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Production, Culture, and Representation: An Anthropological Exploration of Food in Kathmandu, Nepal

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SIT Study Abroad

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**Production, Culture, and Representation:
An Anthropological Exploration of Food in Kathmandu, Nepal**

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Asia, Nepal, Kathmandu

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Abstract:

This paper explores various food-related narratives, including meat production in Kathmandu, organic farming, the separate experiences of American researchers and American missionaries, "haute cuisine" in a luxury hotel, and a nutritional rehabilitation clinic for malnourished children. Accompanying these narratives are my own experiences that are made communicable through making, or watching food being made. The result of these narratives is a growing picture of the various roles food plays within our lives- generated by what was communicated by the people who source, cook, and eat food, but also infused by my own observations. Included narratives primarily concern food's ability to represent as well as shape both the concrete and abstract aspects of our lives- this extends from our hopes and desires to our bodies and physical environment. Lastly, my own lived experience, combined with a rapidly modernizing Kathmandu have meant that these narratives attempt to consider the representative quality of food on a global scale.

Acknowledgements:

The universality of food is one that simultaneously enhances its potential for study, but also allows for it to be frequently overlooked. The constant need to ingest and subsequently digest it has made too many of us take food for granted, and generally see food in a daily context as unremarkable. That said, I would like to acknowledge those individuals who encouraged me in some way or another to pursue researching food- this extends especially to Isabelle Onians who, by giving all of us the go-ahead to bake a cake, consistently gave me the confidence to pursue studying a thing for which I am passionate. In addition, I would like to thank Danny Coyle for his willingness to always listen to and discuss my ideas, even when they sounded their most bizarre. Lastly, I owe much of my research to the openness of people like Agnes and Nicole who were willing to introduce me to anyone and everyone they knew involved in food production and consumption- I only hope I can be in a position to help a researcher like myself one day.

For Amala and Pala, thanks for letting me hang out in the kitchen.

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Introduction:

Observing Food

I had been flipping pancakes for the last two hours. Finding myself in a routine: I would apply butter to the pan and let it melt. Place the fry pan over the mixing bowl and ladle in the batter swiftly from above and then circle the pan to spread evenly and wait. Once the moment arrived when the edges hinted the bottom was cooked, I'd then jostle the pan forward and backward, until the pancake leaped out into an arc, returning from its flight uncooked-side facing down on the pan.

The thirteen year-old girl and the others surrounding me, all who live in the children's home where I had agreed to volunteer for the day, seemed in awe. I thought about my own awe at flipping a pancake, how it must have come off with ease to these girls, but how deep down a nervousness crept in every time I did so. I think it was while flipping pancake twenty-something, that I began to marvel at when my pancakes turned out best: the times I didn't think too hard, and instead just flipped them. Making a pancake is simple, and yet in those girls' minds, even in my own mind, existed a fear (for me) and a fascination (for them) of the unknown.

Michael Pollan writes, "watching other people cook is not exactly a new behavior for us humans [...] even the most ordinary dish follows a satisfying arc of transformation, magically becoming more than the sum of its ordinary parts" (NPR) Taking raw ingredients and reconstructing them into something hopefully delicious but sometimes simply edible, seems a process rife with unknowns. The unknown captures us, and so we watch cooking, aware that everything can go wrong, and marvel every time the result is one that pleases us.

So, as the sun set that day, shedding the rest of its rays on the dusty air outside, I sat on the ground before a woman, herself, cooking for the same thirty-some children. I watched her flash-fry potatoes, slow-cook them with cumin, turmeric, and onion. And like the thirteen year-old girl who seemed in awe every time I flipped a pancake, I watched her placed a mountainous pile of cabbage on the entire stewing combination.

This is how my research began: by watching a woman cook, so it seemed fitting for it to end that way as well. My fascination with cooking, even the most mundane, had followed me from the US and though I didn't realize it at the time, it had boarded the plane with me for Nepal and then followed me to Bhutan. I returned to Kathmandu still with this obsession, but also the understanding that my fascination with cooking was a fascination with potential: the potential for food from cooking, and the potential for culture from food.

If there are any universal truths I have uncovered from my own research it's that everyone can cook, and everyone must eat. For this reason, food is wonderfully universal and at times overwhelmingly expansive. Food can be looked at literally, metaphorically, ethically and spiritually. It can mean what's on our plates, to the restaurant we're eating at. It can be expanded to whom we dine with and how we feel about them. Food also means nutrition and the environment. We shape food,

but it increasingly shapes our behaviors and the future of the world in which we live.

Food is important: it is sustenance, culture, technology. We owe everything to food, thus, in the spirit of this, we must owe everything to cooking it as well.

