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Fieldwork and Ethnography

Ethnographic fieldwork is the unique strategy that anthropologists—particularly cultural anthropologists—have developed to put people first as we analyze how human societies work. Chemists conduct experiments in laboratories. Economists analyze financial trends. Historians pore over records and library archives. Anthropologists start with people and their local communities.

The term fieldwork implies going out in "the field" to do extensive research. Although throughout the history of anthropology this has often meant going a long way from home, as Sienna Craig does in her study of Tibetan *amchi* healers in Nepal, contemporary anthropologists also study human culture and activities in their own countries and local contexts, as Barbara Myerhoff does in her study of elderly Jewish senior citizens in Southern California.

Through fieldwork, often living in a community for a year or more, we try to understand people's everyday lives, to see what they do and to understand why. We participate in their activities (**participant observation**), take careful **field notes**, conduct interviews, take photographs, and record music as we try to see the world through their eyes. We make maps of communities (**mapping**), both of the physical environment and of family (**kinship analysis**) and social relationships (**social network analysis**). Although careful observation of the details of daily life is the first step, through intensive fieldwork anthropologists look beyond the taken-for-granted, everyday experience of life to discover the complex systems of power and meaning that people construct to shape their existence. These include the many systems we will discuss throughout this book: gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, kinship, and economic and political systems. As we extend our analysis as anthropologists, we try to see how local lives compare to others and fit into larger human patterns and global contexts. All of these research strategies and practical tools become part of what we call our **anthropologist's toolkit**.

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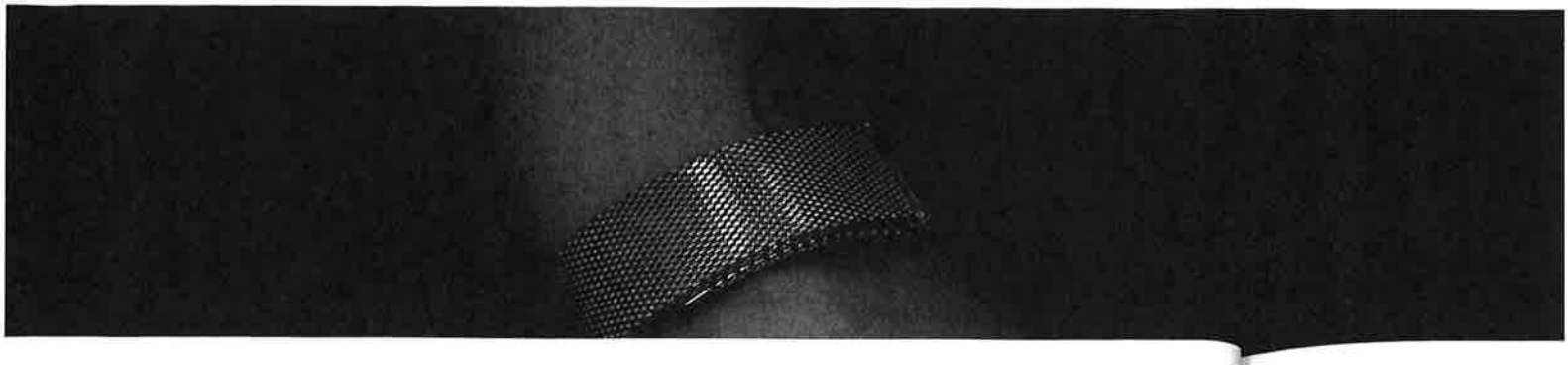
Fieldwork experience is considered an essential part of an anthropologist's training. It is the activity through which we learn and hone the basic tools of our trade: careful listening and observation, engagement with strangers, cross-cultural interaction, and deep analysis of human interactions and systems of power and privilege. Through fieldwork we learn empathy for those around us, develop a global consciousness, and uncover our own ethnocentrism. Indeed, fieldwork is a rite of passage, an initiation into our discipline, and a common bond among anthropologists who have been through the experience.

As you read the following passages by Myerhoff and Craig, try to imagine these anthropologists in the field, conducting fieldwork. Both engage in **thick description**, carefully documenting the details of daily life while also examining the deep symbolic meanings and intense systems of power lying just beneath the surface. What challenges and obstacles do they face? What tools and strategies do they employ? How do they go about building rapport—personal relationships of trust—with their **key informants**? In their writing, how do they allow the voices of those they are studying to come through clearly and authoritatively—a process anthropologists refer to as **polyvocality**? How do they engage in **reflexivity**—reflecting on the anthropologist's personal experiences? How do they trace the connections between their local context and global processes? How do the communities in which they are working confront changes internally and externally?

As you might imagine from these readings, the fieldwork experience can become more than a strategy for understanding human culture. Fieldwork has the potential to radically transform the anthropologist. Can you imagine making the same commitments that Craig and Myerhoff do? What preparation would you need before entering the field? What strategies and skills would you need to conduct effective, meaningful fieldwork? How do you imagine your presence might transform the community where you work as well as your own life—a process of **mutual transformation** inevitable in any fieldwork encounter?

