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Becoming Rasuwa Relief: Practices of Multiple Engagement in Post-Earthquake Nepal

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In this article, we reflect on the multiple nature of our engagements in the wake of the 7.8m earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25th 2015. Specifically, we trace the events, experiences, decisions, positions, and processes that constituted our work with a post-earthquake volunteer initiative we helped to form, called Rasuwa Relief. Using the concept of *multiplicity* (cf. Mol 2002), we consider the uncertain process by which Rasuwa Relief began to cohere, as a collective of diverse efforts, interventions, projects, and commitments, and how Rasuwa Relief was continually and multiply enacted through practices of engagement. As a collaborative effort that coordinated and consolidated many of our post-earthquake interventions over a period of two years, Rasuwa Relief was always in a state of becoming.

This process of becoming, we suggest, indexed and informed the multiple ways that we participated and intervened in the aftermath of the earthquake—as accidental humanitarians or ‘relief workers’, as early-career scholars, and as people attempting to balance diverse personal, academic, and ethical commitments within and beyond Nepal. Based on a reflexive analysis of these multiple engagements, we also present an embedded critique of ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin 2012), inclusive of our own decisions and actions, alongside a self-critical analysis of the affective factors that shaped our own ‘need to help’ (Malkki 2015).

**Keywords**: Nepal, disaster, humanitarianism, engaged scholarship, multiplicity, reflexivity.
On Being Multiple

In the wake of the earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25th 2015, we helped to form a volunteer disaster-response initiative that we called Rasuwa Relief. Like the countless others who attempted to help at this time, we never expected to be directly involved in humanitarian ‘relief work.’ However, our embodied experiences of the earthquake and our deepening relationships within Nepal compelled us to reorient ourselves in relation to the disaster. Amid the uncertainties of the aftermath and still trying to process our own lived experiences, we began, like many others, to act in multiple ways. We hoped that, but were often unsure if, we could become helpful. In early May 2015, we formed Rasuwa Relief and made an informed decision to engage in new ways, and to sustain and elaborate these engagements as the aftermath unfolded around us. As a collaborative effort that indexed a variety of different post-earthquake orientations, understandings of disaster, and expressions of ‘the need to help’ (Malkki 2015), Rasuwa Relief was always in a state of becoming.¹

This article traces the arc of our post-earthquake engagement, beginning with the earthquake itself and the confusion of the emergency phase, and following the subsequent activities, decisions, and actions that shaped two years of volunteer work with Rasuwa Relief. In our analysis, we show how Rasuwa Relief was enacted in everyday practice and through the shared labor of many contributors. Throughout its existence, Rasuwa Relief was used to coordinate not only different kinds of post-earthquake efforts but also “the activity of knowing” (Mol 2002: 50)—knowing the disaster, its effects, and our own embedded role in the uncertain aftermath. Over time these different enactments began to ‘hang together’ and Rasuwa Relief began to cohere, and yet it remained fundamentally multiple (Mol 2002: 55).² Further, by working through and with Rasuwa Relief—as ‘relief workers,’ academic researchers, and persons balancing a variety of different personal relationships and commitments in Nepal—we also became multiply engaged.

While this article serves to highlight the multiplicity of our own experiences and engagements in the context of the 2015 earthquakes, we also draw on the work of other scholars working within and beyond Nepal to argue that multiple engagements are critical in post-disaster settings (cf. Oliver-Smith 1986; Schuller 2010; Farmer 2011; Craig 2015a). In moments of crisis, both humanitarians and scholars must reconcile various and overlapping orientations, efforts, and positionalities. As such, essentializing categories such as ‘humanitarian’ or ‘relief worker’ quickly break down into a diverse array of practices and ethical orientations that hang together in a given context or situation (Malkki 2015; Redfield 2013; Malkki 2015). Despite the intensive training and conditioning of humanitarian workers, critical analyses show that “their everyday practices were guided by a more complex, subtle, dynamic set of professional dispositions, imaginative practices and processes, and unforeseen attachments” (Malkki 2015: 201). As we discuss below, and as other Nepal scholars have also highlighted (March 2015; Craig 2015a; McGranahan 2015; Shakya 2015; Hindman 2015; Shneiderman 2015), the practices, relations, and attachments of academic researchers are similarly diverse and intensely multiple in the wake of disaster.