Food as Production

On my quest to understand more about food in Nepal and specifically Kathmandu, I began at what appeared the natural beginning: meat production. Where was the buffalo that was in my tuk-pa actually coming from? Yes, I knew that the abundant stands where meat was sold were an integral piece in this process, but I wondered beyond these stands.

When I told my Tibetan family that I would be observing a buffalo slaughter the next morning they were definitely surprised and a mildly disgusted. Why would I ever want to witness something as atrocious as a buffalo slaughter. Buddhist beliefs instruct against killing, and yet the amount of buffalo and the frequency with which my Tibetan family and I ate it at home seemed at times, well a bit hypocritical.

A friend in America seemed to wonder the same: why do Tibetans eat so much meat? My thinking and subsequent response seemed to follow a theory I have developed since being in Nepal. This theory is in essence that the primary value Tibetans hold is a simple one: preserving Tibetan culture. This preservation of culture exists alongside and often supports Buddhist values, however, food (meat) seems to be where the two ideas diverge.

It is the climate from which the culture of food in Tibet has been historically shaped that I have decided is the reason for this. I had heard from my Pala as well as other Tibetans some testimony regarding the climate in Tibet, specifically how harsh and non-arable it was. Thus, despite being devout Buddhists, Tibetans had to rely on their yak herds for sustenance and survival. While the Tibetan Diaspora in cities like Kathmandu are no longer without access to fruits, vegetables, and commodities not exclusively derived from yaks, the meat-heavy diet upon which Tibetans previously were forced to survive continues today, through the effort by Tibetans to preserve Tibetan culture prior to their forced expulsion. It is not a new idea that cultural preservation is a key obstacle to any effort to make people forget a history (especially a dark one) so this effort can be read in a way as a means of improving the political situation in Tibet.

Again, however, Tibetan cultural preservation contains both food and religion. It is my conclusion though that food habits win out in this case because Tibetans possess a strong and often unconscious association of Tibetan food with the physical place that is Tibet. In a world remarkably detached from its food systems, it's refreshing to know that the connection between the physical environment and the food it produces still exists. That said, my family's behavior at dinner certainly changed that evening: "I don't really like eating much meat" my Pala remarked.

After several glances at my watch, 5:30am finally arrived. I dressed and met Kanto, friend and agreed translator/research liaison for the time being, to visit a slaughterhouse with a butcher and taxi driver who operates a stall at the corner of SIT's street. I no doubt had visions of a fairly large scale, rural farm operation, and certainly expected it to be outside Kathmandu's city limits. Suffice to say I was surprised when Suresh made no indication towards a means of transport other than his motorcycle. Kanto conveyed that we would walk to the slaughterhouse where we would meet the now seemingly reluctant butcher.

A few minutes away revealed the "slaughter-house," which in actuality was a bricked in, otherwise open, room with a corrugated metal roof. It was here that, I quickly learned, despite my best attempts, that I would be unable to convince the butchers to let me view the actual buffalo slaughter. In short, a media exposé a few years ago provided the public with images of unsanitary conditions in slaughterhouses across Kathmandu. Instead, I was appeased with tea, and a sit-down conversation with two of the butchers. In addition to answering some of my questions about things like how much meat comes from Nepal instead of being imported from India (25%) or whether a notion of "cuts" of meat exists (it does not), the butcher's themselves relaxed enough to ask me questions regarding the meat industry in the U.S. These questions interestingly were focused on the perception of butchers in America- to which I conveyed a growing "farm to table" attitude that butchering or at least an understanding of how and one obtains the meat they serve is actually a growing trend at the moment.

After tea, we resumed our position standing on the street outside the slaughterhouse, where I learned of the growing governmental effort to consolidate meat slaughter in Kathmandu. The butchers were none to pleased about the fact that meat had become political following the recent media exposé, in part because an effort by the government to move towards a more "Western" meat industry immediately made the future of the butcher's association tenuous, let alone those of the Nepali boys in cut-off sweatpants, covered in blood, I saw wandering in and out of the slaughterhouse.

Pondering the future of Kathmandu's meat industry, I knew consolidation would make it easier to control health standards, satisfying both the government's goal and the public's best interest, but I couldn't ignore the alternative- if hygiene standards were not maintained in one of these larger slaughterhouses, no doubt, would more people get sick. However, concerns expressed to me by Suresh and the other butchers rested mostly upon the fact that they would be required to get up earlier in order to travel to and obtain meat from one of these slaughterhouses and then return in time to sell it at their stalls during its greatest demand (morning).