Development of the anthropological perspective through fieldwork, in which we investigate the beliefs and practices of other cultures, enables us to perceive our own cultural activities in a new light. Even the most familiar aspects of our own lives may then appear exotic, bizarre, or strange when viewed through the lens of anthropology. Through this cross-cultural training, anthropology offers the opportunity to unlock our ability to imagine, see, and analyze the incredible diversity of human cultures. It also enables us to avoid the tendencies of ethnocentrism, in which we often view our own cultural practices as "normal" and against which we are inclined to judge the cultural beliefs and practices of others.



Doing fieldwork closer to home

From *Number Our Days*

Barbara Myerhoff

Barbara Myerhoff's book *Number Our Days* is a classic in anthropological fieldwork and later became an Academy Award–winning documentary film. Her first book, *Peyote Hunt* (1974), traces the religious pilgrimage of the Huichol Indians across the Sierra Madre of Mexico. But in *Number Our Days*, excerpted below, Myerhoff turns her attention closer to home. Her fieldwork focuses on the struggles of older Jewish immigrants in a Southern California community and the Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center. Her rich ethnography brings the neighborhood, the Center, and its members to life. The members' vibrant voices fill the pages. Myerhoff also takes a reflexive approach and becomes a character in her own book, detailing her fieldwork process and reflecting poignantly on her experience as a younger Jewish woman studying a community of older Jews. As she says, "...I would never really be a Huichol Indian. But I would be a little old Jewish lady one day... I consider myself very fortunate in having had, through this work, an opportunity to anticipate, rehearse, and contemplate my own future."

Number Our Days marks a turn in anthropology from the study of the "other" to the study of the self—what Victor Turner calls in his foreword to Myerhoff's book "being thrice-born." The first birth is in our own culture. The second birth immerses the anthropologist in the depths of another culture through fieldwork. Finally, the return home is like a third birth as the anthropologist rediscovers his or her own culture, now strange and unfamiliar in a global context.

"So what do you want from us here?"

> Every morning I wake up in pain. I wiggle my toes. Good. They still obey. I open my eyes. Good. I can see. Everything hurts but I get dressed. I walk down to the ocean. Good. It's still there. Now my day can start. About tomorrow I never know. After all, I'm eighty-nine. I can't live forever.

Death and the ocean are protagonists in Basha's life. They provide points of orientation, comforting in their certitude. One visible, the other invisible, neither hostile nor friendly, they accompany her as she walks down the boardwalk to the Aliyah Senior Citizens' Center.

From Barbara Myerhoff. 1979. *Number Our Days: Culture and Community among Elderly American Jews in an American Ghetto.* New York: Meridian.

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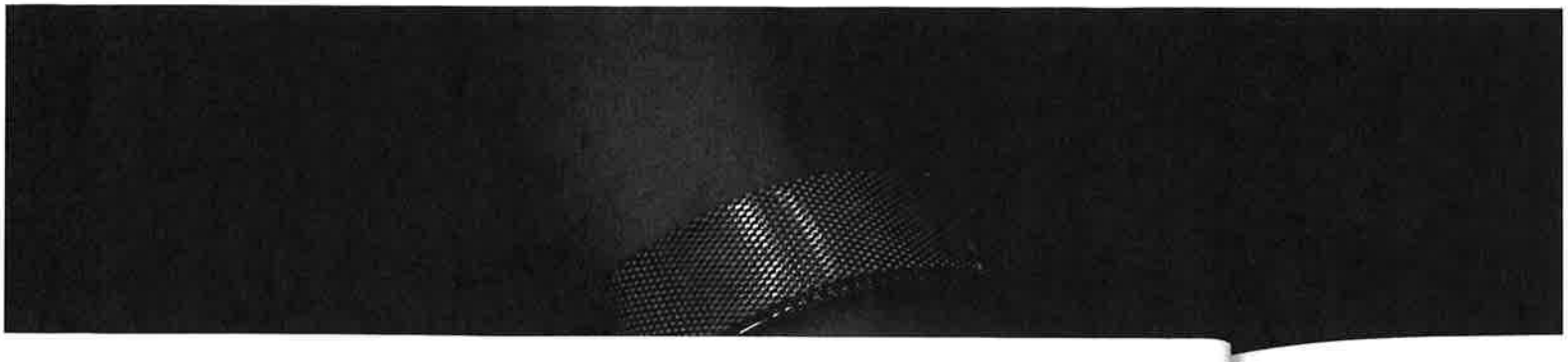
Basha wants to remain independent above all. Her life at the beach depends on her ability to perform a minimum number of basic tasks. She must shop and cook, dress herself, care for her body and her one-room apartment, walk, take the bus to the market and the doctor, be able to make a telephone call in case of emergency. Her arthritic hands have a difficult time with the buttons on her dress. Some days her fingers ache and swell so that she cannot fit them into the holes of the telephone dial. Her hands shake as she puts in her eyedrops for glaucoma. Fortunately, she no longer has to give herself injections for her diabetes. Now it is controlled by pills, if she is careful about what she eats. In the neighborhood there are no large markets within walking distance. She must take the bus to shop. The bus steps are very high and sometimes the driver objects when she tries to bring her little wheeled cart aboard. A small boy whom she has befriended and occasionally pays often waits for her at the bus stop to help her up. When she cannot bring her cart onto the bus or isn't helped up the steps, she must walk to the market. Then shopping takes the better part of the day and exhausts her. Her feet, thank God, give her less trouble since she figured out how to cut and sew a pair of cloth shoes so as to leave room for her callouses and bunions.

