



# The Land in Gorkhaland

## On the Edges of Belonging in Darjeeling, India

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**Abstract** Darjeeling, a district in the Himalayan foothills of the Indian state of West Bengal, is a former colonial “hill station.” It is world famous both as a destination for mountain tourists and as the source of some of the world’s most expensive and sought-after tea. For decades, Darjeeling’s majority population of Indian-Nepalis, or Gorkhas, have struggled for subnational autonomy over the district and for the establishment of a separate Indian state of “Gorkhaland” there. In this article, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted amid the Gorkhaland agitation in Darjeeling’s tea plantations and bustling tourist town. In many ways, Darjeeling is what Val Plumwood calls a “shadow place.” Shadow places are sites of extraction, invisible to centers of political and economic power yet essential to the global circulation of capital. The existence of shadow places troubles the notion that belonging can be “singularized” to a particular location or landscape. Building on this idea, I examine the encounters of Gorkha tea plantation workers, students, and city dwellers with landslides, a crumbling colonial infrastructure, and urban wildlife. While many analyses of subnational movements in India characterize them as struggles *for land*, I argue that in sites of colonial and capitalist extraction like hill stations, these struggles *with land* are equally important. In Darjeeling, senses of place and belonging are “edge effects”: the unstable, emergent results of encounters between materials, species, and economies.

**Keywords** slow violence, shadow place, landslides, waste, human-animal relations, hill stations, South Asia

The town of Darjeeling, in the Himalayan foothills of the Indian state of West Bengal, began as a “hill station.” The mountains of former British colonies are dotted with hill stations, settlements ranging from laboratory campuses in the East African highlands to moderately sized Indian cities like Darjeeling, Shimla, and Mussoorie. Situated at altitudes between thirty-five hundred and eight thousand feet, hill stations were carved into the vertical edges of empire.

Darjeeling was built in the late 1830s as a refuge for Europeans to escape the heat and congestion of the colonial center of Calcutta, nearly four hundred miles to the south. Until 1911, when the British moved imperial government operations from Calcutta to Delhi, Darjeeling served as the summer capital of British India. When they

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annexed the land that is now Darjeeling from the Kingdom of Sikkim, the British deemed the Lepcha people, who had been living there in small groups practicing swidden cultivation, unfit for hard labor. To clear-cut forests and construct roads and buildings, the British recruited thousands of laborers from what is now eastern Nepal. These laborers built schools, sporting clubs, and bureaucratic offices, and they planted conifers and shrubs to match the landscape to British ideals of a restorative nature. Darjeeling quickly became a site of British and European social reproduction, but over its lifespan as a hill station, agricultural production also intensified. Today, tea, timber, and cinchona plantations, tended by the descendants of Nepali laborers but owned by non-Nepalis, remain central to the district's economy.

This article discusses politics of belonging in the afterlife of the hill station. I ask how Nepalis—who still constitute the region's majority—have worked to make claims to Darjeeling as a homeland. In some ways, hill stations are examples of what Val Plumwood calls “shadow places”: places materially and imaginatively oriented to the sustenance and the enjoyment of others.<sup>1</sup> Shadow places are marred by intensive economic extraction, degradation, and displacement. Darjeeling is a shadow place in the sense that much of its landscape is devoted to high-intensity plantation agriculture. Tea, the region's most famous agricultural product, is consumed almost exclusively outside the region by European and American consumers.<sup>2</sup>

Plumwood suggests that in the context of global circulations of things, people, and capital, places readily identified as “home”—affectively charged places that tend to spark ecological consciousness—are frequently sustained by shadow places. Plumwood uses the concept of shadow place to critique a common bioregionalist position grounded on a problematic “split” “between a singular, elevated, conscious ‘dwelling’ place, and the multiple disregarded places of economic and ecological support” created under colonialism and capitalism. Once this split is acknowledged, “the very concept of a singular homeplace or ‘our place’ is problematised.”<sup>3</sup> Attention to this “split” moves discussions of belonging beyond “a literary rhapsody about nice places, or about nice times (epiphanies) in nice places.” Instead, Plumwood argues, any theory of place “must . . . be able to reflect how nice (north) places and shadow (south) places are related,” making “ecological relationships visible and accountable.”<sup>4</sup> By critically reworking place discourse to attend to the entanglement of affectively charged places of attachment and the shadow places that often fuel that attachment, Plumwood argues, scholars and activists can develop a more robust vision of environmental justice.

The contemporary hill station is an apt site for this kind of analysis. Certainly, Darjeeling is a shadow place in that it provides consumers with tea, but the Darjeeling hill

1. Plumwood, “Shadow Places.”

2. For more on Darjeeling tea, see Besky, *Darjeeling Distinction*.

3. Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 139.

4. *Ibid.*, 139–40.

station itself has long been cherished by Indian elites as well as foreign and domestic tourists as a place of attachment, celebrated for the “natural” beauty of its mountain vistas. The situation in contemporary Darjeeling highlights how places of attachment and shadow places are rarely so neatly split as Plumwood describes. Darjeeling is a celebrated place of beauty for some and a place of extraction and displacement for others.

Most importantly for my argument here, Darjeeling has also become what Plumwood calls a “homeplace,” a place of attachment, for the descendants of the Nepalis conscripted more than 150 years ago to build the hill station and the region’s plantations. To understand belonging in the hill station, then, it is necessary to attend to how places of attachment and shadow places can be entangled in a single location. Though British capital has long dried up, Darjeeling Nepalis, who refer to themselves as Gorkhas, today still find themselves working to maintain Darjeeling’s colonial infrastructure and to keep its plantations viable.<sup>5</sup> They work to ensure that Darjeeling remains both a livable home and a commodified landscape. Belonging—making one’s home in a shadow place—is difficult. Questions about the rights of Gorkhas to place are bound up with questions about the ecological effects of plantation monoculture, the sustainability of forests, and the appropriateness of a sprawling city in the steep Himalayan foothills. In order to make claims to belonging in Darjeeling, Gorkhas must reconcile the “split” that Plumwood identifies in contemporary place discourse, between “conscious dwelling places” and “disregarded places of economic and ecological support.”<sup>6</sup> Gorkha claims to belonging are thus as much about environmental justice as they are about identity politics.