By this point, despite an unfriendly landlord and the butchers' initial fears about outside observation, my self-described interest in meat and explanation that where I'm from in Texas, animal slaughter is virtually celebrated, allowed me to finally enter the slaughterhouse. The scene I walked in on would be, what I imagine, akin to a grocery store meat counter exploding, sans glass and plastic. Every imaginable inch of floor was covered in some piece of buffalo carcass. Like enormous versions of the abundant flies, Nepali boys hovered around the room, hacking away with knives and cleavers. In this process, one boy extracted excrement

from the animal's dismembered intestine- it was not for the faint of heart. I harbor a belief that more and more people need to understand where their food is coming from, for both ecological and health reasons. Thus despite the observable difference between our approaches in meat processing, I wish some of the patrons from my neighborhood grocery store could have observed what I was witnessing.

The time of my Kathmandu inquiry occurred at an interesting one, more specifically, during an increasing media discussion of the meat industry back in the States. A growing interest surrounding the use of antibiotic feed for otherwise healthy livestock has been the result of a revelation made by scientists and researchers that this process is resulting more and more in the emergence of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacterial infections. Think MRSA, E. Coli and salmonella (Barclay). For the unfamiliar, which is most of us, highly-regulated centers in the U.S. are responsible for the meat that ends up on our plates. A far cry from the slaughterhouse I visited in Kathmandu, these centers possess a number of common features: required showers upon entry, the electronic tagging of animals, post-slaughter steam cleanings, and even efforts to control air flow.

Thus what I have gathered from my experience looking into meat production in Kathmandu, is that while observably opposite the standard of hygiene used in the U.S., both extremes result in the same thing- people getting sick. Thus, as efforts to consolidate Kathmandu slaughterhouses and visions of achieving the level of perceived cleanliness in the States should be met cautiously. At its most basic, the lives of the people who work to supply the growing demand for meat in this city will be affected. Suresh will have to spend more time and gas meeting his customers' demand, and in the process he will unavoidably add to Kathmandu's traffic and air pollution. In essence, Kathmandu will be "emancipated by its geography," require less land for food, and further distance itself and its people from nature (Steel).

As a means of insuring people's trust in food, this effort can instead be projected as creating the opposite result and one we've seen in the U.S. People, as it's been recently shown, don't trust meat anymore. Animal slaughter is so out of sight and mind, that almost surely the level of regulation and efforts at sanitation in American slaughterhouses would almost certainly be news to anyone. Besides Suresh and fellow butchers, a change in meat production will affect all of Kathmandu's residents, and it will represent a move towards a system fraught with its own problems.

A Desire for Change in Our Food Systems

After a felicitous meeting with a Belgian fashion designer and supporter of various humanitarian projects here in Nepal, I found myself en route to an organic farm begun by American husband and wife duo, Mike and Barbara. On our way to Kavre (about thirty minutes drive from Kathmandu), my fashion designer friend described to me Barbara's extensive career- namely, her role as the "mother of organic farming here in Nepal". Barbara possesses a variety of projects besides her

farm though, a museum of Nepali artifacts perhaps the most well publicized. With Barbara's role in organic farming, and her importance as a founder of the kind of farmer's market I had been attending in Kathmandu, I thought it pertinent to pay her farm a visit.

What I encountered at Mike and Barbara's farm could only be described as a cornucopia of the fresh fruit and produce that I had been taught to avoid eating in Kathmandu. Miles, literal and metaphorical, from the produce of Kathmandu street carts, this farm possessed only produce that was free of the all too common pesticides, herbicides, and harmful chemicals. There was no need to be concerned with peeling, or washing- after receiving a go-ahead from Judith, I began sampling strawberries straight from the vine. Perhaps Dan Barber and Michael Pollan would be pleased to know that upon first bite of this strawberry and subsequent items from Judith and Jim's garden, the taste was better than any produce I had ever had, and for the first time, I understood the notion that the way something is grown or raised play a big part in how it tastes.

As I continued a tour through, what I decided was Eden, I noticed things like, brussel sprouts, raspberries, artichokes, and things I didn't think (and sure enough found out) were native to Nepal. There were strawberries from Belgium and grapes from California- what Mike and Barbara had established and made flourish, was a globalized garden. I wondered then if I had stumbled upon the seemingly rare example of Western intervention yielding positive results.

