to creating a research environment that put collaborative learning as its main goal, without resorting to the rather token gestures for which Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques have been criticized. He also helped us to establish a routine of daily de-briefing sessions wherein we revisited the day's events and discussed their relevance for the research. Thus our model dispensed with expertise as a basis of knowledge, a key axiom in feminist epistemology (Haraway 1991; Rose 1993; Mohanty 2003; Pollard 2013). Rather, knowledge was produced within a community of inquiry, formed through our collaboration in the field and our encounters with people in the field sites. Interpretations were deliberated in regular 'debriefing' sessions that kept research objectives in view while also allowing for wide-ranging discussions about our experiences in the research sites. We all worried about the impact our cumbersome group would have in the communities we visited. In particular, would we tax too heavily the capacities of the households we visited? Would we be construed as explorer- or tourist-scholars, insensitive to the politics of extracting knowledge from local communities (Mohanty 2003)? Or worse, would we be mistaken for yet another development NGO seeking to promote particular forms of democracy (Sundberg 2004)?

Yet we also came to recognize and appreciate the conviviality our group engendered in the sites we visited—enrolling our hosts in the project of teaching soccer to four-year old Sam, lingering over evening meals with drinking and singing, deliberating the next moves of various Party factions. Here Hamal's considerable field experience and interpersonal skills were vital as he took the lead in facilitating such relationships and reminded us of the possibility of forging meaningful encounters in the widest range of circumstances. These too became moments of collective inquiry, as we were able to test out our interpretations with research interlocutors in an informal and relaxed setting, and modify them to reflect their analytical insights. Though none of us enjoyed the epistemic privilege of a closely shared affiliation with people in our research sites, collectively we shared a kind of epistemic advantage rooted in the intersectionalities and relations brought into view through fluid communities of inquiry (Narayan 1992; March 2002).

Here we want to emphasize that it was only through a feminist commitment to engaging everyone involved in the research as collaborators in knowledge production that we were able to redefine our field of inquiry in these ways. Both authors found it a real privilege to work with another colleague who had an equivalent level of training and experience in fieldwork, but also to have such committed and skilled collaborators who approached the work from their own positionalities and experience. Too often, fieldwork is an activity undertaken with 'assistants' who are seen as interpreters and local intermediaries, rather than the kind of multi-level, multi-skilled group we were able to engage. By taking seriously the insights and perspectives each group member could offer, we remained alert to new spaces and practices to probe as 'research sites.' We were also able to gain a much greater appreciation of how routine, everyday and often very localized interactions within households and communities are crucial to the production of wider scale political transformations.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have taken a deliberately reflexive approach to our positionality as feminist scholars and the implications of that positionality for research on state formation and political transition. Several important insights have emerged not only from the research approach, but also from thinking through the work in this manner.

First, feminist commitments informed the framing of the research questions in ways that were often implicit rather than explicit. Here, post-structural understandings of the performance of subjectivities (Butler 1990), a networked understanding of space and place (Massey 2005) and the importance of the everyday in opening up and shutting down possibilities for political change (Gibson-Graham 1996) were foundational to the kinds of questions we asked about the political transition in Nepal. Our understanding of where we would 'find' politics, the need to attend to the multi-scalar, networked relations in the making of the political, and how we frame political subjectivity were thus all informed by feminist theory. Yet, it was also through an (at times subconscious) commitment to these ideas that we were able to stay alert to how our original formulation of the field was perhaps too narrow. Rather, it needed to include some of the spaces and practices that were of deep concern to earlier feminist theorists.

Second, our feminist approach to collaborative and inclusive knowledge production gave us tools to negotiate the cumbersome and somewhat problematic size and

composition of our research team. And fortuitously, we found that by productively working with those cumbersome aspects, we were able to gain new insights and relationships that would not have been possible without the range of people and expertise in our team. While there is no question that in some respects our unwieldy team distanced us from our research participants in ways we wanted to avoid, in other respects it afforded unanticipated forms of connection and opened up fruitful avenues for joint knowledge production.

Finally, our reflections on our research praxis illuminate starkly how feminist theories are salient well beyond considerations of women and gender. Feminist theory draws our attention to the operation of power and how social inequalities are performed. It prompts exploration of the roots of social and political inequality. It foregrounds debates about provisioning, sustainability and redistribution of state and community resources that are crucial not only for the study, but also the realization of political transformation. And, perhaps most importantly, it demands that we trace hegemonic forms of inequality to hierarchical relations within the household.

A study on political transition in Nepal, we suggest, must take up these feminist insights to move beyond the prevailing preoccupation with inclusion of named marginalized groups in formal modes of political representation. Instead, more attention must be paid to the ways in which social inequality and injustice is institutionalized in everyday life. Feminists have long argued that gender is salient well beyond the household. We want to take this point a step further to argue that household relations are foundational in establishing hierarchy and inequality as everyday 'common sense.' As such, they must also be specified as a key terrain for a radical politics that could supplant entrenched social injustices.

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