Since the mid-1980s, political parties in Darjeeling have been agitating for the creation of an Indian state of Gorkhaland. Instead of being a district within the state of West Bengal, as it is currently, Gorkhaland would be its own state within India, controlled by the region’s Nepali majority. In 2007, a newly formed political party, the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, or GJMM, reignited the Gorkhaland agitation. As I show in the next section, Gorkha politicians deploy a political choreography that in some ways echoes the narrow one-to-one/people-to-place bioregionalist discourse of place that Plumwood critiques. For example, in a 1987 pamphlet, *The Voice of Gorkhaland*, party leader Subhash Ghisingh wrote: “Only the ethnic name of a place or land . . . can germinate the real sense of belonging in the conscience of the concerned people.”<sup>7</sup> Gorkha political rhetoric highlights a singularity of place and people—a Gorkhaland.

My intention in this article is to highlight moments in Gorkha life that exceed bioregionalist political rhetoric. This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork I carried out during the most intense period of the latest subnational agitation—nearly three

5. The term *Gorkha* is often used interchangeably with Indian Nepali. Popular use of the term rose in the 1980s as a means of differentiating Nepalis in India from those in Nepal.

6. Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 140.

7. Ghisingh, quoted in Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*, 31.

years consecutively, from 2008 to 2010—and for shorter periods in 2012 and 2015. My interest is not in the workings of Gorkhaland as a political movement.<sup>8</sup> Rather, my aim is to understand Gorkhaland as a place. I follow Plumwood’s suggestion that one long-lasting legacy of colonial and capitalist economic and ecological transformations is a challenge to conventional understandings of what it means to “belong.” In order to assert belonging in Darjeeling, Nepalis have had to creatively situate themselves among the ruins of empire.<sup>9</sup> They have had to make claims to having built the hill station and to being qualified agents of its repair. While many analyses of subnational movements characterize them as struggles *for land*, I argue that struggles *with land* are equally important to senses of belonging. Outlining the multidirectional, sometimes peaceful, sometimes antagonistic relationships of people in Darjeeling to soil, plants, and animals, I offer an understanding of belonging that goes beyond notions of “singularized . . . attachments to and care for” place.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I describe three struggles with land. First, I examine the divergent ways that tea plantation workers, politicians, and environmentalists experience and explain the problem of landslides. Second, I describe how, in the 1980s, plantation residents and villagers began moving to Darjeeling town. Environmental activists and long-time town residents blame these people for speeding the decay of urban infrastructure. Third, I discuss an overlap between Gorkha politics and wildlife conservation discourse. Frequent associations between the protection of Gorkha people and the protection of endangered indigenous animals—particularly red pandas—elide everyday encounters between townspeople and urban “pest” animals, particularly macaque monkeys and street dogs.

Through these examples, I aim to bring attention to what literary critic Rob Nixon calls the “ecological ordinary,” the “quotidian,” historically and geographically particular interactions between people, things, and nonhuman creatures that tend to defy easy political representation.<sup>11</sup> Gorkha land and Gorkha identity, I argue, can be seen as “edge effects”: the unstable, emergent results of encounters between ecosystems, species, and ways of occupying space. In ecology, the term *edge effect* references contact between two types of ecosystems and the forms of life such contact generates. Nixon uses the term metaphorically to describe intersections between humanistic, social scientific, and ecological knowledge about the environment.<sup>12</sup> Here, I push the analytic of edge effects further, showing how senses of place and senses of identity continuously emerge and dissolve along “edges”—where tea plantations meet forests, where a Raj-era town meets Himalayan countryside, and where humans meet other species. I ask, in other

8. See Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*; Subba, *Ethnicity, State, and Development*.

9. Stoler, “Imperial Debris.”

10. Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 140.

11. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 184; see also Tsing, *Friction*.

12. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 30. See also Cronon, “Why Edge Effects?”

words, how belonging works at the edge of “shadow place” and “homeplace.” At this edge, belonging is never simply a question of biology or culture in isolation but a terrain of contested biocultural meanings.<sup>13</sup>

With this approach, I address one of the key challenges faced by the Gorkhaland movement—namely, the accusation that Darjeeling’s origins as a colonial hill station make it unsuitable as a homeland for Indian Nepalis. While Nepalis are a majority there, Bengali, Marwari, Chinese, Lepcha, and Tibetan people have moved in and out of Darjeeling for centuries. Gorkhaland’s detractors argue that the place belongs to no one in particular or, perhaps more accurately, to everyone equally.

### Struggles with Land

Darjeeling’s is a landscape of rolling foothills contained by the borders of Nepal to the east, Bhutan to the west, the plains of Bengal and Bangladesh to the south, and the Indian state of Sikkim to the north. Atop one of the highest ridges in the district sits Darjeeling town. From town, bright green tea plantations and ribbons of forest slope down steeply into the valleys below. Like other hill stations, Darjeeling is something of a settler colony, where questions about human and nonhuman ecological “fit” are constantly under debate.<sup>14</sup> Here, the cultivation of plants and the accumulation of capital have gone hand in hand with the production of identities since the annexation of the region from the Kingdom of Sikkim in 1835.

In the decades after annexation, Nepali labor recruits were tasked with the crafting of an extractive landscape composed of “settler” crops. Foremost among these was tea, the *Camellia sinensis* variety, smuggled from China by British bioprospectors. They also included the Japanese conifer *Cryptomeria japonica*, prized for its evergreen look and its soft wood, which made ideal packaging for exporting tea; and *Cinchona*, the South American tree whose bark contains the antimalarial chemical quinine. These plants were cultivated in vast monocultures while a leisure industry grew up to commodify the mountain landscape that formed their backdrop. In both the leisure and agricultural economies, ideas about Nepali men and women as endowed with natural proclivities to certain kinds of labor were central. In what Piya Chatterjee calls a “colonial taxonomy of labor,” nineteenth-century British texts characterized Nepalis as “good workers.”<sup>15</sup> Nepali men, described as amiable, brave, and industrious, were recruited into special “Gurkha” army regiments, and Nepali women, considered exotic and comely, remain favored hires in domestic service to this day.