Basha's daughter calls her once a week and worries about her mother living alone and in a deteriorated neighborhood. "Don't worry about me, darling. This morning I put the garbage in the oven and the bagels in the trash. But I'm feeling fine." Basha enjoys teasing her daughter whose distant concern she finds somewhat embarrassing. "She says to me, 'Mamaleh, you're sweet but you're so *stupid*.' What else could a greenhorn mother expect from a daughter who is a lawyer?" The statement conveys Basha's simultaneous pride and grief in having produced an educated, successful child whose very accomplishments drastically separate her from her mother. The daughter has often invited Basha to come and live with her, but she refuses.

> What would I do with myself there in her big house, alone all day, when the children are at work? No one to talk to. No place to walk. Nobody talks Yiddish. My daughter's husband doesn't like my cooking, so I can't even help with meals. Who needs an old lady around, somebody else for my daughter to take care of? They don't keep the house warm like I like it. When I go to the bathroom at night, I'm afraid to flush, I shouldn't wake anybody up. Here I have lived for thirty-one years. I have my friends. I have the fresh air. Always there are people to talk to on the benches. I can go to the Center whenever I like and always there's something doing there. As long as I can manage for myself, I'll stay here.

Managing means three things: taking care of herself, stretching her monthly pension of three hundred and twenty dollars to cover expenses, and filling her time in ways that have meaning for her. The first two are increasingly hard and she knows that they are battles she will eventually lose. But her free time does not weigh on her. She is never bored and rarely depressed. In many ways, life is not different from before. She has never been well-off, and she never expected things to be easy. When asked if she is happy, she



shrugs and laughs. "Happiness by me is a hot cup of tea on a cold day. When you don't get a broken leg, you could call yourself happy."

Basha, like many of the three hundred or so elderly members of the Aliyah Center, was bom and spent much of her childhood in one of the small, predominately Jewish, Yiddish-speaking villages known as *shtetls*, located within the Pale of Settlement of Czarist Russia, an area to which almost half the world's Jewish population was confined in the nineteenth century. Desperately poor, regularly terrorized by outbreaks of anti-Semitism initiated by government officials and surrounding peasants, shtetl life was precarious. Yet a rich, highly developed culture flourished in these encapsulated settlements, based on a shared sacred religious history, common customs and beliefs, and two languages—Hebrew for prayer and Yiddish for daily life. * * * For many, life became unbearable under the increasingly reactionary regime of Czar Alexander II. The pogroms of 1881–1882, accompanied by severe economic and legal restrictions, drove out the more desperate and daring of the Jews. Soon they were leaving the shtetls and the cities in droves. The exodus of Jews from Eastern Europe swelled rapidly until by the turn of the century [1900] hundreds of thousands were emigrating, the majority to seek freedom and opportunity in the New World.

Basha dresses simply but with care. The purchase of each item of clothing is a major decision. It must last, should be modest and appropriate to her age, but gay and up-to-date. And, of course, it can't be too costly. Basha is not quite five feet tall. She is a sturdy boat of a woman—wide, strong of frame, and heavily corseted. She navigates her great monobosom before her, supported by broad hips and thin, severely bowed legs, their shape the heritage of her malnourished childhood. Like most of the people who belong to the Aliyah Center, her early life in Eastern Europe was characterized by relentless poverty.

Basha dresses for the cold, even though she is now living in Southern California, wearing a babushka under a red sun hat, a sweater under her heavy coat. She moves down the boardwalk steadily, paying attention to the placement of her feet. A fall is common and dangerous for the elderly. A fractured hip can mean permanent disability, loss of autonomy, and removal from the community to a convalescent or old age home. Basha seats herself on a bench in front of the Center and waits for friends. Her feet are spread apart, well-planted, as if growing up from the cement. Even sitting quite still, there is an air of determination about her. She will withstand attacks by anti-Semites, Cossacks, Nazis, historical enemies whom she conquers by outliving. She defies time and weather (though it is not cold here). So she might have sat a century ago, before a small pyramid of potatoes or herring in the marketplace of the Polish town where she was born. Patient, resolute, she is a survivor.