As Malkki suggests, both humanitarian workers and academic researchers are taught and expected to cultivate an ethical orientation conditioned by a kind of “affective neutrality” (2015: 191). Humanitarian workers often orient their interventions around an ideal kind of compassionate action (Boltanski 1999; Bornstein and Redfield 2010; Fassin 2012) and seek to avoid attachment. Researchers also attempt objectivity and seek to avoid the biases that arise from excess proximity and entanglement (Oliver-Smith 1986). In the context of crisis, however, these attempts at methodological distancing become problematic and sometimes untenable. Drawing parallels between ‘aid work’ and ethnographic research, Malkki identifies common “feelings of insufficiency,” because both enterprises “entail a kind of provisional, improvisational, unstable neutrality, but one that runs up against its limits” (2015: 191). In moments of disaster, both kinds of workers seek a balance, to reconcile ideals of affective neutrality and objective distance with lived patterns of participation and action that arise from proximity to suffering.

In recent years, academic literature on disasters and relief has expanded significantly, offering both embedded accounts of humanitarianism (Fassin 2012; Redfield 2013; Malkki 2015) and rich analyses of post-disaster aftermaths (Simpson 2013).³ However, fewer scholars have written about more personal lived experiences with disaster (Hidalgo & Barber 2009) or their direct engagements and interventions within post-disaster relief and recovery efforts (Farmer 2011; Schuller 2014; Liboiron 2015). In the wake of the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, many academics considered their own complex relations with people and place in post-earthquake Nepal—similarly reflecting on the unstable boundaries between scholarly, humanitarian, and personal engagement—while others articulated productive critiques of the role of social scientists in the time of disaster (K.C. & Shakya 2015; Hindman 2015). These conversations continue, particularly in light of the difficult and slow process of post-earthquake recovery and the likelihood of future seismic activity in the Himalaya region.
By offering a reflexive account of our own experiences and engagements in the wake of the 2015 earthquakes, this article adds to the literature on disaster, aftermath, and humanitarianism. As early-career scholars of the Himalayan region, and as people who were both present during the earthquakes and their uncertain aftermath, we draw from lessons learned as unlikely ‘humanitarians’ trying to help while attending to our own neediness (Malkki 2015). We struggled to navigate the uncertain terrain of post-earthquake Nepal. We tried to help while slowly learning how to do so, acting first based on a kind of reflex and, later, more reflexively. While working with Rasuwa Relief, we were constantly attempting to balance a variety of commitments to diverse kinds of people, places, principles, and positionalities: that is, we were always multiple.

Uneven Narrations of Disaster

Disaster response efforts, humanitarian or otherwise, are often shaped and adapted in relation to particular patterns of ascertainment and narration, fueled by a sense of urgency and rupture. In the aftermath of disaster, differently positioned narrators seek to frame the disaster and to reinterpret the relationship between a cataclysmic event and the latent crises or vulnerabilities that preceded it (Hewitt 1983; Das 1996). Reflecting on the different narrations (and narrators) circulating in the aftermath of the 2001 earthquake in the Indian state of Gujarat, Edward Simpson argues that “the stories these people eventually learned to tell about the earthquake often shared no language or an agreed upon sequence of events. The disaster became competing and contradictory forms of knowledge” (2013: 263-264). In the 21st century, these uneven narrations mix with universalizing patterns of ‘humanitarian reason’ (Fassin 2012) that are used to frame, position, and justify a complex and uneven range of post-disaster interventions. Humanitarian reason, however, is often politically reconfigured by structures of power.

Our decision to form Rasuwa Relief was fueled in part by frustrations with the ways that narratives of disaster were warped by discursive power and the optics of disaster response, privileging some places and some people while obscuring others (Shneiderman & Turin 2015; Nelson 2015). Perhaps predictably, international attention in the immediate aftermath focused mostly on certain high-profile monuments and sacred sites in the Kathmandu Valley, which has been reduced to ‘ruins,’ differentiated and isolated within broader landscapes of largely undifferentiated ‘rubble’ (cf. Gordillo 2014). Areas of high priority included UNESCO World Heritage sites and the iconic monuments of Kathmandu, the avalanche zone near Everest Base Camp (a perennial media favorite), and the government headquarters near the epicenter in Gorkha district. These selective ways of ‘seeing’ the disaster, inflected both by globally circulating ideas and ideals about places of great importance and the centralized interests of the Nepalese state, shifted attention away from the rest of Nepal and helped obscure chronically unequal patterns of vulnerability and the systems of structural violence that helped create them (Farmer 2011). As other scholars have suggested, it is these underlying patterns of inequality that reproduce the unevenness of disaster (Hewitt 1983; Oliver-Smith & Hoffman 1999; Tamang 2015; Ghale 2015).