Nepali claims to belonging in Darjeeling have continually been hamstrung by a sense that they are, like the plants they and their ancestors cultivated, exotic outsiders.

13. O’Gorman, “Belonging,” 285.

14. See Lavau, “Nature/s of Belonging”; and van Dooren, “Invasive Species in Penguin Worlds.” See also Kennedy, *Magic Mountains*.

15. Chatterjee, *Time for Tea*, 77–78.

One of the results of hill station development was what Nepalis in literary and political circles began articulating as early as the 1940s as an “identity crisis”—a sense of being excluded as citizens of India despite having ancestral claims to a place enclosed politically within India.<sup>16</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, after a series of Indo-Chinese border disputes, thousands of Nepalis and other “foreign” groups (most notably Chinese people) were expelled from Northeast India, where they had been living for generations.<sup>17</sup> In the 1980s, tens of thousands of Nepalis were evicted from Bhutan, whose king, like British colonialists in Darjeeling, had once recruited their ancestors as agricultural laborers.

It was against the backdrop of these evictions that the Gorkhaland agitation took hold. From 1986 to 1988, Ghisingh, who grew up on a tea plantation, and his political party, the Gorkha National Liberation Front, led a revolt that ended with the formation of a semiautonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council.<sup>18</sup> In late 2007, another plantation resident, Bimal Gurung, and his party, the GJMM, rejuvenated the movement for Gorkha subnational autonomy.<sup>19</sup>

The arguments of Gurung and his associates about the need for statehood often took spatial form. Tea and timber, Darjeeling’s most abundant natural resources, “flowed down the mountain,” but revenue from these industries rarely came back up. Since Darjeeling’s founding as a hill station, tourists have also come “up” to enjoy the region’s cool mountain air and to catch a glimpse of the region’s “natural” wonders, from tea plantations to giant rhododendrons to Himalayan peaks, as well as its architectural monuments to colonial occupation. With a separate state of Gorkhaland, the economic boons of the region’s agricultural and tourist industries would circulate back from the plains to the mountains.

This spatial vision of justice is encapsulated in the Nepali linguistic dynamic between *oraalo* (downhill) and *ukaalo* (uphill). Stopping downhill-uphill circulation through general strikes, or *bandhs* (closures), was a key tactic under both Ghisingh’s and Gurung’s leadership. *Bandhs* included closures not only of all businesses but also of the roads and railways that connected Darjeeling to the rest of India. When *bandhs* were lifted and commerce resumed, party leaders organized mass rallies and “cultural programs” in which they insisted that people don traditional dress and participate in dance, song, and theatrical performances.

Many accounts of subnational belonging in India focus on representational practices—language, displays of cultural difference, and political symbolism.<sup>20</sup> Critical analysis of subnational movements has revealed that ethnicity is rarely as clean or as

16. Sinha and Subba, *Indian Nepalis*; Subba et al., *Indian Nepalis*; Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*.

17. Hutt, “Being Nepali without Nepal.”

18. Subba, *Ethnicity, State, and Development*; Ganguly, “Poverty, Malgovernance, and Ethnopolitical Mobilization”; Golay, “Rethinking Gorkha Identity.”

19. Bagchi, *Gorkhaland*.

20. Baruah, *India against Itself*; Nag, *Contesting Marginality*; Singh, *How Solidarity Works for Welfare*; Shneiderman, *Rituals of Ethnicity*.

uniform as pro- or antisubnationalist activists portray it. As Townsend Middleton writes, the various manifestations of subnational politics in Darjeeling reveal not a sense of firm belonging but rather a long-standing and shifting sense of “anxious belonging.”<sup>21</sup> These anxieties play out in an ecologically spectacular spatial politics. Bandhs reinforce territorial boundaries, and cultural performances occupy prominent visible spaces. These political actions express what Plumwood might call a “singular” correspondence between place and identity. “The most serious problem for the integrity of current discourses of ‘one’s place,’” she argues, “is the split between the land of attachment, one’s self-conscious identity place (usually the home), and the economic place, or rather economic places, those places on earth that support your life.”<sup>22</sup> Bandhs couch subnational struggles as movements *for land* by a culturally and geographically distinct group of people.

“The problem” with this kind of representational practice, to paraphrase Plumwood’s formulation, “is that [it] encourage[s] us to direct our honouring of place towards an ‘official’ singular idealized . . . place consciously identified with the self . . . while disregarding the many unrecognized places that provide the material support of the self.” In the case of Gorkhaland place discourse, the official singular place is that of a homogeneous homeland for Gorkha people. Overcoming the “split” in discourses of belonging between “dwelling places” and shadow places means attending to “all those places that bear the ecological traces of one’s passage, or that carry the ecological impacts of supporting . . . life.”<sup>23</sup>

In the examples below, I focus on people attending to those contradictory time-spaces of belonging. I focus on “slow” environmental justice struggles that do not figure into representations of subnational movements in the press or in much scholarship.<sup>24</sup> Bringing Plumwood’s place discourse critique to bear on subnational belonging allows us to see past “land” as an inert backdrop for an ethnic and political movement or as a movement’s collective object of desire. This is the world of the “ecological ordinary,” marked by struggles *with land* rather than *for land*. Amid struggles with land, singularity is undermined and subtly critiqued by nonelites in Darjeeling. Of course, ecologically ordinary events can become ecologically spectacular, but only for a time. Although the long temporal scale of colonial and capitalist transformations makes them difficult to mobilize against, social movements frequently coalesce when such transformations take an unbearable toll on bodies and environments: when ecological violence becomes too acute to ignore. Despite the visible toll extractive colonial and capitalist economies have taken on Darjeeling’s landscape, what is striking about the Gorkhaland struggle is that this toll has played a relatively small role in mobilizations by Gorkha political

21. Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*, 29.

22. Plumwood, “Shadow Places,” 145.

23. *Ibid.*, 146–47.

24. Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

parties. At times, Gorkhas have styled themselves as stewards or guardians of land, but in the contexts of the landslides and urban instabilities I discuss below, they have just as often found themselves blamed—as laborers and urban settlers—for land degradation.

