Theorizing the City: Racialized Himalayan Youth on Exposure, Encounter, and Becoming

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Abstract

As linguistic, religious, and racialized minorities, Himalayan youth are one among many marginalized others migrating to Indian cities in pursuit of higher education. This article draws on research with college students from Ladakh in the Northwest Himalaya, formerly a district of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, designated its own Union Territory (autonomous jurisdiction) in 2019. Our research asks, how do Ladakhi youth look towards the future as outsiders and aliens in the urban Global South? In what ways are they architects building the city anew, creating their own cultural subtext to the city? We work to understand how Ladakhi youth use the city as a vector in their own life trajectory. We argue that young people are constantly theorizing the city from the perspective of marginalized others within the margins of the Global South. They theorize the city in four ways, as a site of: a) working through questions of difference, b) "exposure," c) personal growth, and d) as a lens to consider the future of their hometowns. We propose, that through their critiques and desires, students reject the temporal assumptions of 'planetary urbanization' that an urban future awaits their mountainous hometowns.

Keywords

Migration, planetary urbanization, education, urban Global South, South Asia, Ladakh

Introduction

Tashi is telling us about Varanasi, and he's telling us about Mumbai. Yes, yes, there's discrimination, of course. Isn't it everywhere? How is it, he asks, that Ladakhis complain so bitterly about discrimination when they themselves discriminate against Nepalis? And isn't there racism in the US? But he's brushing past these ideas, cutting them short. This is not the topic that interests him at the moment. He wants to show us the photographs that he has taken, and to tell us how these places – Delhi, Varanasi, Mumbai – have changed his life. How his father always wanted more for himself and is now a schoolteacher. How there is a woman he likes but Tashi can never imagine himself marrying, moving back to Ladakh, or staying in one place. Tashi has documented two years of his life for us. We've asked him to show us photos that were most interesting for him, and it's overwhelming now to find: everything, everything, everything. In his film clips there's the landscape of Ladakh – somehow breathtaking even with repetition – and then the bus, mountains, bright cold skies turning toward rain. There's the trip with his friends to Mumbai, jostling and crowed on the train, but warm and intimate with inside jokes and glances. There are endless pictures of students playing Holi, entranced as a tourist from a distant destination, in love with the *idea* of Holi itself. Visiting art shows, having his own paintings on display. And then Tashi at work for his art degree, painting while hanging out with his friends. Tashi also brought a photo of his father on a bicycle at his age during a moment before he had a wife, children, and needed to become a schoolteacher to support his family. Communicating Tashi's life to his grandfather is not possible, as he indicates through broken red lines in a collage he makes at the youth workshop a few days later: the three of them both connected and disconnected (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

We had envisioned it being hard to encourage young people to talk – suddenly we can't get a word in edgewise, we are late for our next meetings, and we can feel the chaos of the city enveloping us. Tashi is one of the young people we have been working with on a collaborative exhibition and zine about their lives studying outside their home region of Ladakh, part of a larger project including a survey, interviews, and other qualitative work with students and their families. We started the conversation in early afternoon, up in a lovely sunny "glass-room" at the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation center, halfway up the small mountain that looks down on the town of Leh, the capital and largest urban settlement in Ladakh, a high-altitude desert on India's northernmost border. Now light is fading and we need time to scramble down the hillside through small lanes between mud brick buildings that are all at once grand, historic, and a little decrepit. We struggle to extricate ourselves from a conversation that could seemingly last forever but also do not wish to be rude to someone who has been so generous with us.

We could tell a story about Tashi as a beleaguered rural immigrant from India's "remote"[1] Himalayan margins, in a rapidly urbanizing world. He's from the small village of Skurbuchan – known for its apricots and walnuts, and traders who used to travel along fragments of the Silk Road network up to the high Tibetan plateau to trade for salt with nomads. His father was the first in his family to give up agriculture. His grandfather still farms barley and makes *tsepo* (baskets) from willow twigs – the image Tashi chooses to indicate their generational divide. We could tell this story as one of a racialized ethnic minority who will struggle to belong in Indian cities – getting called "Nepali" or "Chinese" or racial slurs based on his facial features. Or we might cast him as one of "liberalization's children" (Lukose, 2009), dreaming of freedom and becoming a neoliberal subject. Or, we might understand his decision to pursue a B.A. in Fine Arts over 'traditional' career paths, as a rejection of neoliberal, teleological assumptions of "the Youthful Career Path" (Ruddick, 2003, 354).

None of these characterizations fully capture the meaning of urban life for Tashi, nor do they express what it means for racialized minority youth to intervene in the urban world. Tashi is the protagonist in his own life (with gratitude to Cheng, 2014 for this language). External forces drive him to the city – the expectations of the development state (Ruddick 2003) and practical parents – but the momentum of the city is also the means he uses to create himself anew. In university spaces, Ladakhi students are under pressure to fashion themselves into neoliberal subjects, particularly through discourses of competition and self-making (Ganti 2014, 96). While some embrace this discourse, others reject it through their choice of careers or by articulating desires for an open, unbounded future. The city is a place to become, a place where you can gain "exposure" to different ways of life. We attend to desire here because it "draws attention to striving toward possibilities that are deemed good because we desire them" (Collins, 2018, 966; see also Tuck, 2009). Like Collins, we understand migration as an expression of desires that transform both individuals and the places they have inhabited and will inhabit. Our research asks: how do Ladakhi youth look towards the future as outsiders and aliens in the urban Global South? In what ways are they architects building the city anew, creating their own cultural subtext to the city?

