

Special Issue Foreword

The Politics and Poetics of Himalayan Lives

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Miniatures

The lockdown baby to whom I am *ani* (paternal aunt), rankles and delights her parents. She has her father's wide forehead, her mother's ochre eyes. Language is sparse at 14 months, but she demands "ball" in English while reaching for her mother's breast, clambering for *oma* (milk). Her mother, tired after a night of the child's teething, responds with love and exasperation. Outside this apartment in Woodside, New York, summer heat blankets the concrete and thickens the sky. A few weeks from now, this child's Himalayan playmate will drown beside his parents in a basement apartment just blocks away, inundated by Hurricane Ida. That Sherpa family's immigrant home will become a space overwhelmed by infrastructures of inequality in this "land of opportunity." For now—in a moment before this tragic event but while ordinary lives are still punctuated by pandemic precarity—we consider outings to the Bronx Zoo and Jones Beach, weighing a child's amusement against subway delays, the Delta variant of COVID-19, the father's all-too-infrequent days off, the need for rest.

A friend calls from a high mountain village. This night of New Hampshire summer thunderstorms meets the simultaneity of a Mustang dawn. I hear cocks crowing, a pressure cooker, the graceful slide of sweet tea into a porcelain mug. Her speaker phone becomes a form of travel at a time when movement is constrained, as we live with new forms of distance. In the background floats the voice of another woman I know, together with the low thrum of a *mantra* voiced by that woman's brother, a lama. I see him seated by a kitchen window; his ivory prayer beads in the shape of tiny human skulls pulse through his fingers. A ladle slices water, cool in its copper cistern by the door. A teacup is refilled. Present in absence, it is as if I, too, am holding out my cup. Am I here or there? On both sides of the world, unspoken words punctuate the levity of our conversation. Cancer. Floods. Death. Divorce. As with the joy we take in each other's company, these silences tether us to each other. They bear weight.

Framing

I wrote these miniatures in response to an invitation from the editors of this special issue, Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer, to engage in a conversation about writing, care, and the lives of "ordinary" people in Tibetan and Himalayan worlds. This dialogue began in the form of a panel at the 16th International Association for Tibetan Studies meetings in Prague in July 2022 and has extended in this form. I am grateful to Resi and Harman for the invitation and, most of all, to those Himalayan friends from whom I learn, about and with whom I write, as we embrace life in each other's company.

As ethnographers, how do we parse what is said from what can be known, and what is known from what is intuited or entrusted (Craig 2020, 2024)? What knits together small moments of lived experiences that we come to know not only through intellect but also by feel? What intentions do we bring to the privilege of ethnography when we view it as an opportunity to ponder seemingly quotidian encounters with "ordinary" people? What does this teach us about what matters most? How can Himalayan and Tibetan studies be challenged and changed if we foreground close attention to stories of people whose life histories might not be "extraordinary" by conventional measures but whose lives are remarkable, still? How do social status, immigration status, gender, language, or other markers of identity and positionality inflect both lived experience and representations of that lived experience? These questions animate the contributions in this special collection and guide my practice—writing through the gaps in knowing, in what can be known, to some form of answer.

In recent years, I've become invested in the idea that ethnographic miniatures—told not in the mode of "vignette" but with a sense of wholeness despite brevity—accomplish more than "mere" description or scene-setting (McGranahan and Craig 2023). Rather, such flash ethnography (McGranahan and Stone 2020) can produce both affective specificity and conceptual

insight—a form of what Carole McGranahan might call “theoretical storytelling” (2020). In the spirit of such experimentation, the remainder of this Foreword offers several flashes, each crafted in a different form, that speak to the poetics and politics of “marginal” and “ordinary” lives. A list of figures (inspired by *Harper’s Index*) leaves an impression about the costs, benefits, and values governing translocal Himalayan lives. An ethnographic reflection on fathers and families, labor, and rest speaks to transformations in Tibetan masculinities during times punctuated by migration and social change. A meditation on uranium discovery in Mustang bespeaks possible futures at the crossroads of environmental crisis and political economies bent toward “growth” and “security.” A fictional letter written by a Himalayan New Yorker youth to her once-and-future self takes up questions about identity and belonging across generations and cultures. Consider these flashes as ethnographic spaces that allow detail and specificity about marginal places and ordinary people to illuminate broader currents of our extraordinary, troubled, and mutually implicated world.