As Tania Li has recently argued, while processes of resource extraction—including plantation agriculture—situate land as a simple economic resource, “land is not like a mat. You cannot roll it up and take it away. It has presence and location. It has an especially rich and diverse array of ‘affordances’—uses and values it affords to us, including the capacity to sustain human life.”<sup>25</sup> In shadow places like hill stations, the protracted process of resource extraction, urban decay, and interspecies conflict can sap land’s sustaining capacity, making it a source of danger and anxiety. The concept of struggles with land, then, can aid in understanding how land’s dual role as both productive and destructive force shapes senses of belonging. Thinking about struggles with land can also reveal the difficulties of making and maintaining home in a shadow place. This dual role is most visible at edges: of plantation and forest, of plantation and town, and between species.

### Soils and Stabilities

GJMM bandhs made strategic use of Darjeeling’s topography and geopolitical significance. They halted the circulation of people and things up and down the two main roads that connect the region to the rest of India. Though tea was sometimes brought into the remit of bandhs, more often it was quietly exempted. The exception for tea seems surprising, given its prominence in popular imaginaries of the region. One explanation I often heard from Darjeeling residents regarding the exemption of tea was that GJMM politicians were bought off by tea plantation owners. Another explanation had to do with a combination of instrumental and symbolic politics. At an instrumental level, a total blockade of tea would mean lost wages for tea plantation workers, leading to an erosion of the GJMM’s support base. At a symbolic level, Darjeeling tea—a nationally and globally recognized brand—said what GJMM politicians alone could not about the region’s distinction. The GJMM’s own symbolic displays frequently included images of tea leaves and tea workers (see figs. 1 and 2). As a political tactic in the struggle for land, the GJMM’s careful manipulation of *ukaalo/oraalo* flows of both symbols and commodities was in keeping with subnational land struggles elsewhere.

Tea plantation workers, on the other hand, had to work *with* land to manage flows of things and people. Each afternoon, women plantation workers carried tea to access roads, where it was carted down to factories for processing before moving on to the market center of Siliguri in the plains. The trucks that plied these roads always came up empty, but they left full of tea. Medicines, water, and construction materials, mandated by Indian labor law, rarely came up. A victory for the GJMM, workers told me, would not directly change much about this uneven flow.

25. Li, “What Is land?” See also Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan, *Agrarian Environments*.



Figure 1. Float at a 2008 GJMM cultural performance in Chowrasta. Photo by the author

When I asked about the GJMM's repeated refusal to directly address working conditions on tea plantations, one worker said, simply, "That is not important." Under Gorkhaland, she said, "the plantation—the factory and other things—will be the owner's, but the whole land becomes ours. . . . That means that the soil is ours too. The owner will need to pay us [in taxes]. . . . It's like this, at that time Darjeeling tea will become *Gorkha* Darjeeling tea, because we Gorkhas are working. But the *land* is not the owner's." Tea workers had a stratigraphic understanding of subnational politics. For them, Gorkhaland named not only a struggle for autonomy over place and resources as well as a means of controlling their flow through territory but also a struggle with the soil underneath tea.

Workers were well aware of the problems of plantation monoculture on steep Himalayan foothills, both within and beneath the "factory and other things." Tea plantation owners in the early 2000s were intensifying production to meet increasing international demand. Workers found themselves being asked to plant tea in areas where they had never planted it before, such as recently cut-back forests and steep gullies (*jhorās*). Amid this intensification, *ukaalo/oraalo* movements signaled a different kind of anxious belonging.

One geologist writing about Darjeeling described the region as being in "quasi-unstable equilibrium," meaning that any amount of rainfall at any point could result in



Figure 2. Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) logo, available at [www.gta-darjeeling.org](http://www.gta-darjeeling.org).

a landslide.<sup>26</sup> Workers, too, experienced life on the plantation—especially at its edges, in places like cleared forests and *jhorās*—in a kind of quasi-unstable equilibrium. Planting in *jhorās* and clearing forests were recipes for disaster. The question was not whether land would slide but when.

The most famous landslide in Darjeeling took place on Ambootia Tea Estate, in a deep valley on the road down to the plains. In October 1968, the landslide began about one-third of the way down the valley, where a forest divided Ambootia from a neighboring plantation and covered a particularly steep slope. For the next twenty years, soil continued to erode around the edges of the 1968 slide until the early 1990s, when scientists, environmentalists, and organic agriculture advocates coalesced around mitigating the degradation.

The location of this landslide is significant. On plantations, forests mark property lines, but they also provide crucial protection during the yearly monsoons. Older plantation managers told me that forest cover was crucial in locations where it was “too steep to plant”: at the tops of ridges, at the bottoms of ridges, and in the *jhorās*. Laborers on Ambootia and other plantations lived in villages situated sometimes above, but more regularly below, tea fields. On plantations, edges of all kinds mattered. When the rows of planted tea began to lose their linear, contoured structure—when they began to dip and sag—workers saw a signal of impending danger. Underneath the tough, gnarled bushes that workers clung to as they pulled their way across shear slopes of tea was something dangerously soft. The demands of labor and agricultural intensification made landslides—either pre-existing or potential—a matter of considerable concern. Workers traveled from villages to different parts of plantations each day to pluck tea. During the monsoon, those who lived farther “down” in valleys risked both contributing

26. Sarkar, “Evolution of the Paglajhora Slump Valley,” 125.

to landslides as they trudged through the fields (roads and footpaths are a common landslide origin point) and being victims of them when they returned home. For tea pluckers, the threat of landslides spoke to the impending loss of Gorkha *land*. Even land itself went down the mountain, but never came back up.

Scientific accounts of the Ambootia landslide, however, present an apolitical version of its history. They mention road construction and deforestation, but landslides remain a naturalized feature of Himalayan ecology.<sup>27</sup> These studies do not discuss plantations. Indeed, while landslides are perhaps the most prevalent socioecological threat to all of Darjeeling's people—on the plantations or in town—the tea industry's role in preventing or causing them remains controversial. On World Environment Day in June 2008, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) organized an all-day program, complete with lectures, films, art competitions, and a walking tour of Darjeeling. I attended a presentation by the leader of "Save the Hills," a local landslide prevention group. As he discussed the histories of famous landslides, including the one at Ambootia, he evaded the question of tea altogether, discussing instead the congeries of "social" and "natural" factors that made each landslide different. Some environmental activists based in Darjeeling claim that tea contributes to landslides, while others claim that the unique root structure of some clones of bushes (with both taproots and surface roots) actually prevent landslides.