Young people like Tashi theorize the city from the perspective of marginalized others within the Global South, the "Orientals of the Orient" (Subba and Malla, 1998, 80; see also Wouters and Subba, 2013; see also Gergan, 2014). We insist on this word, *theorize*, to emphasize that their theory making is also world-making. They are determining their position vis-à-vis temporal assumptions that an urban future is inevitable, even for their mountainous hometowns. In Katz's (2017, 598) terms, these young people are engaging in minor theory: "working inside out, of fugitive moves and emergent practices interstitial with 'major' productions of knowledge." While Brenner and Schmid (2014) position the city as the future, students' minor theories of the city see it in multiplicitous relations to time. The city is the future you might be able to prevent for your home, the city is the future that you might wish to carry in your body back to an un-transformed rural place (Gergan and Smith 2020), the city is the place of fleeting feelings that remain with you – the city is the place that artist Tsering Motup[2] has described as experiencing as if he was a migrating bird never to settle.

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[1] Drawing on critical scholarship, we use the term 'remote' not as a straightforward characterization of the region in terms of geographical distance but as a relational category produced through engagements with centralized forms of power. Though strongly associated with 'inaccessibility and lack of connectivity', the concept also evokes notions of freedom, risk, danger, untouched natural beauty, and exoticism (Harms 2014: 378; Hussain 2014).

[2] We are grateful to Tsering Motup for sharing his portfolio with us. You can see his art and contact him on his Instagram @tseringmotup6.

Figure 2

The city is a place that makes alternate futures possible. Planetary urbanization presents us with a pre-destined urban future, but these young people move through more nuanced and displaced senses of time. Attending to how Ladakhi students theorize the city as racialized minorities allows us to critically evaluate the claims of planetary urbanization, while emphasizing that migration entails a "process of becoming" that has practical and political implications (Collins 2018, 968).

In what follows, we introduce the context, and then consider how scholars have considered "urban theory without and outside," (Brenner and Schmid, 2014), and the proliferation of urban theorization that decenters urban theory's totalizing tendencies (e.g., Jazeel, 2018; Roy, 2011, 2016; Oswin, 2018; Ruddick et al., 2018). We then turn to the meanings and uses of urban temporality for young people. How is the urban positioned in relation to time? Is urbanity the future, or is urban existence a delimited time through which you pass, as you become the person you desire to be? We focus on what students describe as central to their higher education in Indian cities, the gaining of "exposure" – an almost tangible good that one can only gain by moving through the urban experience. We demonstrate how, in their personal longings, pursuit of exposure, and experimentation, Ladakhi youth are also *architects* of the city, creating new spaces and using the city itself as a vector in their own life's trajectory – a dreamy or chaotic or productive interlude. They provide tangible experiences and creative theorizations that we can bring in conversation with recent debates on planetary urbanization (Derickson, 2017), "slumdog" cities (Roy, 2011) and new urban worlds (Simone and

Pieterse, 2017), among others.

Youth on the Threshold

As a high altitude desert with scenery and architecture resembling Tibet, Ladakh is often described as "otherworldly." It is a popular setting for Bollywood dance scenes, 4-wheel drive SUV advertisements and motorcycle road trips. At 11,000 feet above sea level, the region is hemmed in between disputed borders with China in the Northeast and Pakistan in the Northwest, and the Himalayan and Karakorum mountains to the South. When mountain passes are clear of snow from (approximately) June to November, you could arrive over mountains passes by road from Srinagar, or Manali in Himachal Pradesh. When roads are blocked, you can fly into Leh, Ladakh – but tickets may be prohibitively expensive, and have been the subject of Ladakhi student protests. Economic class is mapped onto destination cities – it is Jammu that has the most Ladakhi students, as it is the least expensive destination. Delhi, Chandigarh, and Mumbai will find students who often have more resources or who have excelled academically and found mentors or relatives to guide them. Some students with more precise career trajectories (art, agriculture, computer engineering) are scattered across India. Much of the research for this article draws on student participants of our 2016 and 2017 summer workshops. Three study in the US, one in Varanasi, five in Delhi, one in Jammu, and one in Srinagar. Their families represent a range of different socioeconomic statuses; while some are first generation college students, others are the children of college-educated government servants.

If you look for "Ladakh" on a map, you would not find boundaries clearly defined until August of 2019, when it was declared a Union Territory. A former kingdom that became part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) after a 19th century invasion, Ladakh became part of independent India in October 1947, when Maharaja Hari Singh signed a document of accession. Since 1979, the region has been split into two districts, Kargil, with a (mainly Shia) Muslim majority, and Leh, with a Buddhist majority but sizable Shia and Sunni minorities, a longstanding but small Christian community, and increasing Hindu and Sikh minorities due to recent migration. This research is set in Leh District. Since the 1960s, many Ladakhis based in Leh District had been advocating for Ladakh to break away from the state on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and environmental difference (Aggarwal, 2004; Aggarwal and Bhan, 2009; van Beek, 2000). Greater autonomy continues to be a focal point of local politics. After intensifying conflict between Buddhist and Muslim Ladakhis and demands for greater autonomy from the state of J&K, the two districts were granted some measure of autonomy with parallel Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Councils in the 1990s. In August 2019, albeit not without controversy, the longstanding demand for a separate Union Territory was also fulfilled (see Gergan, 2021).

As borderlands and margins of India, the Northeast (part of our larger project) has been the site of separatist claims and slow integration into the Indian union; parallel but distinct from Ladakh's identity-based struggle to break away from J&K. These regions have been seen as both central to nation-building (Aggarwal and Bhan, 2009; Krishna, 1994) and as not quite of the nation (Baruah, 2005, 2020; Bhaumik, 2009). Complex histories, along with the cognitive and geographical disconnect from 'mainland' India, cannot be separated from the racialized colonial legacy that categorized frontier spaces as India's "Mongolian fringe" due to their ethno-linguistic and cultural affinity to Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Nepal (Baruah, 2013). However, with a few notable exceptions (McDuie-Ra, 2012, 2013; Karlsson and Kikon, 2017, 2019), there has been limited work on the lives of internal migrants from the Northeast and other threshold regions and still less on the lives of Himalayan youth or students (with important exceptions being Brown, 2015; Dyson, 2008). This existing scholarship

highlights how the mobility of a youthful educated population is reorienting the relationship of the Indian state to borderland regions and citizens; a relationship our young interlocutors also struggle to navigate.