My visit to the farm came at a good time, more specifically one in which I had become jaded by Kathmandu's emulation of the West. Shifting meat production, the arrival of junk food, and a prevalence of plastic goods, seemed U.S. and European imports that were contributing to the deterioration of the health of a people and their city. Between realizing my own soot-colored mucus after sneezing, and seeing people toss plastic containers and various other petroleum products into the streets and river I was convinced my own culture, in a different country, was making me sick. A concern for the connection between food, health and the environment seemed a far cry from Kathmandu- that was all until I visited Mike and Barbara's farm. It seemed this mentality that food, health and the environment are connected had nested in Kavre and (though somewhat haughtily) crept to the farmer's market at 1905.

It appeared that Mike and Barbara's farm and the instruction they gave in organic farming for locals, represented an attempt to prevent the negative environmental side effects of industrial agriculture and feed lot meat production in the U.S. My experience in Kavre seemed to represent a greater phenomenon of a growing number of foreigners concerned with food, health, and the environment, that are working to try to combat the unsustainable and unhealthy future Kathmandu might face if they continue to use Western models for food production- and it invariably feels like we are circling back on where we once were, as if we can keep Kathmandu from going wrong like we have.

I hope that instead of remediating the negative side effects of modernization, which come from ignoring future environmental and individual health, that Kathmandu can develop upstream of such effects. What I witness though as we arrive back into the city smog, away from the much cleaner Kavre air, is the opposite

of this. It seems as though the difficulty in reaching the farm after private car was no longer an option represented the difficulty of achieving a sustainable future. Perched atop a tremendously scenic hill, Mike and Barbara's farm represents a wonderful ideal for a food system in Kathmandu (perhaps even one it had prior) from which produce is organic and sold locally to people who don't have to worry about peeling or washing it. Reaching the edge of Ring Road, I understand this vision is distant though. That Mike and Barbara work to achieve an unattainable goal is debatable, but what I've decided matters more is that they continue to work this way- perhaps all great achievements arise out of, at least initially, seemingly impossible goals.

The Representative Power of Food

I met Maddie, Kate and Olga mid-morning the same week I travelled to Thimi with a couple researchers on a quest for Newari food. I noticed Maddie and a Nepali woman selling a variety of cookies at the Saturday farmer's market I frequent and so, compelled by an inability to ever turn down dessert, cookies in particular, I introduced myself (in between trying samples). I was previously aware from my prior trips to the market that the cookies made by Maddie and company were affiliated in some way or another with Christian missionaries by the bible verse printed on every business card attached to every bag. I desired to learn more about what seemed efforts to use food as a means of converting Nepalis to Christianity, so after some small talk and a Texas connection, I found myself and two Christian missionaries headed to bake cookies.

On the way over to cookie baking headquarters, Maddie explained that both she and Kate were affiliated with an international organization that situates Christian missionaries across the world. When we arrived at our destination I met the Tibetan Christians whom Leah explained were operating and profiting from the cookie baking business. Sonam, the most vocal of these Tibetan Christian women, explained to me some of her life story: how she converted to Christianity and her family's subsequent reactions. What Sonam articulated was a complicated family situation, one that drew her towards Christianity, and one that continues today, with her family's disapproval of her current beliefs.

While listening to Sonam's narrative, Maddie, Kate, Olga and I rolled white chocolate chip cranberry cookie dough in the palms of our hands. Choosing to ignore the growing, incredibly sticky, dough deposits accumulating in the palms of my hands, I wondered how these women had come to begin baking, what the role Maddie and Kate had in all this, and whether cookies could contribute to converting Tibetans into Christians. My initial thoughts regarding missionary cookies stemmed from my own experiences living with Tibetans. Mostly, I was skeptical that cookies could reach many Tibetans, given Tibetans rarely consume or seem to enjoy sweet foods. Though this is observably changing with the younger generation as more artificially sweetened drinks and snacks are entering Kathmandu's markets.

As I sat listening to Maddie and Kate talk cookie business strategy with Sonam, while rolling the familiar butter, sugar and egg combination I couldn't help but think of how different the experiences of the researchers had been. Maddie and Kate had been in Nepal since last July, and yet they described my Nepali (which is one or two phrases at most) as better than their own. Ultimately what I found was that their lack of attempt at learning neither Nepali or Tibetan, their admittance that they had never turned on their television to watch Nepali programming, as well as the fact that they lived in a guest house all combined, manifested themselves in the very cookies we were baking. As Maddie and Kate reminisced with me about things like July Fourth, Texas barbecue, and Thanksgiving, I realized how little they had assimilated themselves within Nepali culture.

My disbelief at Maddie and Kate's non-existent assimilation interestingly came on the heels of a week prior, when in a cab on the way to Thimi, I silently lamented the fact that for the last three months I had spent in Nepal I had learned only a small amount of Nepali. I envied my friend, Andy's ability to speak Nepali fluently, no doubt a useful skill living in Kathmandu, but one that was acquired through missteps and hard work, the result of years of living in Nepal and months working on his own research. Andy had agreed to let me meet his "didi" (sister) and enjoy some of the delicious Newari food she was rumored to make.