Landslides can be ecologically spectacular. They can cause death and destruction, but more often, they are ecologically ordinary: they go unnoticed or are ignored by those in power (and are certainly ignored by tea-consuming publics abroad).<sup>28</sup> According to Bishnu and Monu, two women tea workers I interviewed, before the GJMM took control in 2007, nobody came down to the plantation when landslides caused damage. They joked that the GJMM leadership—in their big new SUVs and fancy new clothes—only "came down" to look at their problems. Politicians made a spectacle of their visits, but the end result was largely the same:

Bishnu: We know that they are doing very well now because, say, if we have some problem they come down and they *look*. They look around.

Monu: But what do they do *for* the landslide?

Bishnu: Right, what *can they do* for the people?

Monu: Yes. Yes. All the party did was come downhill and *look around*.

Landslides in Darjeeling are a form of what Nixon calls "slow violence," both distanced from centers of power and "discounted by dominant structures of apprehension."<sup>29</sup>

27. See Froehlich and Starkel, "Normal and Extreme Monsoon Rains"; Froehlich, Starkel, and Kasza, "Ambootia Landslide Valley in the Darjeeling Hills"; Starkel, "Ambootia Landslide Valley—Evolution, Relaxation, and Prediction"; Starkel, "Role of Catastrophic Rainfall"; Starkel and Basu, *Rains, Landslides, and Floods*; Starkel and Sarkar, "Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya."

28. Nixon, *Slow Violence*.

29. *Ibid.*, 16.

Landslides are sometimes very fast and sometimes much slower and ongoing, but either way they escape apprehension. Speed and acute catastrophe do not make degradation visible. Landslides are the result of simultaneous productive and destructive work: daily tea plucking and long-term deforestation. On plantations, landslides—either realized or anticipated in the bending rows of tea—highlight a sense of what Nixon calls “displacement in place”: the condition of “being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one’s living knowledge as one’s place loses its life-sustaining features.”<sup>30</sup>

Landslides present problems for Gorkhas’—and all Darjeeling residents’—senses of place. They are both a “natural” feature of high-gradient landscapes and traceable threats to already-marginalized people, even as those most vulnerable are blamed for their prevalence.<sup>31</sup> Disasters in shadow places threaten dwelling not only in the literal sense but also in the sense of a singularized attachment to place that Plumwood critiques. The increased frequency of land loss threatens political mobilization on the plantations as people become increasingly disenchanting with a Gorkhaland politics as usual and with those GJMM politicians who promote it. As Nixon puts it, “Contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bears the social authority of witness, which entails more than simply seeing or not seeing.”<sup>32</sup> In the face of landslides, GJMM politicians, who were caught up in the grammar of subnational politics based on dramatic cultural representation, seemed able only to “look around.” The “authority of witness” remained with geologists and agronomists, for whom the plantation itself was largely invisible. In Darjeeling, landslides were edge effects: the material and political results of a meeting between tea monoculture and forest, political and ecological vision, shadow place and homeplace, and, as I show in the next section, plantation and town.

### **Sundays in the Queen of the Hills**

New jobs in tea plantations are rare. Since Indian independence in 1947, plantation populations have grown while the demand for plantation labor has stayed the same or perhaps even decreased. As plantation populations have grown, village residents not employed on plantations have moved up to Darjeeling town. This influx of “Sundays” (a derogatory term for tea plantation workers, who usually only visit Darjeeling town on their days off) accelerated in the wake of the first Gorkhaland agitation in the 1980s. At that time, housing construction was largely unregulated. New settlements, or *bustis*, sprang up in and around town. Despite building codes that prohibited structures taller than three stories, a growing market for in-town housing inspired developers to go skyward. Like tea bushes or denuded forests on plantations, hastily built blocks in town, some as many as eight stories high, have begun falling into *jhorās* and sliding down the

30. *Ibid.*, 19.

31. Blaikie and Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society*.

32. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 16.

mountainsides. Though post-agitation migrants and the descendants of plantation workers bore much of the blame for these problems, these people, organized into urban “wards,” were the foot soldiers of the revived Gorkhaland movement. One person from each household had to attend every GJMM rally.

A high-visibility occupation of town was key to the GJMM political agenda. Unlike the previous incarnation of the movement in the 1980s, which held rallies in the Chowk Bazaar, or “Down Bazaar,” a market lower down the ridge, GJMM activists held their speeches and events at the top of the ridge, in a plaza called Chowrasta. The Chowk Bazaar was the social and economic center of what is colloquially called “downtown,” where non-British settlers in Darjeeling lived during the hill station period. Chowrasta was the center of “uptown,” the all-white section. Today, though the growth of urban and peri-urban *bustis* has contributed to a breakdown of stark class and racial distinctions between “downtown” and “uptown,” Chowrasta remains, as in the colonial period, the tourist center of Darjeeling. Looking out into the distance from Chowrasta, foothills blanketed with verdant tea bushes appear to undulate for miles, contained only by misty Himalayan peaks. But looking directly down the mountain and toward the Chowk Bazaar, the ridge is so congested that it is sometimes hard to see where a given structure meets the ground.

Most every GJMM rally I observed began downtown and snaked up the ridge to Chowrasta. Speeches blaring from loudspeakers tied to bamboo rigging celebrated the unity of Gorkhas and their distinctiveness from other people in West Bengal. Behind the symbolic claims to Gorkha unity, however, lay a messier class and racial politics within Darjeeling town.

Again, an *oraaalo/ukaalo* discourse was salient. Getting off plantations and “up” into a house and job in town was a common aspiration among younger tea plantation residents, but those who did get up faced new forms of ecological and economic marginalization. In the bodies of so-called “Sundays,” Darjeeling town met Darjeeling plantations, and the concerns of environmentalists about the precarity of land met uncomfortably with the question of regional belonging.