Not all the Center women are steady boats like Basha. Some, like Faegl, are leaves, so delicate, dry, and vulnerable that it seems at any moment they might be whisked away by a strong gust. And one day, a sudden wind did knock Faegl to the ground. Others, like Gita, are birds, small and sharp-tongued. Quick, witty, vain, flirtatious, they are very fond of singing and dancing. They once were and will always be pretty girls. This is one of their

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survival strategies. Boats, leaves, or birds, at first their faces look alike. Individual features are blurred by dentures, heavy bifocals, and webs of wrinkles. The men are not so easy to categorize. As a group, they are quieter, more uniform, less immediately outstanding except for the few who are distinctive individuals, clearly distinguishable as leaders.

As the morning wears on, the benches fill. Benches are attached back to back, one side facing the ocean, one side the boardwalk. The people on the ocean side swivel around to face their friends, the boardwalk, and the Center.

Bench behavior is highly stylized. The half-dozen or so benches immediately to the north and south of the Center are the territory of the members, segregated by sex and conversation topic. The men's benches are devoted to abstract, ideological concerns—philosophical debate, politics, religion, and economics. The women's benches are given more to talk about immediate, personal matters—children, food, health, neighbors, love affairs, scandals, and "managing." Men and women talk about Israel and its welfare, about being a Jew and about Center politics. On the benches, reputations are made and broken, controversies explored, leaders selected, factions formed and dissolved. Here is the outdoor dimension of Center life, like a village plaza, a focus of protracted, intense sociability.

The surrounding scene rarely penetrates the invisible, pulsing membrane of the Center community. The old people are too absorbed in their own talk to attend the setting. Surfers, sunbathers, children, dogs, bicyclists, winos, hippies, voyeurs, photographers, panhandlers, artists, junkies, roller skaters, peddlers, and police are omnipresent all year round. Every social class, age, race, and sexual preference is represented. Jesus cults, Hare Krishna parades, sidewalk preachers jostle steel bands and itinerant musicians. As colorful and flamboyant as the scene is by day, it is as dangerous by night. Muggings, theft, rape, harassment, and occasional murders make it a perilous neighborhood for the old people after dark.

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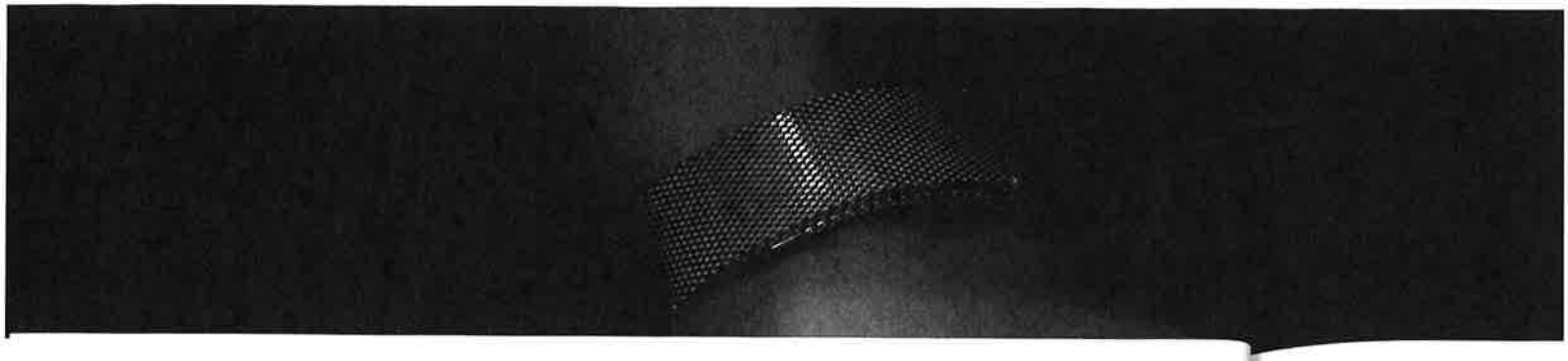
Around thirty years ago, Jews from all over the country began to immigrate to the beach community, particularly those with health problems and newly retired. Seeking a benign climate, fellow Jews, and moderately priced housing, they brought their savings and small pensions and came to live near the ocean. Collective life was and still is especially intense in this community because there is no automobile traffic on the boardwalk. Here is a place where people may meet, gather, talk, and stroll, simple but basic and precious activities that the elderly in particular can enjoy here all year round.