So after exploring the streets of Thimi and learning more about the festival at present from Andy, we arrived at his didi's home outside the village center. When we arrived I was introduced to some of Andy's friends and acquaintances, the majority of whom had previously done or were currently engaged in research projects in Nepal, and I was quickly amazed at their universal ability to speak fluent Nepali. In the company of these researchers, I couldn't help but avoid feelings of inadequacy that I couldn't speak Nepali, hadn't been in Nepal for nearly as long as these individuals, nor was I aware of most of the festivals and ways of life learned these individuals discussed.

Fortunately, my feelings of inadequacy melted away once our host announced that the food was ready. Andy's didi prepared a meal which included both traditional Newari dishes such as beaten rice as well as Indian curried vegetables. While the meal was delicious, what I understood from the experience was the level to which these American researchers had integrated themselves into Nepali culture. Their participation in the day's festival coupled with their ability to speak Nepali fluently and an obvious interest in Nepal's culture, evident from their research, could be represented by their reverence for the food we ate. Throughout the meal exclamations of its deliciousness were made by all. In addition, everyone possessed the knowledge of how to eat the food: sitting cross-legged, gathering with the right hand a proper amount of beaten rice and curry. By all observation, Andy and his friends acted, and most importantly, ate in a way that was Nepali.

My experience baking cookies and eating Newari food in Thimi can be summed up as a study in contrasts, a glimpse into two radically different life experiences had by two groups of Americans not unlike one another. Food however in this instance can be seen as representative: representative of both group's experiences in Nepal. From total assimilation to the antithesis of assimilation, these groups ate food indicative of their past experiences and future hopes and desires.

Certainly the researchers I met desired to learn more about the culture upon which their studies were based, this was observable and felt. In contrast, Maddie and Kate can be seen as participating in a behavior almost the exact opposite of this. Their desire to spread their faith to otherwise non-believers was not overt, but was inevitably the reason why they had come to Nepal. I was by no means an expert in eating beaten rice by hand- perhaps some of my clumsiness was obvious. Oppositely, baking cookies was almost so familiar that it became disconcerting. Neither experience seemed wholly authentic though, and I hardly suspect either group would see eye to eye. Despite the uncomfortable level of pretension the researchers seemed to possess, I appreciated their mentality. However, as I said goodbye to Maddie and Kate, I couldn't help but wonder who could possibly deny the allure of a freshly baked cookie?

The Subversive Quality of Food

After passing the final stretch of brick wall-exterior, I arrived at the gated entrance of one of Kathmandu's finest hotels. A previous investigation into "chefs, kathmandu" on Google had led me here in order to meet the executive chef. Something told me, whether it from too much Anthony Bourdain or other salty kitchen narratives, I had decided that chefs reward ballsiness. So without a pre-arranged meeting or established email chain, I walked passed the guard-post, bent on meeting with one of Kathmandu's finest chefs.

Despite my own discomfort due to an increasing awareness that I was not a guest at the Hyatt, nor would a relative of mine be a guest there (sorry, maitre d), I pressed onward into the bottom floor of the hotel to the restaurant and where the chef was taking his tea.

"I'd like to meet with the chef," I said for the second time and after a moment of nervous pause, was told "the chef's on his way. You can have a seat over there." In a short moment, Sunil and I met and were on our way: namely, a way that entailed me trying to explain my research ideas, simultaneously searching for clues and inspiration in that moment. This attempt gradually gave way to me leveling with Sunil that I was interested in studying food and the culture surrounding it, but also secretly harbored dreams of maybe being a chef myself one day. It was this confession that produced a sort of understanding between Sunil and I. Smiling, he recognized my ballsiness.

Thus, my first meeting with Sunil established two things: the first being I was invited to be his guest for the Nepali New Year buffet the hotel was putting on in a few days, and secondly, if his general manager okayed it, I could begin a month-long chef's training in the hotel. Suffice to say, I almost floated home on my own joy.

I returned almost a week later for the Nepali New Year buffet, excited to have what I had already pre-determined would be the best meal of my time in Kathmandu. Taking the shortcut from Phulbari, I entered the main courtyard area from the side gate, perhaps in an attempt to out-due my previous guest act.

Even though I had arrived on the early-side I was still surprised to see Sunil in the main dining area. Sunil showed me to a table where we discussed a number of things from the kinds of and amount of equipment he has: eight tandoor ovens for instance, to his thoughts on the Michelin system, which for the uninitiated gives out scores based upon a three star system according to food quality.