Only in the past few years has a discussion begun to emerge on race and exclusion in the Himalayan and Northeast region, pointing to the need to study racialization in India (Das, 2013; McDuie-Ra, 2015; Rai, forthcoming; Wouters and Subba, 2013; Bora, 2019) as well as to understand its transnational forms (Goldberg, 2008; Winant, 2006; Bhattacharyya et al., 2002). Karlsson and Kikon (2017; see also Kikon and Karlsson 2019) note that the last decade has witnessed an unprecedented spike in the migration of young people from India's militarized frontier region – the Northeast in their case, to 'mainland' India. The migration of this crucial population (Deka, 2019) also comes at a time when India's mountainous Northeast and Northwest borderlands are undergoing profound ecological and infrastructural transformations (Harris, 2013; Ziipao, 2018; Cons and Eilenberg, 2019; Demenge, 2015). The stories presented here are *not* generalizable to rural to urban migrants in India. On the contrary, these students are both marginalized ethnic outsiders from rural farming or working to lower middle-class backgrounds, *and* privileged in their access to university education, funding from scholarships and parents back home, and in the futures to which they aspire. Our focus on these students is *not* intended to discount the experiences of migrants facing quite a different set of experiences as landless poor, dispossessed, Dalit, or other structurally-disadvantaged people (Doshi, 2013; Roy, 2011; Datta, 2016; Anand, 2011).

Does the Urban *Have* Margins?

When young Ladakhis tell their life stories in relation to cities, in relation to villages, in relation to the dusty roads and the airplanes that connect these sites – how do these young people shift what is urban and rural? Do cities end? Brenner and Schmid (2014) and Merrifield (2013) ask us to leave behind "methodological cityism," whereby the city becomes the "privileged analytical lens for studying contemporary processes of urban social transformation that are not necessarily limited to the city" (Wachsmuth, 2012, 518), and instead think of processes of urbanization as extending across and through the planet. This has ignited a series of debates and led to questions about how we define "urban," and why. For instance, Negi *et al* (2016, 4) forward the concept of "contoured urbanisms" to capture the rapid transformation underway in the Indian Himalayas, largely perceived as predominantly rural, and note how "individuals and families across the region increasingly view their future as—in part—urban, no matter where their lives unfold." India is still predominantly rural (70%), however, Patel (2018) and Kundu (2017) suggest that these figures do not capture the variegated forms of urbanization such as *rurbanization*, wherein settlements retain a rural socio-economic base but have urban characteristics. Methodologically, these concepts, like our work with Ladakhi youth, begin from the margins of urban theory, and reveal important insights that trouble the boundaries between urban and rural.

Building on Lefebvre's (2018) *Urban Revolution* premise, Brenner and Schmid (2014, 750) argue that "[there is] no longer any outside to the urban world," that is, through the demands placed on the planet by capitalist relations in the form of urbanization, we can no longer find a bit of land, ice, water, or sky, that is not implicated in urbanization. The thesis of planetary urbanization is irresistible – that our world's fabric is urban, that we cannot untangle farms and slaughterhouses from urban penthouses. But perhaps we should take care then to interrogate the novelty of these ideas and ask: who they are useful for, and in what ways? We could look to parallel developments in feminist urban studies, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory (E.g., among many others Roy, 2016; Ruddick et al., 2018; Buckley and Strauss, 2016; Derickson, 2017). Urban and rural borders have been troubled in many ways (Buckley

and Strauss, 2016; Derickson, 2017). These borders would be further troubled if we were to ask our young Ladakhi interlocutors if they see themselves as rural or urban subjects.

Debates over planetary urbanization center on the deep entanglement between urban and rural; but this is also a debate about temporal framings, about how urban is defined, and whose theory matters. Ananya Roy recently observed on social media, "If you have spent any serious amount of time in an Indian city then you will realize why the rural is not the outside or the other or the margins or the past of urban life. It is the necessary logic."[3] For young Ladakhis the city is part of village life, and village life is part of the city: there is an ever present relationality (Massey, 2005) that does not neatly fit in the direction of rural to urban flows. Ladakhi students' theorization of the city troubles state development narratives that, much like some theorists of planetary urbanization, assume that the future is urban, or that we already inhabit this urban future.

Ruddick *et al* (2018, 390) ask we pick up Lefebvre differently, to attend to "*social* ontology and the constitutive role of subjects, subjectivity, and struggle." They connect "austerity urbanism," to precarity, right-wing nationalism, migration, and structural violence. Peake and Rieker (2013, 16) observe that "contemporary urban forms continue to inspire modernist hopes for a better life but no longer *a priori* define what this better life is and how it can be realized in the urban." To Ruddick *et al*, (2018, 392) the Brenner and Schmid hypothesis "reinscribe[s] the urban *as* planetary. Urbanization is not only the planetary present, but destiny." The complicated stories of the young people we spoke with support Ruddick *et al*.'s refusal of the implicit assumption that urbanization is destiny, as their narratives of movement, pleasure, and critique reject temporal assumptions that we are all headed to one destination. In Ruddick *et al*'s reading of Lefebvre (2003), the centrality of the city – its capacity to generate different kinds of encounters in ways that makes difference productive – is inextricable from the everyday.

Globally, first generation students and students with linguistic, religious, racial or other minority status face significant challenges in obtaining a higher education and thriving on a university campus (Stephens et al., 2012; Baum and Flores, 2011; Walton and Cohen, 2011). For racialized minority youth, the movement through city spaces of bus stand, airport, and university hostel, and encounters with auto rickshaw drivers, teachers and students from other parts of India, is both mundane and transformative. Youth are crucial political actors in postcolonial India (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2014). In their recent research in rural Uttarakhand, Dyson and Jeffrey (2018, 573) observe how upon their return from urban areas, educated youth seek to transform the *mauhal* (environment) of their villages by taking on the role of "mentors, political guides or social helpers." Will the opening of higher education to a wider range of students from diverse backgrounds, and their migration to big Indian cities strengthen national and community cohesion? Or will it intensify existing societal fractures, whether those originate in regional, racial, or economic difference?