While reflecting on our own roles and engagements, we also address the politics of representation that shaped our ability to act as an advocate for disaster victims (Schuller 2014) and to acknowledge the asymmetries of mobility, access, and language that at times privileged our voices over Nepali voices (K.C. & Shakya 2015; Redfield 2012; Sheller 2016). While we did not ourselves respond to a ‘distant suffering’ (Boltanski 1999) in the wake of the earthquakes in Nepal, we did in many ways become mediators in the relations between suffering Nepalis and people in distant places who expressed a deeply affective ‘need to help’ (Malkki 2015; Craig 2015a; Leve 2015). Reflecting on our own actions and commitments, we strive to move beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and saviorhood that were often prevalent in post-earthquake Nepal. Throughout our work, we tried to maintain an awareness of our own privileged position while at the same time wielding that privilege to increase the voice and agency of others; as we describe below, this was not an easy task.

The Immediate Aftermath: Implicated, Informed, Compelled

Reflecting on his experiences conducting research in the wake of the ‘Great Peruvian Earthquake’ and the co-seismic avalanche that buried the city of Yungay in 1970, Anthony Oliver-Smith wrote:

I found that as a researcher, my responses to the tragedy of Yungay were complex, and only a few were conscious and well rationalized at the time. My initial attempts to achieve scientific distance reflected not only training, but probably also psychological need to escape from the continual daily assault of sorrow and pain which characterized life in the camp in that first year after the quake [...] Finally, I abandoned my position as a non-intervening, objective observer in what was probably the most conscious of my responses to life in Yungay. (1986: 27-28)
When the earthquake on April 25th, 2015, both of us were in Nepal conducting academic research, and were implicated in the unfolding disaster in a deeply embodied way. Like many across Nepal, we too struggled to seek safety, to locate friends and loved ones, to locate other people, to gain information, to establish contact, to understand what had just occurred and what might occur next, and to grieve. And then, like many others, we tried to determine where help was needed (where, what kind, by whom?) and how to help directly and effectively. Having witnessed the destruction firsthand, having spent years working in Nepal prior to the event, and having many friends in earthquake-affected areas, we felt a visceral and personal compulsion to respond. In many ways, choosing to act was part of our own processes of sense-making in the face of extreme uncertainty, a way to channel our anxieties and concerns into what we hoped was right action. In the sections below, we provide some background on where each of us was on the day of first major earthquake.

On April 25th, Austin Lord was in the Langtang Valley in north Rasuwa District, a high-Himalayan valley, home to a community of culturally-Tibetan pastoralists that is also considered a popular trekking destination (Lim 2008). At the exact moment of the earthquake, he was talking to a local man, now a friend, about a proposed plan for hydro-power development in the Valley. When the earthquake struck, landslides and avalanches came down throughout the valley, including a massive co-seismic avalanche that began on the southern slopes of Langtang Lirung (7,234m). This avalanche, which destroyed the entire village of Langtang and released half the force of the Hiroshima atomic bomb, caused the single most concentrated loss of life anywhere in Nepal (Kargel et al. 2016). Austin and his parents had stayed in Langtang village the previous night and left the avalanche zone just two hours before the event (Lord 2015). When the debris cleared from the air and we saw the scale of destruction, we realized how incredibly fortunate we were to be alive and unharmed. Trapped between the massive avalanche above and active landslides below, Austin spent two intensely emotional days in Langtang waiting and working with fellow survivors to create temporary shelters and establish basic systems of triage, before being evacuated to Kathmandu by helicopter on the evening of April 27th.

Upon reaching Kathmandu, Austin spent days gathering and sharing information on the phone and online, responding to media inquiries, and attempting to answer questions from embassies and families around the world trying to locate missing people in the Langtang area. Meanwhile, most of the 488 survivors from the Langtang community shifted to a camp for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that had been established at the Phuntsok Choeling Monastery near Swayambhunath in Kathmandu. Austin and others made several visits to the camp to provide relief materials and to talk with community members. After less than 48 hours in Kathmandu, Austin, grew frustrated with the uneven impacts and optics of the disaster (cf. Shneiderman & Turin 2015; Nelson 2015) and wrote the following statement on social media:

To be clear: Kathmandu is not just a pile of rubble. Don’t believe the hype. Without dismissing the very real needs of some people, the damage is remarkably, fortunately, and unexpectedly limited compared with the possibilities and most importantly with other parts of Nepal. I say this because most current international media continues to reinforce longstanding spatial biases: that there is Kathmandu, Everest, and the rest of Nepal, only vaguely referenced or understood... [yet] the rest of Nepal is where the problems post-earthquake are most pressing, where little attention has been given to the conditions of marginal Nepalis, and where help is greatly needed in the immediate [...] I say this to shine more light outside the city, on places which are currently largely in the dark.

