

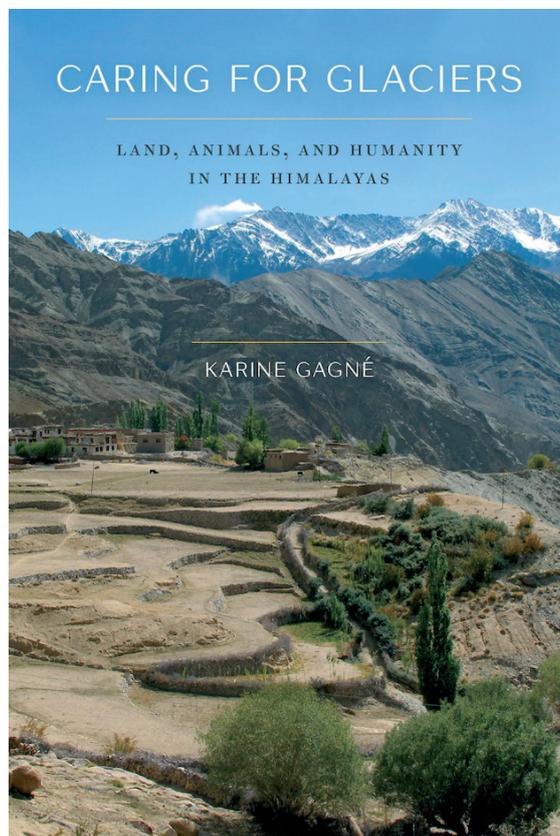
Book Review

Review of *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas* by Karine Gagné

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Ice is melting, youth are leaving, and lifeways are changing more rapidly than many ever anticipated. From handheld technology to transport systems, territorial disputes to global warming, powerful forces of transformation make these changes a factor of everyday life across the Himalayan world today. While these dynamics operate from the uplands of Arunachal Pradesh to the marketplaces of Kashmir, in few places are the intersectional collisions of social mobility, regional conflict, and climate change felt more acutely than the landscapes of Ladakh and Zaskar in northwest India. Taking sustained and careful observation of these socio-ecological changes as a starting point of analysis, Karine Gagné's superb monograph, *Caring for Glaciers: Land, Animals, and Humanity in the Himalayas* employs an attuned sense of place in Ladakh to signal the importance of reciprocity in the cultivation – and indeed preservation – of human and nonhuman relationships in 21st century Anthropocene times.

It goes without saying that this review is long overdue, and if you have not already done so, please read this book! *Caring for Glaciers* won the 2019 James Fisher Prize from the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies for 'Best First Book on the Himalayan Region.' The text provides an essential and textured anthropological corrective to popular presentations of Ladakh (and its neighboring regions of Kashmir and Zaskar) as either inflamed by military conflict (between India, Pakistan, and China) or trapped outside of time (by the imaginaries of Shangri-la). To be sure, Gagné does address all these popular, and at times misplaced, perceptions of the region, but she does so primarily to contextualize a much closer and intimate reading of how embodiment and affective practices constitute the bases of community lifeways in, and futures for, Ladakh as well as the wider Himalaya.

Throughout the text, Gagné mobilizes and applies a close consideration of affective practices to illuminate her observations about everyday life in the Buddhist world.

Drawing on Brian Massumi (2002), in the Introduction, Gagné writes that "affect has been described as an intensely felt, interactive bodily experience that is neither presocial nor fully social," such that "a focus on affect enables the study of feelings that arise from the embodied experience of human-nonhuman interaction (pp. 11-12). Bearing witness to shifting livelihood patterns across Ladakh's landscapes, the essence of Gagné's analysis is that reciprocities in human-environment relations such as those practiced in the western Himalaya can inform and nurture an ethics of care. Along the way, Gagné shows how embodying those ethics – as a socially and culturally-informed ontology as well as a material practice of collective and reciprocal responsibility – can in turn help repair ecological damages encountered elsewhere at local and global scales.