Darjeeling’s is a nineteenth-century infrastructure supporting a twenty-first-century population. This material disconnect has produced some painful ironies in everyday life. On one hand, water shortages are chronic. Town residents—particularly downtown—have no regular access to water for multiple months of the year, despite the fact that Darjeeling, on the wet southern face of the Himalayas, has some of the highest rainfall anywhere in India. On the other hand, the colonial landscape is Darjeeling town’s most important economic asset. For more than 150 years, depictions of Darjeeling for tourist consumption have portrayed the mountain landscape as a space of leisure, good feeling, and relaxation (see again fig. 1). Present-day uptown maintains a distinctly British feel: gabled Tudor cottages and stone bungalows adorned with gingerbread ornamentation sit tucked behind iron gates and the dark shadows of *duppi* trees (*Cryptomeria japonica*). By the time my fieldwork began in 2008, however, this landscape

was what Ann Stoler calls “imperial debris,” a decaying, if still symbolically and materially potent, version of its former colonial self.<sup>33</sup> Imperial debris sat in tension with actual debris. The *jhorās* that lead downward, out of the city and toward the plantations below, are nearly constantly glutted with corn cobs, horse manure, and little plastic *paan* packets.

In late 2009, students from Darjeeling’s St. Joseph’s College produced a series of short films ominously titled *Black Darjeeling*. The films portray Darjeeling as a “sleep-walking” place, caught in “a perpetual holiday mood.” In Gokul Sharma’s “Waste: A Journey toward Change” (2009), the narrator wanders through streets lined with clogged drains and broken pipes and past garbage-filled *jhorās*, interviewing shopkeepers and garbage collectors. The film juxtaposes scenes of accumulated waste below and the famous mountain vistas on high, creating its own edge effect. In the film, Sharma explains: “Darjeeling is a place that appears to be like an artist’s masterpiece . . . a paradise. But . . . paradise is just an illusion. As I walk the streets each day, I am encountered with only waste. . . . Darjeeling lives on top of the waste and proudly calls itself the ‘Queen of the Hills.’”

The sobriquet “Queen of the Hills” dates back to nineteenth-century tourist guidebooks. It references a sense of Darjeeling as a venerated place in the colonial landscape—a sense that persists in present-day tourist literature. As Plumwood explains, the existence of such places is always dependent upon that of “shadow places,” separated by economic and geographic distance. Sharma’s film illustrates how, in the hill station, the distance between the venerated and the shadow collapses.

Still, his words evoke a cosmopolitan environmentalism based on ideas of individual responsibility. Darjeeling’s residents—living on top of one another, apathetic and insensitive to the problems *they* created—are perpetrating another kind of slow violence upon themselves. Though Sharma’s film was tacitly endorsed by the GJMM, its explicit lament for colonial glory links waste, as matter out of place, to a population of people out of place. As the leader of the Save the Hills campaign told students gathered for World Environment Day in 2008: “The water used to percolate through the valley. Water used to run off. But now with tremendous urbanization, all the water drains off into another drain, and it goes eventually into our *jhorās*. *Those jhorās are not meant to hold water. So the jhorās are eating [up the land around them].*” The sense that contemporary town-dwellers misunderstood the vulnerability of the landscape in which they dwelled was central in expert assessments of the consequences of urbanization.

In a discussion of informal settlements in Kathmandu riverbeds, Anne Rademacher describes what one of her informants calls the problem of how to manage the “rural in the urban”: the influx of dwellers and dwelling practices that seem out of step with the demands of urban space.<sup>34</sup> In Kathmandu, landless settlers were cast as

33. Stoler, “Imperial Debris.”

34. Anne Rademacher, “When Is Housing an Environmental Problem?,” 518.

“outsiders.” Indeed, Nepalis spread rumors that the settlers were Indians who did not belong in Kathmandu at all and who misrecognized the riverbed where they lived as “land.”<sup>35</sup> In response, planners moved to reconstruct the riverbed as a watercourse. In the face of Darjeeling’s waste problem, environmentalists made a similar case, namely that “uneducated” newcomers to town misrecognized *jhorās*. Even pro-Gorkhaland environmental discourse in Darjeeling subtly reinscribed ideas about race and class onto the question of who and what should and should not go “up” or “down”—a question that colonial architecture was designed to answer.

When the slow violence of waste management morphed into the acute violence of disaster, however, some GJMM activists attempted to pivot, suddenly linking environmental misrecognition with the quest for political recognition. In early September 2009, Cyclone Aila spun around the Bay of Bengal, then burst north across the plains, settling over the eastern Himalayas. In Darjeeling, resulting landslides destroyed infrastructure and villages. Not surprisingly, those most affected by Aila were people living on the most intimate terms with everyday environmental and social marginalization. The most significant damage occurred in Lower Tungsung village, a *busti* located on the back side of town below Chowrasta. This land was once categorized as unbuildable by colonial-era engineers because it was covered in backfill from the flattening out of uptown Darjeeling.

Aila struck during the height of the GJMM’s agitation, but in the aftermath, politicians, environmentalists, and residents struggled over how to characterize the event. News reports documented deaths in Lower Tungsung, but the extent to which human action—including by the Gorkha leaders who had long encouraged settlement in these areas—could be blamed for the disaster remained a point of debate. After all, cyclones, like landslides, have been part of life in the hills since long before the Gorkhaland agitation. At one GJMM “cultural program” held in the aftermath of Aila, a leader of an ethnic *samaj* (organization) put it this way:

There was an Iron Age, a Stone Age, an Ice Age. You know what our age would be called? The age of plastic litter . . . But it is much more than that. In the cities, plastic may be an aesthetic issue, but in the hill station, it is a “life issue.” It is in the *jhorās*, in *our jhorās*, in our drains, in our landslides—the landslides that kill *our* people. . . . We [are] making such a thing that goes against [nature] and that is dangerous to nature . . . the very thing which Darjeeling has given us.

