

Special Section Guest Editorial

Himalayan Flashes: Regional Ethnography in Short Form

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For some time now, we have been writing the world in brief (McGranahan 2022). Our turn toward flash ethnography emerged both through pandemic time and in response to the political and social exigencies of our times (Stone and McGranahan 2020). We are situated in an era of contracted attention but also within a *zeitgeist* that appreciates brevity in a world saturated with word and image. Together, and in the company of like-minded theoretical storytellers, we have been charting the contours of this urgent and emergent form, itself an echo of other genres such as flash fiction and “sudden anthropology” (Syring and Offen 2017). Flash ethnography essays are not vignettes; they are wholes: precise, generous, playful,

intentional (McGranahan and Craig 2023). Within the confines of constraint—flash ethnography adheres to strict word limits—moments crystalize and, simultaneously, find space to breathe.

The collection we have curated for *HIMALAYA* emerged from two flash salons, one at the ANHS Himalayan Studies Conference held at the University of Toronto in October 2022, and another held at the American Anthropological Association meetings in Seattle, Washington, in November 2022. These flash ethnographies span both space and time, from the foothills of the Nepal Himalaya to the arrivals lounge of the San Francisco International Airport. Unlike other flash collections, these essays

are stitched together with a shared vernacular. Affective threads of culture that feel familiar to each of us are woven through. Still, a heteroglossia. Still, a desire to connect outward from region to world.

The last time we wrote an introduction to a flash collection together, we did so by having a conversation and then editing that transcript—whittling it down to what felt essential (McGranahan and Craig 2023). This time, in the spirit of flashlets (Stone 2023) as writerly experiments and creative interventions into ethnographic method, we have taken turns in a different way. Instead of crafting talk to text, we wrote in tandem and in turn to create a dialogic treatment of a place that centers each of

us—the Boudhanath *stupa* in Kathmandu, Nepal. Our short volleys of embodied experience show rather than tell readers what flash can open up, and what it might accomplish as a vehicle for collaboration. It also helps us to acknowledge the kaleidoscopic nature of ethnographic knowing: fragmented, shifting, patterned, confounding, wondrous. We leave it up to you, reader, to determine who wrote what. Then, consider if this matters.

1. Boudha is a body. There is a pulse to this place. If the *stupa* is the heart-center, then its alleys are arteries and veins, the monasteries that brush its borders are ventricles, chambers of power and action, reminding us that we exist as a circulatory system. *Samsara* is the circle. Consider all that is in movement here: merit and money, youth and age, relics and trinkets, belonging and upheavals, lives and deaths. Sit by the window. Watch the world. Embrace the possibility that we remake ourselves daily. Breath is a form of blood. Walking together is inhale and exhale.

2. Boudha is a time, an action. It is purposeful: a sea of people moving together clockwise on the path around the *stupa* as a form of meditation. This is *kora*, circumambulation as the body at prayer. One goes for *kora* to move the body, to offer the *sems*. Each revolution is an accumulation of merit, an effort to reduce

suffering, a reflection on loved ones' needs. But also: a chance to see friends at the beginning or end of the day, the two times the *kora* path comes alive. Inhale, prayer is audible. Exhale, so too is laughter.

3. What does it mean to arrive? No matter what time of year, the dusty cacophony of Kathmandu welcomes. Still, the taxi drive between the airport and Boudha seems interminable, a stop-and-go staccato of dodging leashed goats and roaming cows. That family of four in balanced precarity across a Honda 150's saddle. Bespangled trucks requesting "horn please." Black SUVs whose tinted windows hermetically seal off the city's reality. Then, the familiar greetings of chosen family. Tea. Gossip. This too, arrival. But to truly arrive is to stoop down and light lamps for those we love, before entering the *kora* stream.

4. That night, sleep comes soon. Eyes are tired. Belly is full. Morning arrives quickly. Expected sounds and scents are right on time. Another *kora* of return begins: incense and prayer, tea and bread, then walking. Through the lanes west of the *stupa*, up to a monastery, east to a village swallowed by sprawl, then back to Boudha. The *stupa* waits. So too do dozens of armed police, jarring the scene. The *stupa* has stood for centuries, weathering the rain and the sun, indifferent to the pigeons, the politicians, the

police. Under a blue, cloudless sky, we step onto the *kora* path.

5. No matter our troubles—the world's and those we bear intimately—we pause to greet the *stupa*. Hands fold and touch crown, lips, heart. The gesture swells toward aspiration, holds longing. We are quiet, in our own bodies, yet this is still a collective ritual. What we encounter at the *stupa* can be another thing entirely. Sometimes, thousands of butter lamps illuminate this extraordinary structure, transforming earthen architecture into cosmic constellation under a full moon. Other times, a different inundation: selfie seekers, courting couples, Chinese tour groups with their badges and sun hats, dreadlocked *dharma* bums, those scavenging dogs.

6. Monasteries cascade north from Boudha. Shops and residences encircle it. The mundane and the profound. Living near the *stupa* is good. Here we can work toward the next life; here we can make prayers for precious teachers; here we can circumambulate. But sometimes movement is away from the *stupa*, rather than around it. In New York City, a landscape without *stupas*, a woman from Boudha asks where to do *kora*. She walks around apartments where Tibetan families live. Each will have altar photos of the Dalai Lama, she reasons; a sacred center is found; a *kora* path is created.

One place leads to many places: from Boudha to New York, from the hills and homes of post-earthquake Nepal to the mountains of McLeod Ganj, from Buddhist festivals to maternity hospitals, from the widening streets and winding back alleys of Kathmandu to the freshly paved nomad resettlement towns of Amdo, eastern Tibet. Places that hold stories continue to be remade. So too with us: we are the paths we travel. Let these flashes take you there.

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