On April 25th, Galen Murton was conducting research in Mustang district, where (despite not being classified as a ‘severely affected district’) damage to buildings and other local infrastructures was significant and widespread. After a few days conducting surveys of damage within the villages near Jomsom, Kagbeni, and Mukтинath and trying to help anxious residents contact friends and family elsewhere, he began a multi-day trip via motorcycle to Kathmandu on April 30th. Along the way, Galen was able to see broader patterns of disaster and response that were in stark contrast to popular accounts of damage across the Kathmandu Valley and media reports of national devastation. A few days after his arrival in the capital, he published an online report (Murton 2015) focused on the unevenness and asymmetry of relief:

In driving from Pokhara to Kathmandu, one could be forgiven for not knowing what had happened. [...] Just to the north a mere several kilometers away, the scene is vastly and ghastly different. Here, in the communities of Gorkha, Lamjung, Dading, Nuwakot, and Rasuwa, devastation is an understatement. As Kathryn March lamented, villages are gone (March 2015), lives are lost, homes destroyed, infrastructures obliterated. And yet why are the roads so empty? [...] Where is this ‘global
response’, the outpouring of hearts, tears, and cash from the international community? What is happening? The hills of Nepal are crying but why aren’t we listening?

While Galen was en route to Kathmandu, we had a preliminary conversation about damage patterns and perceived gaps in the post-earthquake landscape. Our conversation eventually shifted to Rasuwa, where we had both conducted research together in the recent past (Murton, Lord, & Beazley 2016) and which remained largely overlooked. Rasuwa was centrally isolated between the ‘humanitarian hubs’ being established in Gorkha and Sindhupalchowk districts, and was largely (but unsurprisingly) cut off from Kathmandu by the politically dominant district of Nuwakot and chronic road access problems. Austin was acutely aware of the destruction that had occurred in Langtang and the massive uncertainties faced by displaced survivors. Our colleague Bob Beazley provided a detailed report on damage in Lower Rasuwa based on his reconnaissance trip in the days immediately following the earthquake. Our conversations with friends and research contacts in Rasuwa also indicated that relief efforts had not yet reached communities in the northern reaches of the district.

Importantly, our response was also shaped by prior knowledge of the region and its people. We were well aware of legacies of social and spatial exclusion experienced by Tamang populations in Rasuwa who had been subject to centuries of marginalization, corvée labor, and the codified caste-based discrimination of the muluki ain (Holmberg 1977; Campbell 2013). The earthquake hit Tamang communities across northern-Nepal particularly hard (Magar 2015), compounding everyday vulnerabilities, especially in Rasuwa, where 82% of the district population identifies as Tamang (Ghale 2015). The uneven impacts of the earthquakes on Tamang populations led some to relocate the event around a ‘Tamang epicenter’ (Magar 2015) or to interpret the disaster as a ‘Tamsaling Tragedy’ (Holmberg & March 2015). In the immediate wake of the earthquake, Tamang communities in Rasuwa and ethnic minorities (janajatis) in other regions remained heavily underserved and overshadowed by greater attention to other more visible and politically-connected areas.

As we worked on determining the contours of the gaps in Rasuwa, we began considering our own interventions to help fill them. We reached out to a variety of contacts involved in different kinds of disaster relief efforts, within and beyond Nepal. In an attempt to better understand the ‘information architecture’ (Raj & Gautam 2015) of the disaster management complex, we began to attend a series of informational and logistical meetings focused on coordination, and conferred with a variety of other grassroots initiatives and self-organizing ‘non-NGOs’ emerging in Kathmandu. This included the Himalayan Disaster Relief Volunteer Group (aka ‘Yellow House’), an eclectic yet effective group using social media connections to ‘hack’ the disaster response, becoming one of the largest distributors of relief materials in Nepal (Streep 2015). Another group was Kathmandu Living Labs, who were using open-source mapping software to coordinate both localized and global humanitarian crisis informatics through its #QuakeMap program (Meyer 2015) and with whom we had worked.

Figure 1. A group of Rasuwa Relief volunteers after loading two trucks of relief materials in early May 2015. (Yonzon, 2015)
on research-related projects before the earthquakes. At this early stage, these kind of volunteer efforts and collectives with direct connections to specific areas of Nepal comprised a significant share of relief distribution (Tamang 2015).

And so, in the first days of May 2015, we also gathered with a small group of volunteers to discern the shape of current needs, gather resources, and form a plan of action. Describing ourselves as a ‘humanitarian volunteer initiative’—a framing carefully worded to signal our non-professional orientation to the disaster—we released our first public statement via social media. Like many others who have found themselves at the frontiers of disaster response in the 21st century, we launched a crowd-funding campaign to support our initial efforts. We had become a diverse collective of nine people [see Acknowledgments], and we called ourselves Rasuwa Relief.