Calculations

- Average price of a home in Queens, New York: \$767, 693. For houses that can accommodate multi-generational families and a rental unit that generates money to cover the mortgage or taxes, the average price is \$1–1.2 million.
- Support that a Himalayan community member typically receives toward the cost of a down payment on a house from a community loan: \$150,000.
- Number of New York City households significantly behind on rent at the end of 2021: 68,000.
- Rent owed to a Himalayan landlord in Elmhurst, Queens, by his non-Himalayan tenant at the end of 2021: \$24,000.
- Months it takes, on average, for an individual landlord to receive a hardship payment against foreclosure under

the COVID-19 Emergency Eviction and Foreclosure Act: 18.

- Amount this landlord, who makes his living as a dog walker, paid his tenant to leave the property after a year of unpaid rent: \$14,000.
- Number of people this landlord supports in New York: 4.
- Number of people this landlord supports in Nepal: 5.
- Years since this landlord has returned to Nepal, given his immigration status: 24.
- Price per head for a Tibetan goat in northern Nepal in 2022: Rs. 40,000.
- Price per head in 2019: Rs. 15,000.
- Cost per liter of petrol in Nepal, summer 2022: Rs. 199 or \$1.60.
- Cost per liter of gasoline in the US during this same time: Rs. 163 or \$1.30.
- Number of hotels and guest houses in Lo Monthang, Mustang, Nepal, in 1997: 2.
- Number of hotels and guest houses in Lo Monthang in 2022: 39.
- Amount that members of a Mustangi community organization in New York raised over eight years to purchase a community center building (which, in its previous life, was a Bangladeshi auto-repair shop): \$3.8 million.
- Amount raised within this community since 2020 toward renovation costs: \$2 million.
- Amount still needed to complete renovations and meet long-term community needs: \$4 million.
- Cost of purchasing socially expected gifts by one family returning to visit relatives in Nepal in 2022: \$16,000.
- Centuries that a small village in Mustang has been in existence: 9.
- Months it took for glacial floods to severely damage or destroy a third of this village’s homes and fields: 2.

- Donations raised from international friends toward rebuilding one such home: Rs. 5,68,370.
- Actual estimated cost of rebuilding this home: Rs. 1,700,000.
- Number of hours per week that a man from Dolpo, Nepal, now living in New York City, drives his Uber: 30.
- Number of hours per week that this Uber driver cares for his daughter while his wife nannies on Long Island: 60.
- Monthly tuition for one child at a licensed daycare center in Astoria, Queens: \$900.
- Number of individuals living today in Lo Monthang who are over 65 years of age: 1 in 3.
- Ratio of local students to government teachers at several government schools in Upper Mustang before they closed in 2021: 0 to 3.
- Number of Mustangi-American children who attend a weekly language and culture class in Woodside, Queens: 60.
- Approximate percentage of Mustangi-New Yorkers that this class represents: 3.

Father's Day

I'm taking a walk on a Friday morning before driving to New York when my phone rings, announcing a call from a Loba friend.

"Rinchen la, *thangbo ü de*."

"*Thangbo ü, Se-na-la*. When will you arrive in Queens? How long will you stay?"

This father of two from Lo Monthang has been in New York for a quarter century, nearly as long as he has lived in Nepal. He's a householder and a homeowner, although the property deed is in his wife's name since she's the citizen and he remains undocumented. I tell Rinchen that I'll be in town for the weekend and head home on Monday morning.

"Then I'll miss you," Rinchen answers. "We are driving *upstate* to celebrate Father's

Day," he says. "And now we have an extra day on Monday because of Juneteenth!" he adds, referring to a new federal holiday to mark the emancipation of African Americans. I marvel at the ways this Himalayan community has transformed quintessentially American events into occasions for gathering on their own cultural terms. Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Father's Day, and now Juneteenth, a commemoration to reckon slavery's legacies, have all been repurposed into opportunities to eat dumplings, play dice games, and sing and circle dance.

In the background, I hear male voices chatting in Loge-Nepali-English about meat, radishes, and lighter fluid against a din of '80s supermarket music. "We're at Costco, buying food and supplies!" Rinchen explains. This is the second year in a row that about thirty Loba fathers have gathered in this way. They have rented a former summer camp, complete with an industrial kitchen and a hall for singing, dancing, and playing cards into the early hours. I tease Rinchen that this is a convenient moment—as the Saka Dawa moon wanes—to escape the confines of wives, children, and work. "I heard you talking about steak and Johnny Walker," I tease. Rinchen laughs.