That said, what struck me most from my conversation with Sunil, were his thoughts on cuisine that seemed to diverge what seems to be the culinary trend in the US and Europe. While discussing the Michelin system, Sunil revealed that there were no "standing" Michelin-starred restaurants in South Asia and that the place to go for "haute cuisine" were restaurants established by large hotel chains, like the Hyatt. Now, while Sunil could have been totally trying to sell his restaurant as the best, his view seemed depressingly earnest.

Thus, my notions of the corner Parisian place that's been steadily producing some of the most incredible French food for the last century, or the current idea that young chefs in the states must return to their roots, work with humble recipes and refashion a former Victorian home in Charleston- went against notions of haute cuisine in "South Asia."

After I sufficiently exhausted Sunil with my questions and a number of guests had arrived, as any good chef should, he returned to the kitchen. With my time alone at the table, I examined the regular menu. It included all of the standards: salmon, tenderloin, a pasta dish, and a hamburger of some variety. It was a menu that echoed Sunil's assigned mission to give the guests what they want. Like Mike and Barbara's Kavre farm Sunil's menu seemed a global representation. Despite the array the menu offered, nothing seemed original, but I don't know that creativity was involved in Sunil's mission.

A realm where Sunil and his team's creativity did seem to invoke itself though, was the Nepali new year buffet, which is why I decided to dine there. At one point, my plate contained at least three different animals. While I relished the buffet and Nepali cuisine, I wondered how many of the guests at the hotel did the same. A look to both my left and right revealed that both tables had ordered off of the set menu. I was almost perplexed by they're ordinariness.

What Sunil's buffet showed me though and what made me hopeful, was that regardless of whether or not they ate its food, guests were forced to confront a buffet that told them that there was in fact a Nepali new year, that it fell on that specific day, and that the food it presented was traditional Nepali. Though Sunil seemed confined by his guests' desires in the fixed menu, his ability to provide diners who otherwise seemed stuck in a foreign bubble with a little forced learning about another culture seemed subversive in the best way, and another example of food's awesome ability to affect human behavior. During that buffet, perhaps for the first time, I reflected on how I had virtually waltzed into an upscale international hotel chain and met with its executive chef, all with relative ease.

It made sense that my own foreignness, the color of my skin, allowed the guards to let me pass through security without question. I thought of the experience of someone Nepali attempting to do the same, and thought about the transgression of boundaries. No doubt had I entered the hotel under the guise of being a guest, but also no doubt had Nepali culture similarly entered under the guise of food in this

buffet. Food representing culture is nothing new, but rarely do we think of its ability to permeate barriers. Like forms of dance and music have in the past (consider Salsa music in 1940's America), food merges cultures, sometimes gradually at first, or sometimes wholly absorbed at other times. Guests might have ordered from the fixed menu, but others surely tried and enjoyed dishes from the buffet, and whether those people realized it or not, they ingested a culture: the sounds and sites of a city and a whole nation.

Food As Sustenance

When I began this research, my intention was to look at the changing climate of food in Kathmandu, that is the growing appearance and popularity of foreign or foreign inspired food. However what I did not think of including in my research until I was weeks into the process is the fact that when we think about food, we consider taste, presentation, portion, yet hardly do we entertain the absence of food from our plates.

Food is a crucial component to culture, as is culture to food- and the reason for this is the fact that we all must eat. Every individual has their own relationship with food, often within larger identities that are, once again, shaped by food. These relationships with food help distinguish religions as well as nations. Food can describe our past, while providing a sometimes startling forecast of our future. Meals can appear boring, or other times, aesthetically, even sexually-pleasing. We fuss over food to the point where it has become fetishized by television shows. Then we watch these shows while we simultaneously consume food that has been mass-produced and wrapped in plastic. Food often means so much more than consumption that we hardly consider what it would mean if we didn't have enough of it.

When I visited the primary, out of sixteen nutritional rehabilitation homes established by an international NGO, I understood what I was to see that day, yet remained ignorant of what actually observing such things would feel like. The nutritional rehabilitation center I visited was funded by, and put into effect by the efforts of two international NGO's in order to help combat the startling figure that half of Nepal's children, under age five, are malnourished. (cite brochure).

I met the project manager for the NRH in Lalitpur, Sita, through friends I had met at the farmer's market, and with whom I had dined at Kathmandu's finest French restaurant- ironically enough. Thus, my effort to enter a culture established through "high-class cuisine" led me to what could be observed as a culture established through a lack of food.