Disaster & Unevenness in Rasuwa

Heading upstream along the Trisuli River with our fellow volunteers during our first major relief mission on May 10th, we could see that the impacts of the earthquake and the unevenness of response remained profound. The floodplains outside the market town of Betrawati at the border of Nuwakot and Rasuwa had been transformed into a tangle of IDF camps and emergency medical facilities, where dozens of NGO tents with competing global logos clustered into new enclaves of triage—a place where the international humanitarian community was both needed and conspicuous. And yet the further one traveled northward into the hills of Rasuwa, relief units and humanitarian responders became strikingly sparse and then nearly absent altogether.

From the ridgeline above Kalikasthan, one could see several villages on the steep hillsides across the river devastated by still-active landslides. Although the perennial landslide zones that define and often block the upper road to the Rasuwa district headquarters of Dhunche were (surprisingly) no worse than usual, other responders unfamiliar to the landscape had stopped early along the road, unloading emergency relief materials within the more accessible villages. Foreshadowing future problems of coordination and ‘duplication,’ some communities received help from three or four NGOs in the early weeks while others failed to attract any attention—partly the result of spatial biases in communications infrastructure. Within many villages, chronically marginalized sub-populations, like single-women and dalit (‘untouchable’) families, were often subordinated or excluded from locally-facilitated distributions of relief supplies. These problems of optics and micro-politics repeated themselves in fractal patterns across Nepal.

Upon arrival in Syabru Besi, the market center of Upper Rasuwa just 10 miles from the Nepal-China border, we began talking with people who had descended from the surrounding hills seeking support, and both gaps and overlaps in relief distribution became even more evident. Rumors and expectations suggested the opening of the roads to larger vehicles and the imminent arrival of significant humanitarian relief, but at the time of our

Figure 2. Map of Rasuwa District made available by the UN Logistics Cluster that was used to orient and coordinate humanitarian activities in the aftermath of the earthquake.

(UN Logistics Cluster, 2015)
arrival, very little international support had yet reached this part of the district. Instead, relief supplies came from various small groups like ours: including teams from Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Kathmandu, volunteer youth groups on motorcycles, and trekking agencies whose porters hailed from Tamang villages nearby.

In the days and weeks to follow, we encountered a number of disaster response teams from Nepal and across the globe, each arriving with strikingly different agendas and knowledges. Some were exceptionally well equipped but lacked essential information on what was needed where, and by whom. In contrast, others arrived with a calculated strategy to focus their operations in Rasuwa for the long term—explaining that they chose Rasuwa precisely because other districts were already considered ‘crowded.’ Here we witnessed a glimpse of patterns that would later resemble what others have described as ‘competitive humanitarianism’ (Stirrat 2006), as different actors and institutions raced to justify their interventions in ‘unreached’ relief territories.

These competitive dynamics manifested themselves at different scales. Local volunteer groups often reached first; they were nimble but lacked the capital and economies of scale to solve systemic problems. Well-established but top-heavy international NGOs arrived later with more resources and jostled for position. These groups all sought to help, but also to lay claim to a particular part of the humanitarian map. These patterns scripted the performance of a fixed rubric of humanitarian tasks, many of which came designed for distribution in the form of different humanitarian ‘kits,’ a strange kind of pre-fabricated extra-mobile humanitarian object (Redfield 2013). The moment of ‘hyper-consumption’ that often follows a disaster (Simpson 2013: 37) had arrived, and problems related to coordination, quality control, and approaches to distribution (equality vs. equity, individuals vs. households, from the truck vs. to the house) were soon apparent.

On May 12th 2015, while we were in Rasuwa distributing solar units and emergency shelter materials and conducting reconnaissance, the ‘second’ major earthquake struck, this one measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale. Again, we ran to seek safe ground, we watched as stones rained down the hillsides and clouds of dust rose into the valleys, and we attempted to call friends and loved ones as the network jammed. Fear nestled in our throats as we walked over active landslides. Fear kept us awake at night as aftershocks sent debris raining down slopes barely two hundred meters from our cracked rooms in Syabru Besi.

This kind of shared vulnerability was an unavoidable part of our commitment to direct engagement, and another reminder that ‘relief work’ was not an abstract exercise. And yet, we still felt in that moment—as we felt later elsewhere in Rasuwa, in the IDP camps during the monsoon, and at ceremonies for the dead held in Kathmandu and Langtang—that our commitment to informed action and to being co-present was an important ethical decision. Furthermore, these firsthand experiences gained while attempting to do ‘relief work’ had shown us that our situated knowledge of Rasuwa was valuable in multiple ways. Put differently, we saw that an academically and ethnographically informed understanding of post-earthquake locations as more than just ‘dots on a map’ allowed us to “act productively as brokers between multiple actors” (Shneiderman 2015: 1). Thus, as the terms of our volun-

Figure 3. At the time of the 7.3 magnitude earthquake that struck on May 12, 2015, our team of volunteers was in Rasuwa distributing solar panels, tarps, and other relief materials. Here two volunteers watch as dust rises from the valley below immediately after the shock.

