

Special Issue Afterword

Stories are Reasons

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Two years have passed since I drafted the miniatures with which I opened my Foreword. The toddler can now ride a scooter. She can sing “Old MacDonald Had a Farm” and mimic the tone of that ubiquitous *om mani padme hum* chant heard around the Boudha *stupa*, even though she has never been there. She has a sister now. Life unfolds.

What you have now read in this collection also bespeaks the unfolding of lives. Each of these pieces presents an intimate life story nestled within a sweeping social history. The pieces move from birth to death, across mountain ranges and migratory ranges, from village to city, and beyond. They amplify what are often quiet voices, especially those of lay women and children. This collection of works is more than the sum of its parts. With both care and precision, with gentleness but also a form of analytical force that I admire, this edited volume compiled by Harmandeep Kaur Gill and Theresia Hofer helps us to feel, sense, and visualize a shift away from overtly “extraordinary” voices and lives toward a deep recognition of the value of everyday lived experience. Building on their training in anthropological method, a feminist stance, an ethics of radical inclusivity, and a commitment to the “decolonizing” turn, Gill and Hofer offer a way to connect these other streams of social theory and political action with the at once beautiful and at times antiquated circles of Tibetan studies.

This is a huge accomplishment—a form of momentum rather than a fixed result.

More than a year has passed since I first heard versions of these articles, as conference presentations, and it is a privilege to reflect on them in this form. Heidi Fjeld and Inger Vasstveit bring us to Mugum—a place on the margins of both Nepal and the Tibetan regions of China, a place that is “half empty” but home, still. In their treatment of amulets, particularly as a form of guardianship for the most vulnerable among us—young children—we are invited to consider how objects become “infrastructures of protection” in both the material and affective sense. Tashi’s story leaves me thinking about the forces that remain hidden but that hold people up, nonetheless. This study in *srung* and their variants is a portrait of precarity and the weight our bodies carry as well as the “second skins” (Garrett 2013) we fashion, the “waves of blessing” (*jinlab*) we create to carry us through.

From Mugum we move to the Lhasa Special School in Theresia Hofer’s contribution focusing on the lives of deaf young adults. In the words of Tashi and Yangzom we hear voices that are literally unheard but also, often, *unheard of* in contemporary Tibet: social critique, political dissent. In these margins, we learn from a space of erasure and invisibility about what strategic perseverance can look like. The mundane quality of the medium—one WeChat post,

one response—is about as “ordinary” you can get. And yet. And yet. In her careful treatment, Hofer amplifies this call and response to soundings of social theory. This is a story not only of speaking truth to power and rejecting labels placed on us but also of refusing to be the keeper of open secrets—about the failure of education, the hollow “gift” of Tibet’s development, and the burdens of silence. I’m left contemplating what it means to be “profoundly” deaf. The weight of this. Yangzom says it all: “Since I have a mouth and hands I am part of humanity.”

While Hofer’s piece brings forms of risk and bravery in the face of marginalization to the fore, Anne Kukuczka’s meditation on women’s bodies and minds, wellness, hope, and other “gendered, embodied, material entanglements” sheds light on the oppressiveness of the Chinese state’s “happiness imperative”—its unmet inner promises, its unrealized dreams. Both articles ask questions about what it means to live a meaningful life and be of service to society.

Consider the dissonance between a devotion to secular fitness as a form of practice and not being allowed to walk *kora* around the Barkhor as a civil servant—and what each means for wellness or dis-ease. While the gym might become a temporal ritual that makes visible a “horizon of belonging” (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011: 10), we are still left with big questions about the differences between surviving and thriving.

Such questions are echoed in the work of Kunchok Rabten, a poet and translator who makes us sit with what it means to conjure home. His poems evoke deep questions about what constitutes care, what we notice, how we come to accept “harsh truth,” and where, then, this leads us: within Tibet, in exile.

Diaspora runs like blood, like the body of a river spilling down from plateau to plain. It is a current that pulses through the contributions from Geoff Childs and, later, Cameron David Warner—both of whom circle around women named “Tsering.” This name, which means “long life,” reverberates through these two life histories. Each leaves us asking: What does it mean to live a long life? How many lives might one live within this one human lifetime? Each is also a parable about the dance between structure and agency as it relates to gender, social status, mobility, choices, identities. In both contributions we are let into a confounding intimacy between an anthropologist and their interlocutor. In Childs’s case this is unexpected. In Warner’s case this is a rehearsed retelling in the context of an old friendship but also a novel way of being with each other.

We are invited to consider experiments in point of view and to wrestle with the mutability of identity as these women cross borders and, in the process, experience transformation—in how they are seen, in how they see themselves. The

stakes feel high in both instances: we stand under a waterfall of words and are left drenched in detail—saturated by forms of suffering—but also awash in gratitude. Ethnographic practice can be a wellspring of mutuality, of trust, even when the nature of this interdependence rests on shifting and uncertain ground. In the lives of both Tserings, we are confronted with the fraught nature of kinship, marriage, family life, and with unvarnished portraits of “old” Tibet, Chinese occupation, and diasporic Tibetanness. *“I don’t want to go back because it reminds me of how I felt. It was like living on a bed of thorns.” “I put a bit of turmeric on my face to look like a Nepali. I wore a Nepali dress and went over the bridge.”* In each Tsering story, a commitment to empiricism becomes a form of care. Specters of trauma haunt the edges of each frame.

Whereas Childs and Warner take us into spaces of fracture, fissure, and reinvention across social worlds, Ulrike Čokl’s reflections on practices of hospitality in Bumthang, Bhutan, allow us to consider what “society” is for and how it is reproduced: in the pouring of libations, in the choreography of expectations that we gloss as etiquette. Her detailed explorations of *thuenlam* loop back to questions raised by Fjeld and Vasstveit about protection and nurturance and about what it means to maintain harmony between the human and more-than-human worlds. There are rules here, but also forms of flexibility and

adaptation—both in the service of wellbeing and as a way of guarding against harm. In the lives of Mugum children such harm might be a demon; in Bumthang the culprit might be gossip. In both instances we’re asked to consider the costs of not abiding by convention. What is dangerous about pushing certain boundaries rather than sticking with the comfort that comes from reaffirming one’s place—in the lifecycle, in social formations?

Finally, we are gifted with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa’s poems and Harmandeep Kaur Gill’s arresting photographs and accompanying essay. Each considers the themes of this volume in subtle yet exacting ways. “Where I come from, stories are reasons,” Dhompa writes. Yes. Each of these contributions teaches us why. In her sharp-edged musings on nature, culture, openings and closures, and affective truth, Dhompa shows us pathways into and through ordinary lives with extraordinary precision. “You can find a portal or a loophole in every story—trees to untangle in plot.” Consider elder Tibetan hands as such portals. Consider how skin carries memory; how fear clings to death and its specters despite practice to the contrary; how virtuous acts and disappointments, acts of compassion and atmospherics of dispossession are captured by shadow and light. Sense the tenderness here.