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## Book review of 'Rejoinders: Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths Among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists' by Robert Desjarlais

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## SENSORY BIOGRAPHIES: LIVES AND DEATHS AMONG NEPAL'S YOLMO BUDDHISTS

ROBERT DESJARLAIS

REVIEWED BY SARA SHNEIDERMAN

"How...do a person's ways of sensing the world contribute to how that person lives and recollects her life?" (3). Robert Desjarlais' *Sensory Biographies* is an artfully crafted, loosely bound set of narrative answers to this vast question. Drawing upon life history research conducted with two elderly individuals—one male and one female—from the Yolmo community of Nepal, Desjarlais takes us deep into the ethics and aesthetics of his informants' worldviews. In so doing, he both shows and tells us (this sensory distinction is central to his argument) what it means to live life and approach death from a Yolmo perspective. More importantly, as we follow the author through the dense thicket of description that is Ghang Lama and Kisang Omu's meticulously rendered utterances, we catch glimpses of what it means to be human. In this sense, *Sensory Biographies* is ethnography at its best: one of the rare breed that simultaneously documents culturally-specific events and experiences with great sensitivity, and makes them relevant to broader discussions within anthropology, philosophy and beyond.

Desjarlais' ethnography is squarely situated within Himalayan and Nepali Studies, and makes gestures towards Tibetan and Buddhist Studies as well. Following the speech patterns of his subjects, the author moves back and forth between the linguistic registers of Nepali, Yolmo, and to a lesser degree, classical Tibetan and English. This flexibility conveys well the multiply situated nature of contemporary Yolmo identity. The practice of sticking to indigenous terms and idioms helps convey the richness of Yolmo wa expression, especially for readers familiar with the languages at hand. For example, the introductory chapter is titled 'Kuragraphy'—a play on the Nepali word 'kura' which has a wide range of meanings including 'talk', 'thing' and 'event' (18). By casting

his work in these terms, Desjarlais prepares us for the complex and often non-linear trajectories of word, thought and action that make up his subjects' lives, and therefore his own prose.

The ensuing chapters flip back and forth between interviews with Ghang Lama, a man whose identity is forged around his skill as a Buddhist householder lama, and Kisang Omu, a woman whose life has focused on familial obligations and manual labor. Both are over 80, and in the last phase of their lives assent to talk with the ethnographer about the past they have known and the future they imagine. Desjarlais sets up an intriguing dichotomy between the two: Ghang Lama senses and recollects in a primarily visual manner that relies on images and knowledge gained through seeing, while Kisang Omu does so in a discursive manner that relies upon words and knowledge gained through voicing and listening. These two counterposed 'sensory biographies' serve as the bookends for a broader rumination on the principles by which people live and die in a social world influenced by Buddhist philosophies of karma and rebirth.

Readers familiar with other ethnic communities in the Tibeto-Himalayan cultural zone will recognize many patterns in Desjarlais' descriptions of how fundamental social principles like gender, morality and aesthetics operate in the Yolmo world. For example, his analysis of writing and reading as male-gendered skills that influence Yolmo men's tendencies to 'see' the world while women 'listen' to it (143-144) contributes valuably to ongoing discussions of similar gender dynamics elsewhere in the region.

Such resonances raise the question—perhaps the only major one to remain unsatisfactorily answered by Desjarlais' otherwise careful analysis—of what makes these sensory biographies particularly Yolmo ones. It is certainly refreshing to read an ethnography that does not beat the issue of identity to death, and in fact treats it as a phenom-

*[Desjarlais] both shows and tells us (this sensory distinction is central to his argument) what it means to live life and approach death from a Yolmo perspective.*

**Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths Among Nepal's Yolmo Buddhists**

Robert Desjarlais

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

enological quality rather than a purely political one. However, the assertion that the two life histories presented show how “members of a single society live out different sensory biographies” (4) deserves more attention than Desjarlais grants. Although he touches upon gender, education, family structure, location and individual experience as central factors in shaping the two protagonists’ divergent sensory approaches, it remains unclear quite how ‘Yolmo’ coheres as a single society, and how the orientations towards life and death described are more than either individual propensities, or less than larger trans-Himalayan trends.

The book is liberally sprinkled with quotations from Tibetan Buddhist texts and teachers, which provide a set of philosophical guidelines for interpreting Ghang Lama’s and Kisang Omu’s sometimes cryptic statements about life and death. Desjarlais’ effort to understand how such principles play out in everyday life is an important contribution to the anthropology of Buddhist societies, especially in its departure from outdated models that tried to fit practice and experience to text rather than the other way around. At the same time, we are left wondering why Desjarlais chose the particular textual sources he cites (all English translations), and how these works play a direct role in shaping lay Yolmo experiences and beliefs.