(Lord, 2015)
terism began to change following the second earthquake, we made a multiple commitment to continue our work, amid and despite the confusion.

**Engagement and Praxis in the Post-Earthquake Landscape**

For two years after the earthquake, we worked as Rasuwa Relief on a variety of different projects—ranging from interventions focused on immediate humanitarian relief to collaborative community-based projects committed to long-term recovery. This kind of sustained engagement, always challenging and often frustrating, was informed by a lived praxis that complemented and enriched our academic understandings of risk, social inequality, and uneven vulnerabilities. Put differently, as our work progressed, we learned how to refine and improve our engagements through everyday practice—which included recognizing our own limits. As the pattern of our engagement became more elaborate, it also became increasingly multiple, which allowed us to consider both the post-earthquake landscape of Rasuwa and our positions within it from a variety of perspectives.

In May and June of 2015, Rasuwa Relief’s work targeted gaps exposed early in the emergency phase—for example,
delivering 37 metric tons of shelter materials and food stuffs to over 1,600 households in Rasuwa and providing infrastructural support to eight different IDP camps in Rasuwa and Kathmandu. Through this work, we gained both an appreciation for the art of logistics and a cynicism of bureaucratic simplifications of ‘the last mile’ required for distribution. We also learned a great deal about the micropolitics of ‘distribution’ and the need to manage both a variety of differently formed expectations and our own limitations as a small organization. As the monsoon arrived, we shifted our focus toward ‘early recovery’ activities: supporting livelihoods and skills training programs in IDP camps; building ‘temporary learning centers’ in villages where schools had been destroyed; and providing high-quality solar power systems to off-grid communities. During these months, we also educated ourselves about and complied with the shifting procedures established by the District Disaster Response Committee (DDRC) of Rasuwa and the coordination activities of the Shelter Cluster. In a very real sense, we participated directly in what might be called the post-disaster taskscape, and became intimately familiar with what Fassin identifies as ‘humanitarian reason’ (2012)—the narratives and logics that shape humanitarian action. Along the way, we also...
found that while it is easy to critique humanitarian interventions, it is much more difficult to enact them, and to adapt any ‘plan’ to the shifting contingencies that inevitably arise.

Over the course of two years, we also remained intensively engaged in long-term recovery in the Langtang Valley. This work began in early May, while the Lantangpa survivors were living in the ‘Yellow Gompa’ IDP camp in Kathmandu—where most of the community remained until October 2015. This included investments in camp infrastructures; delivering supplies like tents, mosquito nets, and solar units; and being present with the community, such as attending a series of funerary ceremonies for those who died on April 25th (Lord 2015). In June 2015, Austin was asked to become a formal advisor to the Langtang Management and Reconstruction Committee (LMRC)—a group of Langtangpa leaders tasked with organizing the resettlement of the Langtang Valley and seeking self-determination within the official process of reconstruction. While Austin was honored to serve in this role, he also felt unqualified at times and had to deny requests for advice or support regarding certain sensitive matters, like post-avalanche relocation. This involvement, however, provided insight into the Langtangpa planning process, which then allowed Rasuwa Relief to be more precise in providing logistical support that would facilitate the reconstruction process (i.e. trail clearance, restoring local infrastructures, building storage facilities) and to coordinate more effectively with partner organizations. As a result, when the winter months ended in early 2016, the LMRC was in a somewhat unique position to initiate their own reconstruction efforts.

As time went by, we began several other collaborative projects focused on the social and cultural dimensions of recovery in affected communities. In March 2016, for example, we coordinated a series of mobile health camps that brought practitioners of traditional Tibetan medicine, or sowa rigpa, to the villages in Upper Rasuwa. During these camps, Amchi Tenjing Bista and a team from the Lo Kunphen School in Mustang District, examined and administered care to more than 1,000 patients, utilizing both traditional and western medicines to treat a variety of medical conditions—ranging from skin infections and gastrointestinal distress to symptoms that western psychiatrists might describe as depression or PTSD (Craig 2015b). Beginning in late 2015, we also began working together with a team of Langtangpas and foreign volunteers on a collaborative effort called the Langtang Memory Project. This project seeks to create a ‘living archive’ of Langtangpa culture and heritage and supports Langtangpa multimedia projects that help community members tell their own stories of life in Langtang before and after the avalanche (Langtang Memory Project 2016). We understand these projects as part of a larger commitment to polyvocality in the wake of disaster—providing space for at-risk communities to describe their own conditions of vulnerability and narrate their own process of recovery (Schuller 2014; Liboiron 2015; Gergan 2016).