In the late 1950s, an urban development program resulted in the displacement of between four and six thousand of these senior citizens in a very short period. It was a devastating blow to the culture. "A second Holocaust," Sasha called it. "It destroyed our shtetl life all over again." Soon after the urban development project began, a marina was constructed at the southern end of the boardwalk. Property values soared. Older people could not pay taxes and many lost their homes. Rents quadrupled. Old hotels and apartments were torn down, and housing became the single most serious problem



for the elderly who desperately wanted to remain in the area. While several thousand have managed to hang on, no new members are moving into the area because of the housing problem. Their Yiddish world, built up over a thirty-year period, is dying and complete extinction is imminent. Perhaps it will last another five or at the most ten years. Whenever a Center member leaves, everyone is acutely aware that there will be no replacements. The sense of cultural doom coincides with awareness of approaching individual death. * * *

As the numbers of such people shrink and the neighborhood changes, the Aliyah Center becomes more and more important to its members. Sponsored by a city-wide philanthropic Jewish organization, it is maintained as a day center that emphasizes "secular Judaism." Officially, about three hundred members pay dues of six dollars a year, but these figures do not reflect the actual importance of the Center to the community. Many more use it than join, and they use it all day, every day. The Center is more halfway house than voluntary association, making it possible for hundreds of people to continue living alone in the open community, despite their physical and economic difficulties. Daily hot meals are provided there, and continuous diverse programs are offered—cultural events, discussions, classes of all kinds, along with social affairs, religious ceremonies, celebrations of life crises, anniversaries, birthdays, memorials, and occasional weddings. The gamut of political and social processes found in larger societies are well-developed in Center life. Here is an entire, though miniature, society, a Blakeian "world in a grain of sand," the setting for an intricate and rich culture, made up of bits and pieces of people's common history.

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I sat on the benches outside the Center and thought about how strange it was to be back in the neighborhood where sixteen years before I had lived and for a time had been a social worker with elderly citizens on public relief. Then the area was known as "Oshini Beach." The word *shini* still made me cringe. As a child I had been taunted with it. Like many second-generation Americans, I wasn't sure what being a Jew meant. When I was a child our family had avoided the words *Jew* and *Yid*. We were confused and embarrassed about our background. In public we lowered our voices when referring to "our people" or "one of us." * * *

I had made no conscious decision to explore my roots or clarify the meaning of my origins. I was one of several anthropologists at the University of Southern California engaged in an examination of Ethnicity and Aging. At first I planned to study elderly Chicanos, since I had previously done fieldwork in Mexico. But in the early 1970s in urban America, ethnic groups were not welcoming curious outsiders, and people I approached kept asking me, "Why work with us? Why don't you study your own kind?" This was a new idea to me. I had not been trained for such a project. Anthropologists conventionally investigate exotic, remote, preliterate societies. But such groups are increasingly unavailable and often inhospitable. As a result, more and more anthropologists are

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Sitting in the sun and contemplating the passing parade on the boardwalk that morning in 1973, I wondered how I should begin this study. At eleven-thirty the benches began to empty as old people entered the Center for a "Hot Kosher Meal—Nutritious—65¢," then a new program provided by state and private funds. * * *

I followed the crowd inside and sat at the back of the warm, noisy room redolent with odors of fish and chicken soup, wondering how to introduce myself. It was decided for me. A woman sat down next to me who I soon learned was Basha. In a leisurely fashion, she appraised me. Uncomfortable, I smiled and said hello.

"You are not hungry?" she asked.

"No, thank you, I'm not," I answered.

"So, what brings you here?"

"I'm from the University of Southern California. I'm looking for a place to study how older Jews live in the city."

At the word *university*, she moved closer and nodded approvingly. "Are you Jewish?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Are you married?" she persisted.

"Yes."

"You got children?"

"Yes, two boys, four and eight," I answered.

"Are you teaching them to be Jews?"

"I'm trying."

"So what do you want with us here?" asked Basha.

"Well, I want to understand your life, find out what it's like to be older and Jewish, what makes Jews different from other older people, if anything. I'm an anthropologist and we usually study people's cultures and societies. I think I would like to learn about this culture."

"And what will you do for us?" she asked me.

"I could teach a class in something people here are interested in—how older people live in other places, perhaps."

"Are you qualified to do this?" Basha shot me a suspicious glance.

"I have a Ph.D. and have taught in the university for a number of years, so I suppose I am qualified."

"You are a professor then? A little bit of a thing like you?" To my relief, she chuckled amiably. Perhaps I had passed my first rite of entrance into the group.

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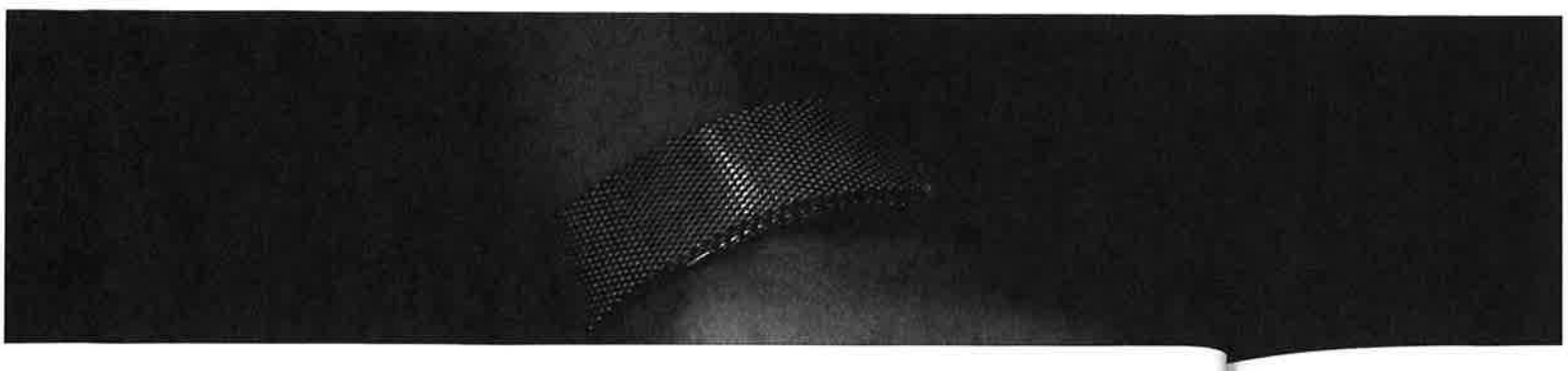
The anthropologist engages in peculiar work. He or she tries to understand a different culture to the point of finding it to be intelligible, regardless of how strange it