Sita was kind enough to answer my questions about the operational side of the center, until two staff members arrival helped segue us into a tour of the facility. The ground floor of the center consisted of offices, one being a doctor's, a playroom, a kitchen, and a set of immaculate bathrooms. Part of the trade off for living in the facility and receiving nutritional rehabilitation for their children as well as

education in nutrition and health is that the women maintain the cleanliness of the center, thus lending the place its spotlessness.

As my tour through the rehabilitation center continued, Sita and I moved to the second floor of the facility where I was able to observe where two nurses administered vaccinations and distributed medications often for conditions beyond malnutrition (like Tuberculosis, pre existing heart conditions, and cerebral palsy). In addition, I observed the living quarters of these mothers and children. Four rooms divided up by severity of the child's condition were split evenly into two wings, in which beds were lined up like that in a hospital ward.

It was in the "severe" room on the left wing where I witnessed, for the first time, a child dying of hunger. Though we encounter images of malnutrition on television, in papers and magazines, seeing a seven year-old child the size of a two year-old was an experience that still caught me off guard. The fact that this child had lost seven years of normal physical and mental development appeared as though it would result in a thought only Sita articulated. Turning towards me Sita shook her head- "he won't survive."

In an example of cruel irony, his name in Nepali meant "success." The remainder of my time at the center was spent asking Sita questions, in an effort to get a sense for the future of these children, for malnutrition as a whole in Nepal, and what food's role could be in this process. What Sita's answers seemed to indicate was that the success of the children who leave the various rehabilitation homes across Kathmandu is generally guaranteed and that the women, upon their return to their villages are designated the responsibility to disseminate the knowledge they obtained from them. Despite these positives though, I couldn't shake the feeling that a future free of malnourished children and knowledge of good nutrition was a distant goal. That two more nutritional rehabilitation homes are under construction seems to mirror this sentiment.

What I took away from my visit to the rehabilitation center was firstly a reminder of how little we think about having enough food to eat, but it was also a reminder to be thankful for the fact that nutritional knowledge (whether we choose to ignore it or not) is widely distributed and available in the states. That said, my thoughts couldn't help but shift to how food quality and quantity in the US and Europe could be so radically different. Perhaps, Tristram Stuart puts it best in that "we are hemorrhaging out food," in effect wasting colossal amounts of food for reasons, the most gross being, an all too common inability to meet customer cosmetic standards.

Again, though, it's worth considering Kathmandu's future: more specifically its rush towards modernization. Will a trend towards "developed" food systems: a greater demand for meat and dairy, the emergence of processed and packaged foods, a fledgling movement of haute-cuisine, exist alongside a growing number of malnourished children? It is my belief that if food is to move forward in Kathmandu, in a sense that it is allowed to be a form of art and a creative outlet- if food is able to reach this point, its most basic purpose should remain revered as well. A recognition of the possibilities of food and the cultures that can accompany it, should be joined by a recognition of the fact that food is survival. If we lose sight of this, we risk

emulating where too many modern food systems have gone wrong. Part of revering food, is to not waste it.

Conclusion:

Food and Remembrance

Standing in the kitchen, corn meal stuck in between the crevices of my fingers, I was frozen. "So what are you making?" my Amala asked. I didn't have a good answer, because the fervor that had inspired me before was wearing off. In a moment, the realization that corn tortillas are impossible to make without a tortilla press (note to anyone attempting the same) hit me and what had been Hacha Blair making dinner quickly turned into Hacha Blair trying to quell waves of panic. The light had gone out and the alternate bulb overhead cast a strange glow on the kitchen, making it feel as though all hope was diminished. I had taken my Pala up on what have been countless, playful "you make dinner tonight!" comments. Michael Pollen says anyone can cook, so dammit, I'll just have to do it. If I think being a chef is an avenue I might want to explore, and if I know I want to work in a kitchen this summer, then I should just make dinner. Standing in my family's kitchen a mere six hours later, I thought "anthropologist studying food" is probably the better career option.

I responded to my Amala with a quiet "tuk-pa?" I had spent at least fifty times watching Pala make it, so I knew deep down, if I got it together I could chop some red onion, sauté the buff, with tomato and garlic, and add lots of water, I could make tuk-pa. Pala entered in that moment, and I think I had known from his hawkishness that I had failed, really even before starting. He took over making tuk-pa, effectively pushing me to the side and I knew it was for the best. This is all not to say that I can't cook. I've been cooking for the last year at school. I watch copious amounts of cooking instruction. I can cook, but I learned that night that I couldn't cook in that moment, which was something I didn't understand until some later reflection.