Young People on Urban Time

Holloway et al (2019, 468), have observed a growing attention to temporality in recent scholarship on "youthful becomings" that discard notions of time as linear, neutral and chronological and instead focus on its "role in events and openness to futurity." Like many educated but unemployed Indian youth, young people from Ladakh and Northeast India experience a temporal disruption (Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010) as their "transition to adulthood, with its associated markers of independence, has

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[3] Ananya Roy @ananyaUCLA 4:59am 14 Mar 2018. https://twitter.com/ananyaUCLA/status/973846109050163201

become increasingly uncertain" (Ruddick 2003, 354). Their movement back and forth between the city and home further alters their relationship with time. This altered temporality can also be seen in Kikon and Karlsson's (2017, 2019) work on young migrants from Northeast India who experience a "stretching" of "lifeworlds" (drawing on Samuels, 2001) or a "vacillatory lifeworld" (Hage, 2017) – as they move back and forth between the Northeast and South Indian cities. Furthermore, as racialized minorities from mountainous regions understood as lagging behind on the "temporal development trajectory" (Ferguson, 2006, 190), Ladakhi students find themselves in cityspaces evaluating whether a forward movement on this trajectory is necessarily the future they want. In contrast with the purported desire for urbanity among rural/semi-urban populations, Ladakhi youth in our project invoked the urban not as the inevitable future but as a moment within other registers of time.

Youth experiences provide an appealing vantage point because of the ways they and their parents displace their sense of rapid change – generational vertigo – onto youth (Smith, 2013), who are understood to embody hopes for the future (Cole and Durham, 2008). Ladakhi students, much like the lower-caste/class young women in Lukose's study (2009: 14), bear the "burden of locality" due to their non-metropolitan status, even as they tenuously navigate new spaces of consumption and state-centric developmentalist projects. There is a profoundly temporal aspect to this experience. These young people experience ambivalence toward the state in their search for employment (see also Jeffrey, 2010). They are waiting for their lives to begin, waiting for the Indian state to meet their needs, haunted by their desire for state intervention (Secor, 2007). Key political events have signaled a growing impatience among Himalayan youth with their state of "Timepass" (Jeffrey 2010), and a collective intention to draw attention to minority students' issues and rights. In one protest against high airfare, young Ladakhis painted their faces green and held placards saying, "E.T. wants to go home, but the airfare is too expensive" to highlight their status as aliens in Delhi. These protests also indicate the sheer numbers of Ladakhi students (though from a particular class) coming to cities like Delhi, and the discourse of being 'aliens' in the city indicates a critical understanding of the unequal terms of the relationship between the margins and the center.

In the tradition of hooks (1984), we trace the paths of those who are marginalized by the city, their desires, and the means through which they maneuver to manage urban experiences rather than being consumed by them. Simone and Pieterse (2017, 190) suggest that a burgeoning youthful population in Southern cities "know much more than their predecessors about the ins and outs of the city [and] circulate through it in more expansive and deliberate ways." We read the city from the lens of minority youth's racialized and gendered experience of the city and the interplay of vulnerability and agency in their strategies for *using* the city, rather than being used by it. As Simone (2009, 10) observes, economic structures are not the only part of the mobility story, and do not "obviate a wide range of *desires to use the city* as a means of acquiring experiences and sensibilities forged from a more expansive exposure to the world." Likewise, "migration…is clearly coded in the norms of contemporary capitalism," it must also be understood, "as *a process of desiring* on the part of migrants… an actualisation of deterritorialising and reterritorialising processes both in individual subjects and the places they inhabit through migration" (Collins 2018: 968). The temporary migration of Ladakhi youth to Indian cities can be understood as a process that alters their relationship to the linear temporality of the modern nation-state (Anderson 2006 [1983]) and the demands it makes on youthful subjects and their places of origin, in ways that cannot be predicted or charted clearly.

Methods

This article draws on longitudinal interviews, a yearlong collaborative project, and a summer workshop and exhibition organized together with Tashi Morup, Monisha Ahmed, and Rigzin Dolma

from the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation (https://lamo.org.in/). We conduct this research as insiders and outsiders: one of us is a white foreigner married into a Ladakhi family, and the other has family ties in Ladakh and has the experience of studying in Delhi and Mumbai but having never lived in Ladakh she does not know the Ladakhi language. The larger project includes approximately 65 interviews with young people from Ladakh and Northeast India, and a survey of more than 200 student-sending households. Students participated in interviews and two workshops (one in summer 2016, and one in summer 2017), and spent the intervening year documenting everyday experience outside Ladakh. During a two-day workshop in June 2017, students shared photographs and spoke to each other about their experiences. They also brought old pictures of their parents and grandparents traveling outside of Ladakh. During the workshop students created a zine with a collection of around 200 photographs, discussion notes, and local magazines. Students also wrote letters to their parents, future Ladakhi students, and to the "rest of India," among other self-chosen groups. In July 2017, we held an exhibition titled, "Postcards from college: Lifeworlds of students studying outside Ladakh" which included pages from the zine and a co-designed photography exhibit. The exhibition and community discussion following it explored the questions: What does it mean to be Ladakhi outside of Ladakh? How do new friendships, traveling, fun and enjoyment help students grow? What do they hope to accomplish when (and if) they return home?

