

Special Section Research Article

Come Drink Tea

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Abstract

How do you remake place as home? In Toronto, Tibetan refugees do this through asylum petitions for citizenship, the purchasing of real estate, and the refashioning of a Canadian donut shop as Tibetan cultural space.

Keywords

Flash ethnography; refugees; citizenship; Tibet; Canada

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The day starts with tea. In Tibet and then in Nepal and now here in Toronto, the pot is placed on the stove or the fire. Milk and water go in. Tea leaves. Sugar, maybe ginger, or salt and butter. Stirred. Whirred in the blender. Strained. Sipped. The day starts with tea.

Kesang and I have drunk tea together on two continents. First in Kathmandu, in the Boudha and Jorpati neighborhoods, and next in the Parkdale and Etobicoke sections of Toronto. As she moved residence from one country to the other, I expanded my research to include both. Nepal and Canada are now both Tibetan places. People know these places in cultural ways, including with new names and uses of space. “Jameson” is how the core Tibetan area in Toronto is known. Jameson is a street in Parkdale, a longstanding neighborhood of immigrants and refugees. It is where the Polish butcher shop hangs a photo of the Dalai Lama on its wall and carries specifically Tibetan cuts of meat, and the Sri Lankan grocer sells *tsampa*. Jameson Avenue between King and Queen Streets is where many Tibetans land upon first arrival in Toronto.

In the last two decades, thousands of Tibetans have applied for political asylum at the US-Canada border at Niagara Falls. If successful in receiving refugee status, they have settled in Toronto as New Canadians. Becoming Canadian, however, also involves remaining Tibetan. Anthropologists can be of use with this.

For the last fifteen years, I have been involved in two projects with Toronto’s Tibetan community. The first is research on refugee citizenship and political possibility. This project revolves around questions of political categories and claims to sovereignty, and the ongoing tension between citizenship and refugee status. For sixty-five years, Tibetans have lived in South Asia as mostly undocumented refugees, refusing the citizenship they now seek in North America or Europe, unironically using both refugee and citizen status to ground their claims to sovereignty in Tibet.

The second project is expert witness testimony in political asylum and family reunification cases. My job, in part, is ethnographic translation between what it means to be both Canadian and Tibetan. I do this for judges and for immigration officials, and I do this with the Tibetan community. For example, how does one explain the repurposing of the iconic Canadian donut shop Tim Horton’s as Tibetan community center? How do I explain the way Canadian spaces are made Tibetan and vice versa?

Things have shifted since I first came to Toronto in 2007. Many families, including Kesang’s, have moved from Jameson westward to Etobicoke where they purchase and live in their own homes. In India and Nepal for four, five, six decades, Tibetans were not allowed to own property. The symbolic and material values of a home now coincide in exile. In each of the major Tibetan centers of North America—Toronto, Minneapolis, New York City—a new and popular occupation is real estate agent. Owning a house is a new possibility even if home also still exists elsewhere.

One day Kesang and I came into Jameson to walk around. “I want coffee,” she said. “Let’s go to Tim Horton’s.”

“There’s better coffee down the street,” I said, thinking of Capital Espresso, near Parkdale Community Legal Services, a building I knew well, where the attorneys I work with were based, and where signs and pamphlets were printed in numerous languages, including Tibetan.

A lifelong tea drinker, Kesang said back to me, “I don’t really care about the coffee. I want to see who is there.” Continuing, she said, “Tim Horton’s is like *kora* at Boudha. I see everyone I know there.”

Boudha is a large Buddhist stupa in Kathmandu that Tibetans circumambulate numerous times every day as a form of walking prayer. This is called *kora*, a social activity as much as a spiritual one.

Kesang laughed as she said this, adding “There is nowhere to do *kora* in Jameson.” Instead, she said, people go to Tim Horton’s

to see who was already there, and to hope people you know might come in while you were there.

I was in Jameson again the following year, talking at the legal clinic, visiting with old friends, meeting new people, and stopped by the Tim Horton's. Two older Tibetan men were coming out, and two young Tibetan women were going in. The women saw a friend approaching and called out to her *ja 'thung kha sho!*—come and drink tea.

Come and drink tea. This is the remaking of a Canadian place as a new sort of Tibetan home.

Carole McGranahan is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, USA, and a scholar of contemporary Tibet and the Himalayas. She is author of *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (2010); co-editor of *Imperial Formations* (2007) and *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire* (2018); and editor of *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment* (2020). Together with Nomi Stone and Sienna R. Craig, she has written and edited collections of flash ethnography for *American Ethnologist* and *Anthropology and Humanism*. She is currently co-editing *The Tibet Reader* as well as a volume on *Ethics and Ethnography*, and finishing a book about *Theoretical Storytelling*.