Joking aside, the fact that these men are spending time together in this way moves me. Each one works so hard. Beyond the remittance routine or older patterns of bringing home the trade and paying boarding school fees, many of them have embraced fatherhood here in America in ways that have rewritten models of Himalayan masculinity.

I think about how Angyal advocates for his dyslexic son at a local public school and how Tsering cares for his two autistic children each afternoon after working the early morning shift at a grocery store. About how Dzambling endures a gnawing form of guilt and grief, remaining patient with his son—this boy who does well in school and draws Spiderman with aplomb but refuses to speak his parents' language, saying, simply, "My tongue doesn't work for those words." I think about Gyaltsen who, after

years of cooking at Chinese restaurants, became a stay-at-home dad. The French braid technique he's mastered on his nine-year-old daughter is the envy of all the girls at Himalayan Language and Culture Sunday School.

These are not the only stories. Others circulate among women Himalayan-New Yorkers about husbands who refuse to do laundry or who remain unsupportive of their professional aspirations, fathers who insist that daughters do the dishes but never ask their sons, and, yes, about domestic abuse. But gender dynamics are changing. As one fiery, well-educated Loba woman put it, "Our men? They're learning. In America, it must be different! Sometimes I think they're a little scared!"

Later that weekend, I'm in the home of my old friend Dolma, a domestic space dominated by this graceful matriarch, her daughters, and granddaughters. With only one *meme* (grandfather) and one *makpa* (adoptive son-in-law) in the household, men are outnumbered two to one. On this evening, the *makpa* is downstairs, packing for a summer trip to Nepal, while the *meme* is with his fellow fathers, uncles, and grandfathers upstate. *Meme* Kalden calls us on FaceTime, his wrinkled yet still boyish face awash in joy. "We've been singing and dancing for hours," he says.

I can't help but think about his brother, the uncle this family lost to Covid in April 2020. Uncle made a decent living and sent money to his wife and sons in Nepal, but he never made papers. That grim spring, this "essential worker" labored at his grocery store job on Tuesday, spent Wednesday and Thursday rummaging for care—not sick enough, not the right language—and died on Friday in the family's tenement apartment. Twenty-three years into life in America, he never had the chance to return to Nepal. Dolma knows what I am thinking. All she says is, *Ma ngu a*. Don't cry.

After we hang up, Dolma shows me other videos and photos Kalden has been sending from the Father's Day weekend. The men borrowed costumes from a Tibetan

performing arts troupe for the excursion. I watch men lament in harmony and move in lockstep. Men dressed in Nepali drag. Men wearing fur-lined Losar hats, even though summer solstice is days away. Men cooking *dal bhaat* and making beds. Men seated around a campfire, together, whispering to each other under a milky blaze of stars.

Elemental

This turtle on whose back we rest is made of so many elements. Across the Land of Snows, they are parsed as earth, air, fire, water, space—wherein space also lives as consciousness. Metal threads through neighboring cosmologies, filtering from plateau to plain. Then there is the Periodic Table of the Elements, a garden of earthly delights.

Today we are concerned with U 92. Uranium. To speak of it in this way sounds like an amusement: *U 92? U 92? Bingo!* But these are serious games.

It is iridescent, some say, like the inside of a conch shell. Others describe an emerald glint. "Like the color of Jetsun Dolma," recounts an elderly woman from Samdzong village, comparing the sheen of river stones bearing uranium to Green Tara. It is an uncanny reckoning. "But I have heard that the rock can be peaceful or wrathful," she says.

Tibetan physicians remind us that every substance on earth can manifest as medicine or poison. In my mind's eye, I see a river that now runs dry, having forced another village to relocate. Even the goats found this place too desiccated for survival.

Nepali parliament resurrects the Safe and Peaceful Use of Nuclear and Radioactive Materials Bill, 2075 [2018]. News outlets from India and China are quick to report on this event.

We are sitting in the mayor's living room. Swaths of cotton fabric printed with fruits and flowers are tacked to the ceiling to catch dust. The floor is pounded earth, swept clean, and sprinkled with water twice daily. Afternoon sun bisects the room into shadow and light.