"Exposure" and Becoming through the City

In our 2017 workshop, students shared the challenges of navigating an unfamiliar cityscape, especially young women studying in Delhi – a city that has garnered an international reputation of being unsafe for women. But students also explained how the city offered freedom and anonymity that were scarce back in their hometowns: "Dear *Amaley* and *Abaley* (mother and father) stop being a detective!" Bold and assertive in its insistence on a life unfettered by parental control in the city, this statement was scrawled in pink in one image from the workshop. Much like other young people in India's "New Urban Worlds" (Simone and Pieterse, 2017) students described fashion forward sartorial cultures, art museums, and feminist flash mobs. They experiment with gender identity, worry about climate change, and participate in protests. They must pacify parental anxieties via phone calls and WhatsApp messages about getting good grades and refraining from falling in love across religious and cultural lines (though sometimes, they are). The city can be an enticing place and stories abound of those who lose their sense of purpose while for others, it sets them on exciting new personal and professional paths. Students explained to us that the urban experience provides them with something that has been glossed as "exposure." But what is this exposure and how is it transformative?

Young people from Himalayan regions arrive in the lowland Indian city as outsiders. Their own class and experiential differences from one another are many. Some students have traveled to the city for years – they may view the city as a waypoint for a pilgrimage site. Or the city might be a destination of its own, a place their parents or grandparents visit to avoid the health implications of long winter months at high altitude. Some young people arrived for the first time as a child holding tight to their parents' hands. When they arrive as a college-going teenager, the hot enveloping city air may be familiar – they can already remember the feeling of wearing just a t-shirt, or even shorts, the longing for air conditioning and iced drinks. They may have a sense of where to go, how to speak, when to turn to English instead of Hindi to preempt rude remarks, and what places to avoid. But others, from families without means, arrive for the first time to study, stepping out into warm humid air from the last in a series of overnight buses. They know Hindi – but in the city it rushes by so fast and their accents mark them as outsiders. They navigate the city with the slimmest set of instructions gleaned from that one cousin who made it to college, that aunt who visited the city long ago, the older student from their village whom they were never close to but upon whom they suddenly rely. Their parents have sent them to this familiar or

unfamiliar place with a task: complete your education. Make us proud. Don't waste money, don't waste time, and don't get caught up in drugs, fashion, or love affairs. This sentiment is not at odds with the goals of the Indian state or the overarching developmentalist project of neoliberalism and modernization, in which education and urbanization are paths to become citizen-workers (Ruddick 2003).

The young people in this project, though mainly from families of modest means, work to extract particular forms of value from the city, not unlike "voluntourists" from wealthy urban centers who might visit rural Ladakh for a "village homestay" or "women's empowerment" project. This value takes the form of education, but also intangible forms of value, such as "exposure." An English term imported into Ladakhi development discourse; "exposure" indicates the necessity of "going outside" to be exposed to things that you would not find back home. Young people, politicians, women's groups, and others go on "exposure tours" to gain this specific form of expertise that manifests as a way of being in the world and a sensibility. These experiences are inflected with, but complicate, a neoliberal sense of subjectivity, i.e. notions of "individual enterprise and self-responsibility" (Jeffrey and Young, 2014, 183). In what follows we describe how exposure is derived from carefully curated urban experiences. We argue these experiences are central to how students use the city in ways that are transformative not only for them but also their hometowns and the city itself (Collins 2017; Simone 2009). However, while students value the experience, the city itself is not the future they desire for their hometowns – a move we argue, challenges the premise of planetary urbanization.

First, many young Ladakhis enthusiastically embrace charity work – in the zine they include volunteer work for cancer societies and old age homes, and raising money for "patients" (Ladakhis receiving medical treatment outside Ladakh due to inadequate facilities near home). These images and their captions naturalize both "our Ladakhi welcoming nature," and "helping others." During group discussions, students also spoke of a Buddhist ethic that compels them to serve others. Students felt the pressure to be accomplished, perfect, and stack their resumes to the brim. This especially comes across in comments from Dechan– an accomplished young woman participating in several service organizations and holding a leadership position in a major student organization, but feeling like she should be more active, and always searching out societies to join. Dechan's desire to maximize every opportunity perhaps also stems from how she viewed her time in the city as fleeting before her inevitable return to Ladakh.

Second, young Ladakhis understand exposure as intentional engagement with difference. This comes in the form of being exposed to new ideas and cultural difference. Thus, Kunzes was eager to talk about "dancing her soul out" with a group from Mizoram, a state in Northeast India, and about becoming a feminist through her experience in Miranda House, part of Delhi University that is known for its women's activism. One student included images of herself on a cycle rickshaw with a caption "trying different things." There is an element of exoticization here: zine captions describe, "us with colorful people." This twists the ways that Ladakhis are often rendered exotic others by their classmates and teachers (Smith, 2017). Engagement with the city's diverse offerings, for instance through participating in Holi festivities, was seen as an opportunity to transform their "typical Ladakhi nature" i.e. being "shy and reserved" to being bold and adventurous. This form of multiculturalism is also signaled through gratitude for diversity like this sentiment expressed in a letter to the 'Rest of India': "thanks for accepting us in your society for a time…I feel happy when they ask a lot of questions about Ladakh traditions and culture…thank you for being so diverse, and thank you for allowing democracy to sustain amidst the greatest possible violence and hardship," "Thank you for the rich history, that makes me proud." These sentiments are echoed in photographs of national landmarks, a New Delhi street sign, the Gateway of India in Mumbai.

Third, there is the professional horizon that opens up when students consider careers like graphic design and music production, or to want more from life than the societal ideal of government jobs, engineer, or doctor. Ladakh lacks employment opportunities outside the public sector and many students expressed concerns over languishing in government jobs where their skills and desires would be stifled. One former student reluctantly accepted a government job during the course of the summer workshop in 2017 but resigned shortly after against her mother's wishes. A little more than a year later she had accepted a different government job. Letters to future students encourage the cultivation of meaningful career paths *and* the need for discipline and courage:

> "because you go outside, you'll realize you are far behind the rest. You might be the creamy layer of your school or society but when you travel outside there are millions who can outrun you with their knowledge and influences. But don't run away from these little obstacles because you'll eventually learn from such hardships."
> "Be open, gain experience" "Be proud of who you are," "be open, *gain exposure*," "I want you to know the path that you will choose or go through won't be like a fairytale, there'll be lots of hurdles and injustice that you will face. But I want you to be aware of all of it and be brave."
> "question everything."
> "you are unique in many ways and there is no category made for separating you into any group. You are also a part of this universe at the same time. Don't get sad and disappointed harshly for anything."
> "Students should dream big and should not get disappointed with the point that we are Ladakhi and we can't do big things."