Through Rasuwa Relief, we also undertook a social media campaign that we hoped would provide insight into the situation ‘on the ground’ in Rasuwa and promote greater understanding of the social and political complexities of the earthquake aftermath. With these efforts, we tried to focus attention on the socially constructed dimensions of

Figure 8. In March 2016, Amchi Tenjing Bista administers care to an elderly woman with chronic health problems in the village of Gatlang. These mobile health camps allowed a team of amchi (practitioners of Tibetan medicine/Sowa Rigpa) to treat over 1,000 patients in Upper Rasuwa.

(Lord, 2016)
the disaster, highlighting the challenges faced by particularly vulnerable and socially excluded groups, such as persons with disabilities, and to include or represent marginalized voices. Through this work, we sought to critique and counter the kind of official representations of disaster that “are dominant to the point of ubiquity” (Liboiron 2015: 147) and that reproduce the uneven delineation of certain ‘acceptable’ risks in Nepal. While constructing these critical narratives, we tried to limit the effect and affect of our own mediations and focused on promoting the voice and agency of earthquake-affected Nepalis over our own.

However, while this approach was inflected by the ethics of social science, it was neither completely objective nor apolitical. In fact, and especially with respect to Rasuwa, we acted specifically and intentionally to make certain people, places, practices, processes, and pasts more visible than others—to draw attention to certain needs still unmet, like pervasive struggles with mental health, and to explicate the complex process of reconstruction (and its politics) to a broader international audience. These attempts to promote informed and critical awareness, however incomplete, were only possible because of the multiple nature of our engagement.

Finally, on April 25th, 2017, Rasuwa Relief—which was formed to fill gaps and designed to be a temporary volunteer initiative rather than an official NGO—was formally closed. And yet, while this phase of our work has finished, we remain engaged and committed, multiply.

On the Practice of Engaging Multiply

Our commitments are to making sense of the frustrations, the possibilities, the unknowns. (McGranahan 2015: 1)

This article represents a preliminary attempt to consider our own practices of post-disaster engagement and our own multiple commitments to Nepal in the wake of the 2015 earthquakes—to illuminate processes of engagement that are not often described in detail, to articulate a kind of engagement that we conceive of as multiple. Importantly, despite our ongoing work in Nepal, we do not personally identify as ‘scholar-practitioners,’ ‘activist academics,’ or even ‘engaged scholars.’ Why do we reject these categories? Because, as we have suggested, the practice of meaningful post-earthquake engagement does not imply a professional orientation to humanitarian action, and because many of the most important things that a ‘scholar’ can do in the post-disaster context are not necessarily ‘activist’ (or even directly ‘academic’). Rather, we suggest that our work in Nepal and the nature of engagement is more than that, or rather that it is both that and more—it is multiple (Mol 2002).

Becoming Rasuwa Relief was neither easy nor smooth, but marked by challenges, missteps and mistakes, recurrent frustrations, and frequent encounters with our individual and collective limits. Despite the fact that our initiative was launched as a critique of certain gaps in the humanitarian response, our own efforts were at times woven into and through the “social field of humanitarianism” and its...
moral imaginary (Fassin 2012). We maintain, however, that our proximity to specific communities and participation in their response allowed us to form a more specific and grounded critique of vague concepts like ‘transnational humanitarianism’ (cf. Ticktin 2014) and ‘disaster capitalism’ (cf. Klein 2007) based on direct experiences and encounters. Further, by reflecting upon our own imperfect efforts in the post-disaster context, we have also highlighted the contingent and conjunctural dimensions of post-disaster response and ‘relief work’ in a time of crisis where “aid work and research seem like flecks of dust, at best. And there is no right balance between distance and proximity” (Malkki 2015: 73). While this account of our process may not necessarily offer any neat models or solutions, we hope that it provides a few examples of the ways that scholars might contribute by engaging multiply in the wake of disaster.

By critically reflecting on our own experiences in Nepal through the writing of this paper, we have proposed not a rethinking of the disaster response paradigm—though that is certainly a critically important and ongoing project implicit in our analysis—but a reconceptualization of engagement that might account for the multiplicity of interventions undertaken by scholars in the wake of disaster. Multiple engagement presents a variety of possibilities: to construct a more empirically and experientially informed critique of humanitarian reasoning; to use the tools of critical academic analysis to reimagine standardized post-disaster routines; to undertake direct personal interventions that are neither academic nor professional; to be co-present at a difficult moment; to act in terms of an ethic of care.