seems in comparison with one's own background. This is accomplished by attempting to experience the new culture from within, living in it for a time as a member, all the while maintaining sufficient detachment to observe and analyze it with some objectivity. This peculiar posture—being inside and outside at the same time—is called participant-observation. It is a fruitful paradox, one that has allowed anthropologists to find sense and purpose within a society's seemingly illogical and arbitrary customs and beliefs. This assumption of the natives' viewpoint, so to speak, is a means of knowing others through oneself, a professional technique that can be mastered fairly easily in the study of very different peoples. Working with one's own society, and more specifically, those of one's own ethnic and familial heritage, is perilous, and much more difficult. Yet it has a certain validity and value not available in other circumstances. Identifying with the "Other"—Indians, Chicanos, if one is Anglo, blacks if one is white, males if one is female—is an act of imagination, a means for discovering what one is not and will never be. Identifying with what one is now and will be someday is quite a different process.

In working among the elderly—also, I suspect, among the very young—an exceptionally important part of one's information is derived from nonverbal communication and identification, this because the bodily state is such a large determinant of well-being for the growing and declining organism. At various times, I consciously tried to heighten my awareness of the physical feeling state of the elderly by wearing stiff garden gloves to perform ordinary tasks, taking off my glasses and plugging my ears, slowing down my movements and sometimes by wearing the heaviest shoes I could find to the Center. Walking a few blocks to the day-old bakery in this condition became an unimaginably exhilarating achievement. Once by accident I stumbled slightly. The flash of actual terror I experienced was shocking. From the close watching of the elderly it seems I had acquired their assiduous need to avoid falling, though of course, to one my age in good health such a minor accident presents no real danger. This recognition occurred after I had been watching two very old women walk down the alley with great concentration, arms tightly linked, navigating impediments in slow-motion movements that were perfectly coordinated and mutually supportive. So great was their concern with balance they might have been walking a high wire.

The work with the very old people at the Center was not the first time I had employed this imaginative identification as a source of information. Years before, in doing fieldwork with the Huichol Indians of Mexico, I had had similar experiences. However much I learned from that was limited by the fact that I would never really be a Huichol Indian. But I would be a little old Jewish lady one day; thus, it was essential for me to learn what that condition was like, in all its particulars. As a society, we are increasingly cut off from the elderly. We do not have them in the midst of our daily lives, and consequently have no regular access to models of successful old age. How can we then do anything but dread the coming of age? I consider myself very fortunate in having had, through this work, an opportunity to anticipate, rehearse, and contemplate my own future. * * *

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What the Center people taught me went beyond knowledge about old age. In addition they provided a model of an alternative lifestyle, built on values in many ways antithetical to those commonly esteemed by contemporary Americans. The usual markers of success were anathema to them—wealth, power, physical beauty, youth, mobility, security, social status—all were out of the question. Lacking hope for change, improvement, without a future, they had devised a counterworld, inventing their own version of what made "the good life." It was built on their veneration for their religious and cultural membership and it was full of meaning, intensity, and consciousness. This they had managed on their own, creating a nearly invisible, run-down, tiny world, containing a major lesson for any who would attend it. It was not the first time that an anthropologist had found in obscure, unworldly folk a message of wide applicability for the larger outside society.

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The amount and variety of information accumulated in a field study is overwhelming. There is no definite or correct solution to the problem of what to include, how to cut up the pie of social reality, when precisely to leave or stop. Often there is little clarity as to whom to include as "members," what to talk about with those who are. The deliberate avoidance of preconceptions is likely to result in the best fieldwork, allowing the group or subject to dictate the form the description ultimately takes. But always there is a high degree of arbitrariness involved. Choices must be made and they are extremely difficult, primarily because of what and who must be omitted. In this case, these methodological dilemmas were especially troublesome. Nearly everyone at the Center wanted to be included, feeling so strongly as they did the wish to be recorded and remembered.

