

Conference Report

Himalayan Studies Conference 6, 13-16 October 2022, Toronto, ON, Canada

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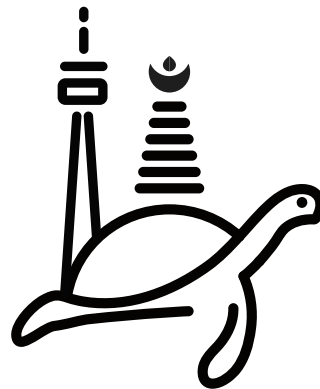
The Himalayan Studies Conference 6 took place at Victoria College at the University of Toronto from October 13–16, 2022. It was co-convened by Nadine Plachta and Katharine Rankin, who were supported by a conference committee of the Executive Council of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), a local University of Toronto host committee (Pushpa Acharya, Christoph Emmrich, Frances Garrett, Elsie Lewison, and Sarah Richardson), a volunteer coordinator (Adrian Khan), and a member of the HIMALAYA editorial team who handled the Zoom Events platform (Stefan Lüder).

Over the course of two and a half days, the conference was run on hybrid modality with a total of 209 participants (115 in-person and 94 online). 47 panels and roundtables featured many participants from Himalayan countries, including: India (38), Nepal (17), Bhutan (2), and China (1). Thus, HSC 6 had an almost equal number of participants joining from the Himalayas as those coming from North America, the UK, and Europe. HSC 6 was certainly the most international Himalayan Studies Conference so far.

Theme and Logo

“Himalayan Futures” was identified as a conference theme that could attend to both climate crisis and environmental challenges in the Himalayas, and the activism pushing back for life—human and non-human—for hope, for creativity, and for transformation. There is currently much to be worried about—rising temperatures, glacial lake outburst floods, seismic instability, rapid infrastructure development, border conflicts, and tensions over territorial claims. The conference strove to focus on how Indigenous, Dalit, and other historically marginalized communities bear witness, sustain hope, and take action in the wake of these developments. It aimed at envisioning alternative understandings and trajectories of environmental, social, and political change to engage multidisciplinary perspectives of justice, struggle,

and solidarity in the making of shared Himalayan futures.



HIMALAYAN STUDIES CONFERENCE 6

The conference logo reflected the commitment to including Indigenous perspectives, as well as the geographic location of discussions in Toronto. It creatively brought together North American Indigenous forms of knowledge and worldviews, symbolized by the turtle, with Himalayan Buddhist principles of peace and compassion depicted by the stupa. The CN Tower, a communications and observation tower in downtown Toronto, was added to represent a widely recognized landmark of the city. The logo was developed by artist Thinley Gyamtso Lama from the Indigenous Tsum community in Nepal’s northern Gorkha District.

Keynote

Both keynote speakers and discussants were selected with the conference theme in mind, as well as with the objective of representing diverse regional expertise and different career stages. The keynote speakers addressed the topic of climate change in relation to histories of oppression faced by Indigenous and marginalized groups in contested territories. Mona Bhan (South Asian Studies and Anthropology, Syracuse University), in her presentation *Weathering the Occupation: Meteorological Wars and Climate Contestations in Kashmir*, argued that climate and weather perform an agentive role by showing that they constitute a geopolitical force that have

the potential to challenge the fiction of national cartographies. Focusing on Ladakh, Karine Gagné's (Anthropology, University of Guelph) talk, *Taming India's Northernmost Border: Ecologies of Violence, Care, and Resistance in the Himalayas*, explored climate change as a terrain for claiming citizenship and resisting state abandonment. Karine also made a case for including multispecies relationships within the ambit of scholarship that troubles the violent practices associated with state and border making. Galen Murton (Geography, James Madison University) and Pasang Yangjee Sherpa (Asian Studies, University of British Columbia) served as discussants for these two keynote talks.

Contributions to Himalayan Studies

The various panels at HSC 6 showcased well how Himalayan studies have complicated broader debates on issues of climate, sustainability, infrastructure, and disaster—all critical matters of Himalayan futures. For example, scholarship on and in the Himalayas has long made influential contributions in political ecology by posing political-economic explanations of environmental change—emphasizing the role of the state and elites in driving deforestation—that challenged racist and classist Malthusian frameworks. It pioneered in making the case that community empowerment justifies decentralization—providing a key rationale for Nepal's large-scale community forestry systems that would be reproduced around the world as mobile policy.

Himalaya-based scholarship has also led the way in infrastructure studies, with insights about the imperative to consult and mobilize local and Indigenous knowledge; in disaster studies, with consolidation of the science of geologic instability, landslides, glacial lake outburst floods, and grounded examinations of everyday lives in landscapes of crisis; and in decolonial studies by highlighting the politics of citational practices, theoretical lineages, and institutional structures of academia.