Over the course of six historically grounded and empirically rich chapters – themselves framed by a theoretically sharp introduction and wistful but also hopeful conclusion – Gagné takes the reader on a journey that vividly illuminates the extent to which an ethos of care pervades life in Ladakh. After outlining the axes of morality and ethics that frame her analytical approach, in Chapter 1 Gagné brings the reader to Ladakh in the depths of winter. From the outset, one starts to feel the sense of loneliness – to say nothing of the cold – that she herself experienced during early days in the region but which for far longer has been a routine condition of life for countless others. Beginning on pages 48-49 in Chapter 2 – and in a move of brilliant editorial coordination – Gagné presents the importance of *arthalis* (or the year 1948) to situate Ladakh in the broader geopolitical landscape of post-Partition South Asia and modern India. The geography of this military history in turn forms the basis for Chapter 3's analysis of the socio-cultural "becoming" of sentinel citizens across the region (and on which Gagné has also written about at length elsewhere).

Moving on from these contemporary histories of war, conflict, and nation-making,

Gagné then takes the reader to more temporal, ecological, and sensual spaces of Himalayan life. All the while, she reveals not only where ‘cracks’ have recently emerged in the landscapes of social, cultural, and environmental relations, but also how community members work to fill and repair such cracks through careful and embodied ethical practices. Chapter 4 attends to ‘Father White Glacier’ and the temporalities, and erosion, of family bonds. Going in search of Aba Tenzin and using pastoralist sensibilities to examine how “landscape was a lived space” (p. 119), Chapter 5 conceptualizes herding as a relationship between landscape and the human and nonhuman actants that together comprise such environments. As a geographer, I especially appreciate Gagné’s attention to the processual ways in which landscapes are co-produced with, alongside, and at times both above and beneath the human communities that move through them. Finally, Chapter 6 brings the reader’s attention more squarely to glaciers, and the importance of knowing and caring for the ice which has for centuries sustained life in Ladakh. In the Conclusion, Gagné considers the significance – if not imminence – of ‘vanishing ice’ and points attention to the critical conditions this creates for people across the region, a reality faced in countless other places around the world as well.

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- Galen Murton on *Caring for Glaciers*

Taking a reader by the hand and guiding them through many layers of historical landscape and community making in Ladakh – from early militarization and central state formations to transformations of environment and melting ice today – is a heady task that Gagné accomplishes remarkably well. Nevertheless, I also came away from the book wondering why more

attention was not paid to several other salient topics - tourism, remoteness, and ice itself – that appear inextricably bound up in complex regional dynamics. To be sure, the author touches upon these things here and there, but sometimes only obliquely. First, tourism poses, and has already imposed, huge impacts on the environment, economy, and even politics of Ladakh (and Zaskar) and yet very little attention is paid to the political and moral economy of tourism throughout the book. Second, while Gagné begins the text with a close and auto-ethnographic encounter with loneliness, the powerful trope of remoteness with which loneliness is often associated – and which itself is often employed to characterize Ladakh – is hardly discussed beyond a paragraph or two in Chapter 1. Although Gagné surely succeeds in disrupting much of the Shangrila stereotyping that frequently simplifies Ladakh into overly reduced depictions, I think that more sustained attention to the relationships between remoteness and loneliness would allow readers to not only “transcend” spaces as described in the book but moreover “live” in those worlds of Ladakh. Finally, I was also surprised by the limited engagement with cultural, ecological, and hydrological perspectives on the cryosphere over the course of the book, especially considering ‘glaciers’ is the third word in the title. Knowing that Gagné has

recently taken up this topic with new and exciting research and scholarship, I like to think that following flows of snow and ice in (but also surely beyond) Ladakh and Zaskar is a fruitful way to extend key takeaways from the

monograph, even if some of the scientific dimensions seem to be elided in the book at hand.

Of course, gaps such as these are both inevitable and relatively minor. More importantly, the work that Gagné has done – and that the book continues to do – is to nuance our understanding of changing

ways of life in the world. Illuminating how this happens and why it matters, the book reveals that an ethics of care is critically important both today and tomorrow. If there was ever somewhere that life required reciprocity with fellow humans and non-humans alike, one might think of Ladakh as that kind of place. From knowing how and when ice melt must be channeled to irrigate apricot orchards to embodying wayfaring as a co-relation in the lives of both herders and goats, the landscapes of Ladakh require care. As Gagné shows, such ethics of care are essential, just as their knowledge and practices are also at risk. May understanding this relationship – as portrayed in the book but moreover lived in Ladakh – help to cultivate a more *care*-full ethos for future generations as well.

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