Importantly, we are not alone in seeking to understand the possibilities of multiple engagement in the wake of the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal (cf. March 2015; Craig 2015; Shakya 2015; Shneiderman 2015). An increasing number of scholars have contributed to this effort in the context of other disasters (Oliver-Smith 1986; Farmer 2011; Schuller 2014; Liboiron 2015) and critical dialogue about the positions and values of social scientists in the wake of disaster continues in Nepal (i.e. K.C. & Shakya 2015; Hindman 2015; McGranahan 2015). In recent years, several workshops and events focused on patterns of engagement in post-earthquake Nepal have been held at academic conferences (for example, the ‘Nepal Earthquake Summit’ at Dartmouth College, February 2016) and new solidarities focused on knowledge-sharing and collaboration are emerging (such as the recently established ‘Nepal Geographers Association,’ April 2017). Lessons learned from these kinds of collaborations and dialogues have the potential to contribute to planning efforts for disaster-risk reduction and preparedness efforts in Nepal, across the Himalayan region, and beyond.

Importantly, the project of multiple engagement is not simply a reflexive academic exercise. The people of Nepal face protracted conditions of extreme vulnerability and a profoundly uncertain future. In the face of ever-present risks, we cannot allow political theatre or instrumental narratives of ‘resilience’ to obscure the lived struggles of Nepalis (Tamang 2015; Leve 2015), nor can we tolerate the common practice of “planning to forget,” as Simpson has described (2013). As Mark Schuller has argued while reflecting on his own positions and commitments in post-earthquake Haiti, “We have a responsibility to learn from our collective mistakes, to understand how the system is maintained and can change, and make the most effective use of the life stories, frustrations, injustices, and analyses that people entrust to those of us who are “insiders without” (2014: 412). Multiple engagements are needed in post-earthquake Nepal and in other post-disaster contexts, to combat confusion and amnesia with clarity and an informed will to remember the patterns of inequality and structural violence that shape and intensify disaster. With these theoretical frameworks and our own imperfect experiences in mind, we call for a greater focus on multiple engagement within the interdisciplinary fields of Himalayan studies and disaster studies—not just as a particular method of field research and publication, but as an increasingly important mode of political and ethical action.
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Endnotes

1. As a volunteer initiative and a collective effort, Rasuwa Relief was unlike an official NGO or a formal humanitarian organization. Though our work continued for roughly two years, Rasuwa Relief was formed in response to temporally specific needs and was understood to be ephemeral from the outset.

2. Describing the concept of multiplicity, Mol argues that to be multiple is to be “more than one, but less than many” (2002: 55). Importantly, this plurality does not imply fragmentation, because multiple enactments—of a disease called atherosclerosis, or of an organization called Rasuwa Relief—begin to ‘hang together’ through practice.

3. See Oliver-Smith & Hoffman (1999); Bornstein and Redfield (2010); Ticktin (2014) for a review of these literatures.
4. At the time of the earthquake, both authors were U.S. Fulbright Scholars in Nepal, conducting research on infrastructure development, mobility and social change. For more information on our scholarly contributions see Lord (2014; 2016), Murton (2015; 2017), or Murton, Lord & Beazley (2016).

5. More than 300 people lost their lives in the Langtang Valley on April 25th, including 175 Langtangpa. Unfortunately, more than two years after the earthquake, some of the bodies have not yet been recovered from the Langtang avalanche zone.

6. For example, Tamang communities make up only 5.8% of Nepal’s population yet an estimated 34% of total earthquake casualties were Tamang (Magar 2015). See also Thapa (2015).

7. At this point in the ‘Emergency Phase,’ most large NGOs were still establishing logistical supply chains (with the exception of a few with air assets) and mobilizations by the Nepalese state (with the exception of the Nepal Army, which focused on search and rescue and evacuation operations) remained limited.

8. Our term post-disaster taskscapes refers both to the work of Appadurai (1990) and Ingold (1993), in the wake of disaster, the landscape is re-animated by a variety of tasks—this includes both a localized meshwork of entangled tasks that seek to recover the temporality and resonance of place (Ingold 1993) and pre-fabricated tasks that circulated within a globally circulating humanitarian ‘scape’ populated by highly mobile disaster practitioners (Appadurai 1990). See also Redfield (2013) on hyper-mobility of crisis responders and the circulation of humanitarian ‘kits’.

9. Oliver-Smith described similar experiences while conducting research in the wake of a co-seismic avalanche in Yungay, Peru (1986: 28-29).

10. While people in this region were, on average, relatively well-off prior to the earthquake due to tourism in the area (Lim 2008), the damage from the avalanche in Langtang was on a scale seen nowhere else. Despite support from several small NGOs, volunteer initiatives, and foreign contacts the majority of people in Langtang did not have the resources to rebuild.

References