Attempts to contextualize the loss of housing and life brought questions of ecological belonging together with questions of political belonging. Plastic was a “life issue” because the mass discarding of *jhorā*-choking waste—much of it at the hands of tourists who came to Darjeeling to consume “nature”—threatened the very existence of Darjeeling town dwellers. Consumption and risk were unevenly distributed in Darjeeling.

35. *Ibid.*, 519.

In the wake of Aila, however, activists seemed more willing to weave the instability of land—and the problematic edge effects of hill station development—into narratives of Gorkha resistance to West Bengal. The West Bengal government responded to the disaster with financial and material resources. For many, however, this relief failed to account for the ecological distinctiveness of Darjeeling. One GJMM activist and retired civil servant explained: “Disaster management plans are made in the Writers Building [the seat of the West Bengal state government], so they do not know anything about Darjeeling. We are totally different up here. Here, we need warm clothes. They send cycles [bikes]. . . . [Sending] a cycle, [sending] *dhotis* [skirt-like light cotton wraps], this is a very *casual* approach to disaster management.” Here, Gorkhaland’s outward manifestation as a struggle for land became intertwined with everyday struggles with land. The same activist continued:

Once we get a state of Gorkhaland, the decision making process will be here in Darjeeling, not in Calcutta. . . . In disaster management, it is not sympathy, it is empathy [that is needed]. It is *about place*. Calcutta will not bother, because it is not their brothers. So empathy means—suppose I am the Secretary concerned and whatnot, and I know my people are dying. They are my relations, so I will work faster. The disaster management plan will be prepared by Darjeeling people, who have experience with how to handle the landslides, so they know that *dhoti* is not the item, or a cycle is not the item.

The idea of a specialized Gorkha disaster management system, however, was a minority current in the movement. After the end of the second Gorkhaland agitation in 2011, the new Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) was formed, promising increased autonomy and local control over Darjeeling’s resources. But when I returned in the summer of 2012, three years after the disaster and a year after the formation of the GTA, many residents of Lower Tungsung had yet to see any material or monetary relief, while others had received pittances for their destroyed houses. The party continued to come down and look around, but even those visits eventually waned.

### Species Struggles

Among GJMM activists, discussions of “nature” and the dangers posed to it by urbanization were not limited to the problem of waste in *jhorās*. Images of Kanchenjunga (the world’s third highest peak), snow leopards, rivers, and tea bushes were prominent both in environmental programs organized by NGOs and in GJMM depictions of Gorkha “heritage” (see fig. 1). The endangered red panda was a particularly prominent symbol (see fig. 3).

In a lecture at the 2008 World Environment Day program, a representative from the Darjeeling Zoo discussed the responsibilities of local people to help conserve the red panda. Red pandas are fickle creatures. Undeniably cute and problematically solitary, they present conservation challenges. Their lack of enthusiasm for mating in the

Figure 3. Poster from the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in Darjeeling. (Distributed by Election Commission of India.)



wild, according to the zoo official, meant that it was “our job” to help conserve them. They were an integral part of the Darjeeling Himalayan ecosystem. In the official’s narrative, the underpopulation of red pandas came as a result of the overpopulation of Nepalis, specifically their historical and contemporary encroachment on the forest, the construction of tea and timber plantations, and the continued expansion of the town into red panda habitat. Since the 1990 Rio Earth Summit, the zoo representative explained, preservation of endangered species had become the responsibility of the local people where those species are indigenous. Being “native” to the region necessitated caring for “native” species. She explained, “This means the red panda must be in Darjeeling. . . . Animals must be kept where they are found.”

In this presentation and in GJMM political rallies, “saving” the panda and protecting Gorkha “heritage” were couched as a cosmopolitan responsibility, just as it was a responsibility to keep waste out of *jhorās*. In what Nixon calls an “eco-archaic” discourse, those species that belonged needed to be conserved, paradoxically, alongside the remains of colonial architecture.<sup>36</sup>

Despite their prominence in GJMM symbolism and local environmentalist discourse, most Darjeeling residents rarely saw red pandas face-to-face. They had almost daily encounters, however, with two decidedly less charismatic megafauna: macaque monkeys and street dogs. Unlike red pandas, these species had no trouble reproducing. They were problematically numerous. Many of Darjeeling’s macaques live at the Buddhist-Hindu Mahakhal Temple, the site of an old monastery on the highest point in town, just above Chowrasta. This monastery, the popular local narrative goes, was called the Dorje-ling monastery (in Tibetan, *dorje* is a ritual thunderbolt, and *ling* means “place”). It was one of the only structures whose presence the British acknowledged when they annexed Darjeeling.

The temple monkeys are sacred, and their belonging predates both colonial and Nepali settlement. For people in Darjeeling, then, macaques are deeply problematic.

36. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 184

They are in a sense the living descendants of some of its oldest residents. Like the Bhutias and Lepchas who occupied the hills well before the British arrived, macaques refuse to be excised from the landscape. Macaques are consummate edge dwellers. Their “niche” in town is constantly being remade as they interact with humans.<sup>37</sup> As Agustín Fuentes notes, the “contact zones” (borrowing a concept used by Mary Louis Pratt, Donna Haraway, and others) where people and macaques meet are “characterized by subtle behavioral and ecological interactions against the backdrop of the *longue durée* of human histories and paleohistories.”<sup>38</sup>

But while contact zones are sites of mutual becoming across species lines, shadow places like Darjeeling are sites of “anxious belonging.”<sup>39</sup> In Darjeeling, macaques are moving manifestations of colonial and postcolonial underdevelopment. They routinely attack tourists and townspeople, exercising their own form of territoriality—refusing to be either eco-archaic symbols or tourist attractions.<sup>40</sup> They have played this role elsewhere in India. According to Radhika Govindrajan, macaques that were “relocated” to the northwestern state of Uttarakhand from Delhi, where they were considered a nuisance, have become touchstones for anxieties among Uttarakhand’s *paharis* (“hill people”). *Paharis*, however, are anxious not about the overpopulation of their foothills environment but about its *depopulation*. The flight of young *paharis* to the plains in search of jobs threatens the legitimacy of Uttarakhand’s subnational statehood and justifies the appropriation of the hills by plains people as an “internal colony.”<sup>41</sup> As Govindrajan argues, “Unfamiliar monkeys, supposedly captured in the plains and dropped off in the hills, feed circulating concerns about . . . the erosion of *pahari* identity.”<sup>42</sup>