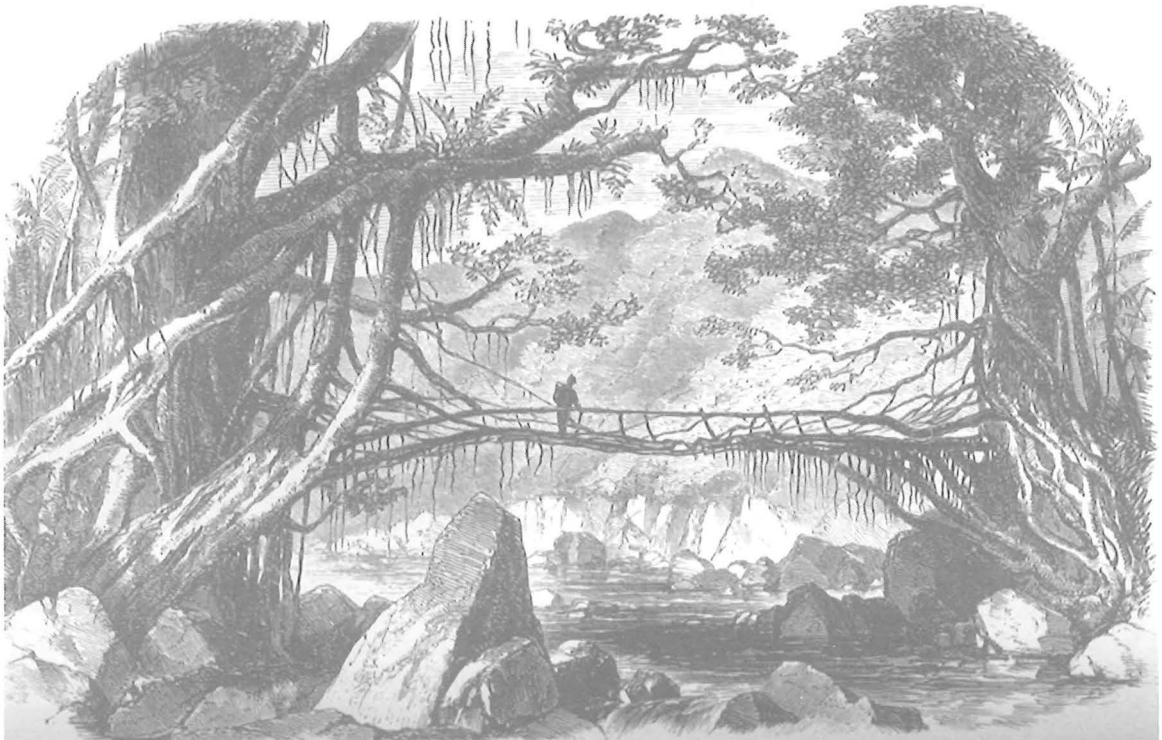
The latter chapters are increasingly occupied with Desjarlais’ personal reflections on the ethics of writing such a book. Taking the discussion beyond the usual anthropological concerns with informant consent and ethnographic

accuracy, Desjarlais considers the ramifications of his work within the complex metaphysical system that he has taken such pains to describe. While writing about the indigenous concept of ‘bhaja’—which literally means echo, and is used to describe traces of human actions that continue to have an effect after the fact—it dawns on the author that his book itself may be a bhaja (278-308). This is simultaneously an exciting and disturbing proposition, since it means that the book, and particularly the words of the informants inscribed within it, will have a real and lasting impact within the webs of cause and effect—karma—within which both the author and his Yolmo counterparts are entangled.

This graceful exploration of ethics from a phenomenological perspective is one of the book’s most compelling features, and will be particularly useful for students of anthropology who wonder how it ‘feels’ to do fieldwork and then live with the consequences of writing about other people’s lives. Published in the University of California series, *Ethnographic Studies in Subjectivity*, *Sensory Biographies* succeeds as an ethnography of that most elusive concept by taking seriously and describing in accessible terms the intersubjective encounter between anthropologist and informants.

As an academic ‘bhaja’ of sorts, it is my hope that this review will augment the positive echoes already resounding in the wake of this masterful work.

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*Himalayan Journals*, Sir J.D. Hooker

“Living Bridge,” formed of the aerial roots of the India-rubber and other kinds of figs.