The panels at HSC 6 picked up on these themes by demonstrating how anthropology, geography, history, education, art, and religious studies come to bear in disciplinarily specific and collaborative ways on existential questions about Himalayan futures. Some panels were formulated explicitly in relation to the conference theme, such as *Himalayan Linguistic Futures: Language as Expressive Practice, Learning, and Survivance*; *Bhutanese Futures: Tensions, Preparations, and Prospects*; and *Reckoning with New Uncertainties on a Himalayan Scale*. There was a cluster of panels on art and literature connecting across the Himalayas, and a cluster on education, pedagogy, and youth perspectives. As always, Nepal remained a key geographic focus at the conference, but related Himalayan geographies were also featured, including in the keynote talks. Finally, HSC 6 took up issues of decolonizing Himalayan studies through panels on *Reindigenizing Research*; *Doing Ethnography*; and *Publishing Himalayan Scholarship*.

Film Screening and Discussion

HSC 6 also screened the film *Ningwasum*, followed by a Q&A with director Subash Thebe, who joined on Zoom from London. Subash is a visual artist from the Indigenous Yakthung community in eastern Nepal, who uses a multimedia approach in his film and artwork. He draws on both science and speculative fiction to address Indigenous struggles resulting from the effects of (internal) colonization, capitalist practices, and climate change.

Developed from extensive ethnographic research, *Ningwasum* places the Yakthung community in a futuristic space travel scenario. The documentary centers around two Indigenous astronauts and time travelers from an alternative future, in which a Yakthung nation coexists with other nations and allies that have created their own advanced technology. *Ningwasum* explores concepts of time, memory, and belonging as well as experiences of colonization and the cultural erasure that comes with it. Instead

of succumbing to histories of domination and marginalization, *Ningwasum* imagines a future in which Indigenous people have asserted their identities through the use of technology, a creative space that Subash calls “Adivasi Futurism.” In that way, *Ningwasum* offers a counter-narrative and envisions life beyond the state. It tells the story of how Indigenous communities also create spaces of hope and possibility for what is yet to come. *Ningwasum* was filmed mostly in the Nepal Himalayas, including the Wasanglung region that is believed to be the shamanic home of the Yakthung people. The dialogue is spoken entirely in the Yakthung language, with English subtitles, and weaves oral narratives, animation, and electronic music into its storytelling.

Additional Highlights

An additional highlight of the conference was the inaugural meeting of the Canadian Himalaya Initiative, hosted by Christoph Emmrich (Study of Religion and Historical Studies, University of Toronto) at the Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. A field trip to the Tibetan Collection at the Royal Ontario Museum with Sarah Richardson (Historical Studies, University of Toronto) and a momo lunch provided by Surendra Lawoti’s family business, *Nepali Momo*, on the last day of the conference, successfully rounded off the program.

Logistical and Technological Challenges

Conference organization also came with significant logistical challenges and complications. What was initially planned and intended as a primarily in-person event became a truly hybrid conference in the months before. This outcome was in part due to the lingering effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic and the backlog in visa processing at Canadian High Commissions around the world—serious situations that were entirely out of control of the conference organizers. For example, while some international participants were issued a visa to Canada just a couple days before the

conference, despite having applied months in advance—and were therefore lucky to get on a plane—others needed to shift to a virtual participation at the last minute because of not receiving a visa. Many of the pivots to online participation were only confirmed within the week or even days before the conference, including for one of the keynote discussants and the filmmaker.

On top of these challenges posed by the pandemic and visa access, the Zoom Events platform itself proved to require significant technical know-how. Fortunately, Stefan Lüder was able to travel from Frankfurt to Toronto on short notice to help maintain the hybrid Zoom technology. One of the enduring images of the conference for all who attended in person will no doubt be of Stefan gliding in and out of the session rooms, exuding calm and alleviating the ever-present anxiety that technology would interfere with substantive academic exchange.

As many of us have learned through numerous conferences over the past two years, the future of academic meetings will remain hybrid. HIMALAYA welcomes suggestions for hosting the next Himalayan Studies Conference in North America, and we look forward to future conversations at HSC 7, in-person and online.

Nadine Plachta is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. Her work focuses on Indigenous knowledge systems, conservation area policies, and local governance. She has explored this theme in the context of emerging environmentalisms, development discourses and practices, infrastructure landscapes, as well as disaster, conflict, and political mobilization. Plachta's scholarship is based on long-term ethnographic engagement in South Asia and especially in Nepal, where she served as Resident Director at Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute in Kathmandu (2014–2019).

Katharine Rankin is Professor and Associate Chair in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. She has contributed broadly to scholarship on market and state formation through a decolonial, area-studies orientation engaging ethnographic approaches—and featuring case studies of infrastructure development, post-conflict and post-disaster governance, commercial gentrification, microfinance, and a trans-Himalayan trading entrepôt.