In this work I decided to concentrate on the Center, its internal affairs, and its most active members as much as possible. This eliminated the nonjoiners, the marginal individuals, the majority of people living in the neighborhood and, accordingly, limited the generalizations that I could make in the end. I decided not to compare Center elders with others. I felt the Center people and their generation were sufficiently unique to warrant most of my time. The choice favored depth over breadth, tight focus rather than representativeness. * * *

Of the three hundred Center members, I met and talked with about half, though I observed all at one time or another during the years of the study. Of these, I knew eighty personally, and interviewed and spent most of my time with thirty-six. I tape recorded extensive interviews with these, ranging from two to sixteen hours, visited nearly all in their homes, took trips with them from time to time outside the neighborhood—to doctors, social workers, shopping, funerals, visiting their friends in old age homes and hospitals, and often following my subjects to convalescent homes and hospitals; I went to many funerals and memorial services. Apart from these excursions and my interviews with outsiders who knew Center people well—teachers, rabbis, local politicians, volunteers—I concentrated on the Center and its external extensions, the benches, boardwalk, and hotel and apartment lobbies where they congregated.

As often happens, I established a particularly strong and gratifying attachment to one individual, and also as often happens, in addition to being particularly knowledgeable and articulate about the community, this person was also an outsider. "Shmuel the Filosofe," he was called, and in a very significant way he was my teacher, critic, and guide. * * * His voice is heard throughout the book. I have included my own voice * * * for it proved impossible to expunge. His statements and retorts did not make sense without that, for he was directing his commentary to me. That is not the only place I have included my words and reactions. For a long time I resisted this. I wanted to focus on the Center, not myself, but it became clear that what was being written was from my eyes, with my personality, biases, history, and sensibility, and it seemed dishonest to exclude that, thereby giving an impression of greater objectivity and authority than I believed in.

As often as possible I have included verbatim materials, heavily edited and selected, inevitably, but sufficient to allow the reader some degree of direct participation. I have tried to allow many individuals to emerge in their fullness and distinctiveness rather than presenting a completely generalized picture of group life without reference to the living breathing people who comprise it, and who are in the end the only reality. In the interest of economy and privacy, I have combined several of the minor characters who appear on these pages, though most would have preferred to have been identified. Wherever possible I have altered identifying biographical features that seemed insignificant. All verbatim statements are presented as they were given, usually taken from tape recordings. Major figures are disguised as much as possible but uncombined. Events reported are actual occurrences, subjectively witnessed and interpreted by me.

The always complex problem of assuring privacy to one's subjects was made more difficult in this study because of the production of a documentary film on which I collaborated with Lynne Littman toward the end of research. Also called *Number Our Days*, it was based on my fieldwork at the Center. We were not at all sure that the film would cross the ethnic barrier, and were surprised when it was widely viewed and enthusiastically received. To our great satisfaction, it brought the elderly concrete benefits in many forms—unsolicited funds, attention and favors from strangers and friends, and above all, visibility, which they so long for. But it made effective disguise of the Center and its director impossible. Nevertheless, privacy for individuals could be preserved, and so I have changed all names of people and groups mentioned here, this to allow myself freedom to record some of the unflattering things I saw there, as much as possible to prevent the elderly from recognizing themselves and each other, to save them and their children any embarrassment that might accrue. Certainly, I did not want to cause the old people pain that could be avoided, nor did I wish to jeopardize my welcome among them.

* * *

The format of this book is designed to meet several purposes. In addition to wanting to speak within it as a participant, and wishing to preserve particular individuals, I wanted to render the elders' speech. Many verbatim statements are included; the most

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extensive of these are called "*bobbe-myseh*" or grandmothers' tales, speeches and exchanges between people that occurred in a "Living History" class. * * * The bobbe-myseh were drawn from miles of tape, intended to convey the texture of the speech, people's characteristic thought, and interaction style. It was Shmuel, the critic and philosopher, who dubbed these stories and exchanges "bobbe-myseh." He found them inelegant and rambling. Sometimes they build to a significant point about Center people's beliefs and experiences, but even so, these are much embedded in "trivia." Seldom grand, occasionally self-serving, always vital and original, it was inconceivable to leave them out.