These exhortations to future generations of Ladakhi complicate how we might view the discourse of "exposure" as a straightforward production of neoliberal subjectivity. "You'll eventually learn from such hardships," reflects a need to internalize difficult experiences and class difference, and work harder – the "up by the bootstraps" mentality that can serve to individualize an ethic of hard work as though that could overcome structures of exclusion and capitalist expansion (Berlant, 2011). On the other hand, "question everything," and "you are also a part of this universe at the same time," indicate an expansiveness and connection that transcends competition and a drive to succeed on uneven terrain. Exposure *could* be channeled into a job or entrepreneurial spirit, but often it was something more as well: in letters to future Ladakhi students, some wrote: "don't just study for a job" and "Don't forget to give back to your community."

Exposure is expressed as an individual relation to a bigger world (and the urban is positioned as the point of contact with that bigger world). It is also a process through which one person (the student) absorbs and then transmits urban knowledge back home. Exposure is a conduit to other values marked as urban: dreaming big, being able to compete with others, but also being in a position to help those less fortunate than yourself, and thus positioning yourself in the role of beneficiary, not recipient. Here, we glimpse challenges Ladakhi students, despite their relative privilege, face in the city and back at home, as racialized minorities navigating migration, higher education and future employment prospects.

How "Exposure" Travels

If we take the premise of planetary urbanism seriously, we might conceive of these students as woven into the fabric of the urban, spreading, spreading up into the mountains, their urban-inflected impulses now forming an urban infrastructure of its own, in the sense that Simone argues people act as a city's infrastructure (Simone, 2004; Tadiar, 2016), urbanizing mountain villages and homes. Yet this

is an incomplete understanding: the process is surely not so passive. Rather, students describe themselves as changed in quite different ways, not as being of the urban but having transformed themselves, and the urban sites too, through their managed interaction. In attending to questions of youthful agency, Holloway et al (2019, 466), argue that a conceptual focus on "encounter" has the "political potential to challenge differences between 'them' and 'us'" while opening up for scrutiny "relations which extend beyond the specific site of encounter." Students emerge from their time in the city as skilled negotiators able to manage the urban experience – its seductions, the overwhelming heat, the danger, while also managing parental and community expectations and anxieties.

Letters to "dear rest of India," read: "Thank you for making us more stern and confident. Thank you for helping us grow from hardships. But also just because we're from Ladakh doesn't mean that we can't get into good colleges or become successful." Kunzes asserts, "I learned to be bold, fearless and confident and become an independent strong woman." This confidence enables students to call out specific ideas or cultural practices in which they wish to intervene. A letter written to "Ladakhi society," reads, "Let's just move with the rest of the world. Not only through material means, But also in thoughts. Let's be more liberal about certain things. Accept the way we are and chuck out the age old thoughts. We learn about feminism, gender equality and social equality but when we go back here we have to shed that knowledge and do whatever suits you." Despite Delhi's reputation for being unsafe, young women's exposure to feminist thought and activism in university spaces pushed them to challenge gendered expectations and norms at home. Students also expressed frustrations with community leaders' inability to hear young people's concerns and ideas: "You talk about bringing up social issues and serving the community but you don't support our youth and their determination to contribute to our society," read one of the zine pages. A few others described reflecting on what some perceive as the hypocrisy of Buddhist religious leaders, and how their interactions with different religious and ideological perspectives in the city allowed them to develop a personal understanding of Buddhism that was more tolerant.[4]

The city experience becomes a tool to reshape sense of self in relation to nation but also homeplace – becoming the person with "exposure" that can view both home and the city through a critical lens. Conversations and images in the zine also reveal this does not remove marginality but complicates it and reconfigures constellations of power, which appear differently upon return. "Exposure," grants legitimacy and confidence, but is in relation to age, gender, and social status. A young man from a family of farmers who had not attended school told Sara he loved math and wanted to do a PhD. Five years later, his family celebrates when he gets a position in the police force. His sister aimed for a PhD in literature, but her family celebrates when, after in-between jobs and anxiety, she lands a government teaching position. Their aspirations were born of moments when a horizon opened up. Her dreamy nature and comical inability in the kitchen or on the farm, (a source of family teasing), connects to her yearning for an unusual life. She keeps that nature and her internal world, but is grounded in a practical job (one that is nonetheless aspirational for many). The limits of family expenses and lack of mentors for first generation students from rural backgrounds can constrain how exposure manifests upon return. Economic and social status in these cases is shifted through education (movement into salaried labor). These two young people gained legitimacy in the milieu of their village, yet their horizons remain constrained in relation to those from other classes of families who have moved into more varied careers.

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[4] In the 1980s, the Ladakh Buddhist Association led a movement for greater autonomy in the region, using tactics that emphasized religious identity and had lasting repercussions (Smith, 2020). Young people today continue to reflect on this movement and its legacy in relation to religious values (citation redacted for review), as well as in relation to other issues such as how religious organizations spend their funds.

Positioning themselves in a space of movement and liminality (Gergan and Smith, 2020), students wish to consider when and how the urban will be incorporated into their home places. Even after adjusting to city life, some students explain: "Leh is the only place I can feel completely at home. Leh is like the base camp…" As the base camp around which your constellation of places and people or your life's trajectory is built, the desire is *not* for Leh or Ladakh to *become* like India's urban spaces, at least not entirely. In conversation with Mabel, Rinzin explains this:

> Mabel: Do you think that's a good thing that Ladakh is becoming more and more a part of India or do you still feel like no, Ladakhi identity should be different from Indian identity and that we don't really fit in really well in India?
> Rinzin: I think somehow Ladakh is become yeah, as we said, like it's becoming more and more integrated into Indian nation state. And then I'm like 50/50 into this matter and I want Ladakh as it is now…I just want this thing to remain like the same status quo thing...
> Mabel: So you like Ladakh how it is right now?
> Rinzin: Right now. And because I feel like if it gets more and more, what should I say, Indianized or whatever (laughs)…because if I take an example of this, the current government of like India, I feel if this kind of elements come into Ladakh, it's very bad because this government is very conservative in every manner. So if this kind of things gets highlighted into Ladakhi culture, then it's very bad for us.