The lowland Nepali surveyors wait for the mayor's wife to serve them tea. The mayor, his brow a river of worry, pontificates: "Who will get the mining rights? Will Nepal give its body away, like the Buddha to the tiger?" *Maybe*, I think. *But this is not an act of compassion.*

Some uncomfortable truths:

That the concrete cluster of buildings at the Kora La border crossing are, in fact, not located at the border at all, and that this corner of Nepal is already a simulacrum of sovereignty.

That the expansiveness of thought, which once fashioned vast irrigation systems so that people might thrive in a desert, is itself running dry as people scramble for power or passage abroad. And, that possible futures—Indian tourists, Chinese trade—rest as much on sacred territory as on unstable ground.

That prophecy can become complacency.

That greed can be as slippery and toxic as another element, Hg 80, mercury.

What does all this evoke?

Reservations. As in questions, regrets, the knot in one's stomach.

Reservations. As in Diné (Navajo) lessons on Himalayan soil.

Erasure. As in the idea that if something is not named—*colonialism, extractive capitalism, climate change*—it does not exist.

Erasure. As in a glacial lake that bursts and wipes out sentient centuries in minutes.

Refusal. As in the statue that, upon being stolen from the village monastery, grows heavier and heavier in the thief's hands until it can no longer be moved.

Refusal. As in letting territory remain undisturbed, letting trace elements rest.

A Letter to My Self

Dear Pema Lhamo (aka me):

Ms. D'Amato told the class we are supposed to write to our 12th grade selves. That means four years from now. I don't know what to write. Who knows? I mean, who knew we'd have a pandemic? In my culture, we are supposed to respect elders, but adults don't know anything.

Tomorrow, I graduate 8th grade from Central Queens Academy. This summer after we get back from Nepal to see *ibi*, we're moving to the Bronx. I don't want to go to the Bronx, especially for high school. It is so ghetto. (I know. I'm being salty¹ and maybe a little racist. I'm not supposed to use that word, but it is true!) The Bronx is where my parents say we can afford to buy a house. I don't know why we need to buy one. I like our apartment. It is near the park and the subway. I like the trees in our neighborhood. There are no trees in the Bronx.

Last time we went to Nepal, I was in 4th grade. I liked Nepal, but it smelled weird, and my head hurt when we went to Mustang, and everyone was always telling me to be quiet or telling me I talk funny. But my mom was happy, so that's cool.

My school fam² thinks I'm shy and that I just sip tea but never spill it.³ But my cousin-friends from Sunday School think I'm funny AF⁴ and a sick dancer. My favorite part of Sunday School is learning to play the *tamyin*. I'm, like, CEO of that shit. (Nobody but me is reading this, right?) I really want to learn how to play the guitar too and write songs like Taylor Swift. She's the GOAT⁵, even though everyone thinks Arianna⁶ or Selena⁷ are better. Whatever. They don't write their own songs. I'm going to write my own songs. About life and friends, but also about Tibet and other political things. We read Amanda Gorman's inauguration poem⁸ in English class this year. It was *amazing*. How she did that with words about America? I want to do that too, about New York.

Since I'm writing this only to me, I'm going to write a secret: I have a crush on Alicia. I think I'm bi or queer, or whatever. She's Dominican. Everybody wants to 'ship⁹ me with this other Asian kid, but he's Pakistani or Bangladeshi or something and spends all his time roasting¹⁰ people, especially girls. Not my vibe. Maybe I can talk to my aunt about it. The crush, I mean. She went to college here and understands things. I'll never tell my parents. There isn't even a word for "gay" in our language. At least, I don't think so.

Ok, Self, see you in four years! Tashi Delek!
Wish me luck! ☺

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Endnotes

1. “Salty” is American English slang for being angry, upset, or having a bad attitude.
2. “Fam” is American English slang for “family”, in this case implying close friendships.
3. To “spill tea” in American English slang means to gossip; to “sip tea” implies just listening to gossip or rumor but not offering any in return, in a social circle.
4. “AF” is American English slang for “as fuck”. It is used for emphasis.
5. American English acronym meaning “greatest of all time.”
6. Pop singer Ariana Grande.
7. Pop singer and actress Selena Gomez.
8. Gorman, Amanda. 2021. *The Hill We Climb*. New York: Viking Books.
9. To “ship” someone in American slang means to indicate that you are in a romantic relationship with someone.
10. To “roast” someone in American slang means to tease or taunt them.

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