As my Pala's annoyance seemed to soften, the ease of discussion in the kitchen gradually began. We resumed our normal dynamic in which I watch him cook and we talk about most anything. I told my Pala that, though embarrassed, I was not discouraged. I think he understood deep down, maybe like I did, that making dinner for my family would have somehow felt inauthentic. I couldn't make my family American food or fusion food in the typical homestay fashion. In expressing my goal of wanting to be a chef in the future, I had committed myself to watching and learning my family cook. Momo buff flautas sounded cool at the time (and I still think are an awesome idea!) but I hadn't been watching my family make them for the last month.

I was a committed student, and so when I tried to act as teacher, it didn't go as planned. Suffice to say, that night we ate the most humble tuk-pa I've ever eaten.

All I kept thinking was "this is the physical manifestation of humble pie." Without even Chinese cabbage, it was quite literally essence of buff, plus noodle. There was no flavor in that tuk-pa, but I ate it enthusiastically. I savored the noodles, and I got seconds. I was thankful there was dinner that night, but also I think I was thankful for that moment.

The following morning, I made my Amala make paclips for breakfast. The next night I helped make momo's. I was pretty good at both because I had seen them being made, and I had practiced them before. Food had taught me to be honest with myself and not to let future goals obscure present practicality. If my family lets me make them dinner, it will be tuk-pa because it's authentic for my experience, one in which I've watched it being cooked, but also the greater experience of immersing myself in Tibetan culture and becoming a part of my Tibetan family.

Making American or fusion food felt inauthentic because I know my experience has is past being a "homestay" one. Food has shown me my own transformation from life in Nepal. I understand that what I want to make is what my family normally eats, and "my family" as I have known "family" for the last four months, is Tibetan. When I go back to the U.S. in a few weeks, I hope to immerse myself in cooking. I'm sure there will be countless successes and failures, and I really don't know whether I'll be a chef or an anthropologist in the future. I hope I can learn a lot about cooking American food, and food from Texas, and food only made in San Antonio. I want to learn how to make food I grew up eating, and food that I've never even tried. In all of this though, I want to be able to make the things I've made in Nepal.

I want to remember how to make the dishes I've made with my family, and the moments I spent in the kitchen and the conversations that were had there. I want to remember Tibetan culture through making the food I associate with it. I want to put into practice all that I've learned since being here, and now I've realized that besides being my passion, food can also be my vector for that. If I return to Nepal in the future (I plan to) maybe I can make my family American food, but right now it doesn't make sense. At the moment, I want to make Tibetan food for a variety of reasons, maybe the best of which can be articulated by my desire to never forget how to make the tuk-pa I had that night.

Methodology:

When I began this research, I possessed little reference for really how or what I should go about studying, only that I wanted to consider the importance of food in Kathmandu culture all the while utilizing knowledge from previous coursework (which included elements of food theory- if such a thing exists). A routine of visiting a weekly farmer's market began as my starting point though. My means of going about generating "research leads" began by expressing interest in the food people were making, and subsequently asking if I could observe or help in the production process. I met a number of people who came to the farmer's market not to sell food though, but rather to purchase food they realized as healthier- it was through these connections that the majority of my research was acquired. I visited farms, nutrition centers and restaurants where, through participant observation and informal unscripted interviews, I collected information regarding the production and consumption of food in Kathmandu. Using food as a gateway in either activity or discussion, I learned a tremendous amount about what various groups of people find worthy of discussion. Enhancing my research throughout were articles posted to NPR's "The Salt" and Bon Appetit's "The Foodist," both blogs that are food and cuisine focused. Additionally, TED's "Food Matters" channel, which possesses a variety of speakers (chefs, authors, farmers, bread-bakers, and artists) provided information and ideas, especially of comparison. Though I received permission for research from the individuals whom with I spoke, I will add that names and other identifying factors have been changed.

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Suggestions for Future Research:

It is my estimation that Kathmandu, like it has been explained to me so many times before, is rapidly experiencing tremendous change- though this is felt in a variety of aspects, I think food is the most interesting and perhaps fruitful lens through which we can examine this change. With this in mind, my future research suggestions all recommend looking at the entrance of "Western" food into Kathmandu markets. Some ideas to consider:

- The idea of "snacking" in Kathmandu
- Changing tastes of Tibetan youth towards sweeter foods
- Restaurants and coffee shops as places of convergence for different identities (nationalities, sexual orientation, caste-based)
- Imitation and recreation of foreign food labels in Kathmandu
- The changing shopping experience: markets versus the one-stop-shop
- "Traditional" versus "modern" cooking appliances (and what this says about nutrition)
- Notions of being a chef in a South Asian city
- Fusion food and what it says about ex-pat culture