This idea of becoming "Indianized" expresses a concern of being absorbed into the "Greater India Project", a Hindu nationalist vision of the Indian state (Longkumer 2020). This idea also emerges in relation to safety. Tsomo describes a spectrum of safety, from Leh (safest) to Jammu to Delhi (least safe), and relates this to the number of Ladakhis in the cities:

> Tsomo: Specifically like eh, robbery and....just messing you know, some guys are like, very different people I don't have any kind of idea like what kind of people I can meet in Delhi, you know…We cannot actually rely on them by looking at their face and body, like what about their personality, you know. In Jammu, I don't think [you can find too many of] that kind of people…just some who look strange and like different, you know (laughs).… but here [in Delhi] I don't know, I don't have any idea like which kind of people we can meet...
> Mabel: So you're saying…like you feel safer in Jammu?
> Tsomo: Safer because there's lots of … Ladakhis, that's why we feel secure, you know. In each street, we can find Ladakhis and our friends...so, that's why maybe I think Jammu is...secure...feeling secure. I feel like Ladakh is such a place where we can, I don't think we can find somewhere else, like it's the safest and very very decent place, I think as compared to these places, actually.

These ideas are reiterated in other conversations, in which young people describe urban settings as a place where you might see and recognize other Ladakhis for safety or go in groups. In this way, young people are positioning their safety and marginality in relation to ethnic or regional identity as a Ladakhi, writing in one of the letters instructions to the "rest of India," presumably based in an experience of street harassment: "don't make us feel unsafe to go around day or night," "Don't make us feel alienated in our own country. Don't comment on us when we do/say nothing to you." Those from Ladakh and the Northeastern borderlands face the burden of racialized discrimination that reinscribes their exclusion from the national imaginary. The threat of harassment is contrasted with a paradoxical representation of Ladakh as unsafe by their Indian classmates, peers, or friends: "They used to say like, I say I'm from

Ladakh, they'll be like, Ladakh is a very nice place, but is it safe? …I'll be like Ladakh is very safe and they used to ask about the borders because on one side we have Pakistan and on the other side we have China."

Exposure as the intentional managed engagement with difference makes the city desirable, but when students find they are in turn marked as different in ways that are threatening or exclusionary, the city can seem inhospitable. Exposure travels and transforms across time and space. Before you depart Ladakh, it is the unknown, the thing you need that you must leave home to acquire. But then: life in the city also *exposes* you to risk, to racism, to sexual harassment, potentially to violence. It is an exposure to the ways that your place is understood: dangerous, backward. This exposure *does* transform you, it does change how you relate to the outside world. But not always in straightforward ways or ways that assimilate you into the center. Rather, this exposure may firm up your understanding that you exist on the margins of the nation. What you do with this information is not pre-determined.

Discussion: Theorizing the City

In listening to how exposure is acquired and how it travels with students from the city to their homeplaces, we find it helpful to attend to temporality, to the role that time plays in shaping youthful experiences: the waiting and anticipation of the future (Jeffrey, 2010), desire for the state which does not arrive in the way that you wish (Secor, 2007), pressure to be the lucky girl with the bright future that you do not disrupt (Krishnan, 2018). The temporality of urban experience is also the students who fail exams for government jobs and study to pass them year after year, and those who are left behind in their villages. Layered upon this is the delayed time of return for those who linger in urban centers but only imagine themselves settling back home. Simone and Pieterse (2017:190) tell us that for many young people in Southern cities, "the prolongation of youth and the kinds of malleability that come with it" are not always a strategic choice but are often a default position. After finishing their undergraduate degrees, many of the students in our project enrolled in further education or year-long fellowships. Other young Ladakhis returned home in the hopes of charting alternative career paths like opening up an arts café or local farm-to-table programs. Urban temporality is also described by students as the fleeting time of youth, freedom, and peril, a time when you dress differently, monitor your actions in a different way, and face risks in the youth-time of the city, which encompasses danger, freedom, and bodily self-discipline. The exposure of the city moves back into homespaces, unevenly and differently based on the narratives that the student-as-protagonist writes for their own life. Exposure to what an urban future might look like is one piece of how they then work to write their own future and the future of their hometowns.

We theorize the fabric of the city from the vantage point of these outsiders as both part of neoliberal and capitalist forces and as something that exceeds these, or even pushes against them: a refusal to turn all things, including your own body and intellect, into exchange value, a deferral of work or consumption, a desire to linger and loiter in the space between childhood and productive citizenship (see also Phadke et al., 2011; Ruddick, 2003; Krishnan, 2018). Sometimes this comes from a place of privilege – middle class parents back home – but even those from lower economic backgrounds stretch funds to delay entry into formal workspace, or make decisions that reflect alternative valuations of life's choices: taking a lower paid government job back home after finding work in the urban corporate world. As they wait for their hometowns to change, and mold their bodies, subjectivities, and comportment to be appropriate to both places, sometimes with ease, sometimes with irritation and frustration, these students are also shaping the future of their hometowns. They complicate the premise of planetary urbanization, however, through the ways that their presence as mountain outsiders

paradoxically lends cosmopolitan flair to the city's urban landscape, and through the ways that their careful appropriation of urban life is deployed selectively back home.