In Darjeeling as in Uttarakhand, macaques are both detrimental to infrastructure and a part of it: they claim space and crowd up against people, but they also feed on waste. Shopkeepers routinely clash with macaques, but they cannot remove them. To adapt Haraway’s term, the shopkeepers have “inherited” a tense and violent relationship to monkeys, just as monkeys themselves have inherited this temple.<sup>43</sup> They must maintain and rebuild their shared niche. For Darjeeling’s town dwellers, any sense of place had to be worked out through complex questions about how best to live together with a variety of other-than-human species.<sup>44</sup>

To do their part in this maintenance, townspeople work with local dogs. In Hindu cosmology, dogs are also ritually significant creatures, as the messengers of Yama, the

37. Fuentes, “Naturecultural Encounters in Bali,” 606.

38. *Ibid.* See also Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone.”

39. Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*, 29.

40. Ogden, *Swamplife*; Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*.

41. Govindrajan, “Monkey Business.”

42. *Ibid.*

43. Haraway, “Staying with the Trouble.”

44. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*.

god of death. In Nepal and Darjeeling, people observe this status on the second day of the Nepali festival of Tihar, called Kukur Puja, or Dog Puja. Street dogs are washed and adorned with *tikka* and flower garlands. Like monkeys, dogs mediate the relationship between people and the sacred: dogs connect people to an afterlife. And like monkeys, dogs are critical nodes in the metabolism of urban life. They live on what townspeople and tourists leave behind: corn cobs, half-eaten plates of chow mein, and other forms of waste. These are the descendants of the dogs of colonial occupation: Welsh corgis, terriers, rottweilers, and Labradors. Street dogs are thus a kind of living imperial debris.<sup>45</sup>

At the foot of the temple, alien and indigenous species meet, along with notions of sacred and commodified nature. A local veterinary NGO only neuters female dogs, not males. Town residents prefer males hungry and territorially aggressive, so as to better corral macaques in space, keeping them from coming down beyond the temple site. The residents do this to protect themselves but also to protect tourists, who are often ignorant of the threat these exotic-looking primates pose to their bodies and property. As people continue to migrate up from plantations, and as the mountains beyond continue to draw tourists to the area, town-dwellers of all kinds have come into uncomfortable proximity. People who live in town care for dogs as much out of sacred duty as out of economic interest. Tourists who fear monkey attacks are less likely, after all, to visit the stalls beneath the temple where Nepalis, Marwaris, or Tibetans sell curios, sweater vests, and souvenirs. These human-dog-monkey encounters are edge effects. These ordinary encounters are difficult to readily define as political through the lens of a singular place discourse. Amid environmental degradation, they remain in the shadows, behind iconic images of towering peaks and cute red pandas.

### **Conclusion: Inheriting the Hill Station**

In her work on shadow places, Plumwood critiqued the romanticism that undergirds bioregionalist discourses of place and belonging. Plumwood's aim was to denaturalize the romanticized sense of attachment to mountains, rivers, and forests that tends to come with a privileged place in the global economy. Plumwood's critique, however, also allows us to understand the experience of place and belonging for less privileged people, like Gorkhas, who find themselves put to exploitative work on the very land they claim as "home." In this article, I have argued that place and belonging are both edge effects. They emerge at the points where senses of attachment intersect with the "shadowy" work of extraction.

Landslides, urban waste, and interspecies encounters in Darjeeling underscore Plumwood's critique of a "split" in contemporary place discourse. These events both

45. Stoler, "Imperial Debris"; Freccero, "Carnivorous Virility."

challenge the existence of a singular, discrete “homeplace” and raise questions about what it means to belong in a disconnected and denuded “shadow place.”<sup>46</sup> To move between homeplace and shadow place, Gorkha people need travel no farther than the distance from plantation village to urban *busti*. Darjeeling’s existence has long been predicated on the provision of goods and services for places elsewhere—from the colonial metropole to the global market. The presence of settlers there is marked by ecological instabilities that exist in tandem with feelings of “anxious belonging,” precarious senses of Indian citizenship.<sup>47</sup> In giving some material sense of that anxiety, I want to prompt a closer consideration of the instability of place in subnational politics. In the Himalayas, land is always in the process of “going down”—occupied, eroded (and occasionally reconstituted) by both human and nonhuman territorial action. As Plumwood notes, just as we should never take identity for granted, we should not take the ground on which people contest and rework representations of themselves as stable or uniform.<sup>48</sup> Just as concerns about ethnic or national identity are inflected by conflicts over framing, tactics, and knowledge, concerns about place are complicated by the overlap between environmentalism, imperial debris, and even the status of land and animals as sacred, dangerous, natural, or threatened.

Darjeeling is thus an appropriate site not just for rethinking belonging but for examining the processes by which people encounter the temporally problematic “edge effects” of colonial monoculture and urban underdevelopment. The history of hill stations (and of capitalism more broadly) reveals that the seams, or the “unruly edges,” in Anna Tsing’s terms, where forest meets field, where town meets plantation, and where land meets sky, afford extraordinary accumulative possibilities, even if they are also extraordinarily precarious.<sup>49</sup> People in Darjeeling, as I have argued, have inherited the hill station, and with it these edge effects. The ways in which they confront them can enrich approaches to justice and injustice on the margins of South Asia and beyond. Stopping the downhill loss of land and people, resources and capital was not only a strategy of GJMM political action but also a desire of nearly all of the people in Darjeeling whom I met during my fieldwork. Gorkhaland as a place is not a unified entity but one that is worked over with edges—not just the contact zones where species meet but the ecological zones where forests and monocultures meet and the temporal zones where movements to conserve imperial debris become wedged into movements to preserve an ancestral “homeland.” Making subnational demands does not mean blurring these edges but attending to them.

46. Plumwood, “Shadow Places.”

47. Middleton, *Demands of Recognition*.

48. Plumwood, “Shadow Places.”

49. Tsing, “Unruly Edges.” See also Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.

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