Amplifying the marginal position of Ladakhi youth is their Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, i.e. their membership in constitutionally recognized tribal groups. Those from the ST category have reserved seats in public institutions, such as universities, through a quota system but this has not alleviated the experience of discrimination in the city and university spaces. This discrimination includes tropes associated with those benefiting from affirmative action as being "lazy free-riders." In addition to this, the growing population of educated ST youth and a rapidly shrinking public sector in India has led to an "explosion in the ranks of the tribal elite competing for the state's sizable largesse" (Khan Suan, 2011, 183). For those who desire to eventually return to Ladakh, this raises concerns as to what careers await them there: beyond government jobs, work alongside the army, running shops, construction, or work in tourism, there is a limited economic base to which to turn, and agriculture is no longer enough. And yet, there is still an articulated desire to return. While Ladakh lacks urban resources, it is still imagined by the urban polity as an idyllic tourist getaway, a place where city people might go to escape the heat of the plains. Woven into this imaginary are romanticized orientalist tropes of highland Himalaya as an enduring and timeless landscape; a vision that elides how "remote" mountain spaces like Ladakh are in rapid flux, grappling with economic and ecological change (Harms et al., 2014; Hussain, 2015). It is these visions of their hometowns that Ladakhi youth inhabit, embody, and wrestle against in the city – an experience that perhaps makes for an uncomfortable lived reality and exacerbates the desire to return.

We suggest that understanding relations between urban and rural requires careful attention to temporality and the ways that it is manifest in globally intimate relations. Lowe's (2015) landmark research on the intimacies of four continents suggests that part of the work of liberalism has been to produce cartographies of distance in place of intimacies, to summon from the European imagination the idea of an unmarked and universal subject who then discovers the relations between places marked with difference. As she demonstrates, this is a politically-inflected illusion that hides more than it reveals. When we imagine an intensification of urban spaces that is driven through urban agency (the urban as a colonizing machine), we might wonder what that vision conceals and the nuances that are obscured in such a rendering. For young people like Tashi and Rinzin the urban is both a star in a constellation they use to navigate their own lives, *and* a fundamental site of capitalist and state development and expansion that necessarily affects their horizons of possibility. In Tadiar's (2016, 74) accounting in relation to the urban poor, "people bring together the particularities of their social relations (of family, kin, ethnicity, affiliation), their location and connections, personal character and style, to make themselves the 'intersections' where, when, and by which means, opportunities and transactions for eking out some kind of living (though never enough for a valuable life) might happen."

Conclusion

Each year, thousands of students from the Indian Himalayan states migrate to urban centers to experience a heady mix of exclusion, liberation, self-discovery, and a sense of cosmopolitan, pan-Himalayan, or sometimes even transnational identity. These stories are global: from the fringes of the Amazon, to the U.S. South, to the Himalayas, rural, first generation, Indigenous, and racialized minorities seek urban educational opportunities to improve their lives. While higher education is understood to be a universal good, this temporary migration has countless unintended consequences. As youth from previously excluded groups complete their education or drop out, and return to their homelands or seek employment elsewhere, their migration experiences will alter relations between these margins and the nation-state. In this moment of time, they become the intersections that Tadiar

(2016) describes above. Bringing their own histories and those of their families, as well as their class positions and their desired futures to bear on their locations at home or away, they intervene in their own lives and the lives of their places. How does the migration of this crucial population transform both the young people and their places of origin?

Collins (2017: 974) writes that migrants are "driven by desires for … becoming through that process, for being otherwise in ways that alter their own subjectivity and place in the world." We work to understand how Ladakhi students theorize the city as an instrument that can accomplish this transformation. We pose as a provocation that young people have a particularly poignant situated positionality in relation to the urban future, since they are the ones who will build or leave these cities, who understand their own life in relation to these urban spaces (see also Simone and Pieterse, 2017). In our conversations with Ladakhi students these urban imaginaries were not a given rather, students "make conscious use of displacement – of not being at home or of being between homes – so that new subjectivities, spatialities, and temporalities might be marked and produced in spaces of betweenness that reveal the limits of the major as it is transformed along with the minor" (Katz 2017, 598). As visible minorities, Ladakhi students embody difference and their encounters in the city reverberate far beyond its borders.

Most of our interlocutors did not intend to make the city their home but their desire to make the city more inclusive will have important consequences for the next generation of Ladakhi and Northeastern students. The struggle then is not to make a place for oneself in the city but to extract knowledge, skills, pleasure, and anything else the city offers in a short span of time. This space of encounter is generative of different kinds of subjectivity (Holloway et al 2019) and social movements, which "provoke profound epistemological shifts" (Ruddick *et al* 2013; 397).

As Ruddick *et al* also argue, it is important not to conceive of the world in relation to the urban (i.e., urban/Other), in such a way that it generates a "chaotic concept," in which all kinds of non-urban space (wilderness, Indigenous lands, agricultural land, villages) are folded together. Rather the city might be a specific spatio-temporal moment that sets you on a new course through rural life, and, perversely, your marginal mountain upbringing may set you up to be *more* cosmopolitan (McDuie-Ra, 2012) and compelling figure in the city, as Ladakhis join Northeasterners in cultivating subaltern subcultures that do not rely on the city's dominant culture (Smith and Gergan, 2015).

To understand how the city matters for those it excludes, we must consider the relationship between a diasporic time that recalls home through visions of the past and future, and the time of the modern nation-state (Anderson 2006 [1983]) that imagines national origins and future trajectories, as well as the complex connections between diasporic and cosmopolitan practices. These students might enter the city as diffident and careful explorers unsure of their abilities but they leave (or hope to, soon enough) having gained "exposure" to the city's diverse offerings. And yet many of them struggled with how to deploy their new skills and experiences upon their return home. Discursively students positioned the city against their hometowns, as they described progressive thinking and being in the city that they would like to replicate, and other elements (discrimination and danger) they hoped to avoid. Is the urban a future to be held at bay? Are these young people more likely to become integrated into the urban centers of India? Or create new subjectivities with transnational linkages? These questions emerge repeatedly, obliquely and directly, among the students studying away from home and their parents. The city is understood to be a way station on the journey back home, and also to be a place that will fundamentally change what home means.

Acknowledgments

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