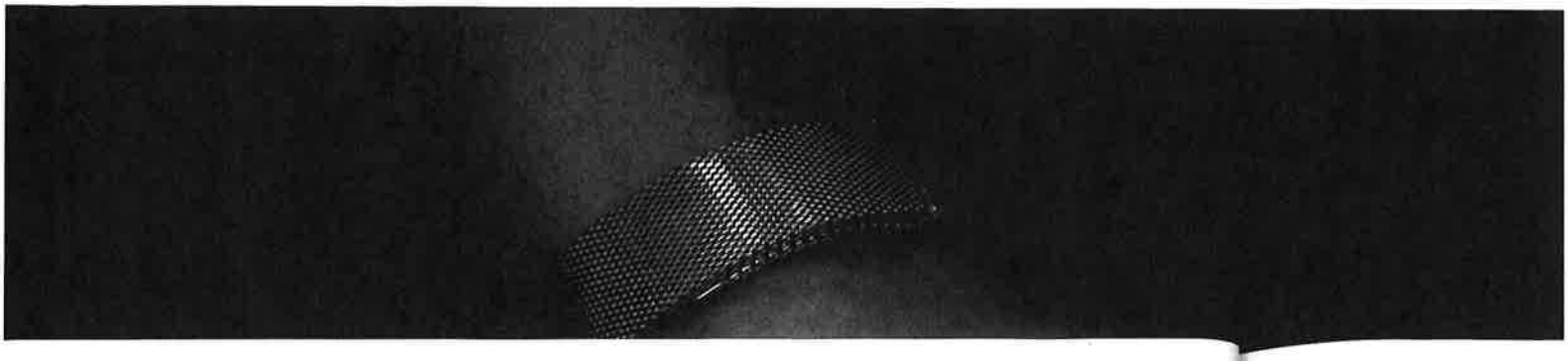
* * *

Center people, like so many of the elderly, were very fond of reminiscing and storytelling, eager to be heard from, eager to relate parts of their life history. More afraid of oblivion than pain or death, they always sought opportunities to become visible. * * * They narrated themselves perpetually, in the form of keeping notes, journals, writing poems and reflections spontaneously, and also telling their stories to whoever would listen. Their histories were not devoted to marking their successes or unusual merits. Rather they were efforts at ordering, sorting, explaining—rendering coherent their long life, finding integrating ideas and characteristics that helped them know themselves as the same person over time, despite great ruptures and shifts. * * *

I was eager to respond to Center people's desires to tell me their stories and puzzled as to how to find the means and the time to listen to as many as possible. Abe [the center director] was helpful here, too. He suggested that I offer a class in the Center where people could assemble for recounting their life history. We pondered the subject together and decided it should be called "Living History." * * * People would have an opportunity to bring in their writings, poems, and the like, and read them to the group, an activity they enjoyed greatly and found few opportunities for in the Center's crowded schedule. They might bring in photographs, letters, and any materials they wished to have included. * * * But, I wondered, would people be willing to tell me, a stranger, their life history, and would they be inhibited if I tried to tape record the sessions?

Abe and I sat on a bench talking about the class in the early days of my work. Basha came out of the Center and Abe called to her, "Basha, how would you like to have the professor make a book from your life?" Basha did not hesitate. "You got a pencil? You want to get it down right. I begin with my childhood in Poland. Tell me if I go too fast. Naturally, it's a long story."

The following month, classes began. I was prepared with cookies, tea, coffee, tape recorder, and two-dozen notebooks and pencils for people who would be willing to use them at home. * * * At first a half-dozen people came, but after the word spread that there were no political fights and no insistence on public disclosure of personal matters, more attended. Soon a core of about twenty people had formed and they came faithfully. * * * The longer the classes lasted, the more people had to say. They stimulated one another's memories. * * *



I loved these classes and the style of the exchanges and stories. Shmuel was right to call them grandmothers' tales, for they were the kind of rambling, bubbling, unfocused, running comments that a bobbe might tell her grandchildren without putting down her dough or her sewing. Too busy to stop and shape a tale with grace and art, but too alive to imagination and verbal expression to be silent, so she might weave a kitchen tale that despite its crude surface, came from and went to a deep place. * * *

Hitting on a format that allowed for storytelling was a fortunate accident. When we began the sessions, there was no way I could have anticipated the significance of these exchanges. In time it became clear that storytelling was a passion among these people, absolutely central to their culture. * * *

The Center people who came to the Living History classes were increasingly pleased with the storytelling sessions. Here is Rachel's comment on the class toward the end of our meetings:

> All these speeches we are making reminded me of a picture I have from many years ago, when we were still in Russia. My brother had been gone already two years in America. I can see my mother like it is before me, engraved in my head. A small house she goes out of, in wintertime, going every morning in the snow to the post office, wrapped up in a shawl. Every morning there was nothing. Finally, she found a letter. In that letter was written, "Mamaleh, I didn't write to you before because I didn't have nothing to write about." "So," she says, "why didn't you write and tell me?"
>
> You know this group of ours reminds me of that letter. When I first heard about this group, I thought to myself, "What can I learn? What can I hear that I don't know, about life in the Old Country, of the struggles, the life in the poor towns, in the bigger towns, of the rich people and the poor people? What is there to learn, I'm eighty-eight, that I haven't seen myself?" Then I think, "What can I give to anybody else? I'm not an educated woman. It's a waste of time."
>
> That was my impression. But then I came here and heard all those stories. I knew them, but you know it was laid down deep, deep in your mind, with all those troubles mixed. You know it's there but you don't think of it, because sometimes you don't want to live in your past. Who needs all these foolish stories?
>
> But finally, this group brought out such beautiful memories, not always so beautiful, but still, all the pictures came up. It touched the layers of the kind that it was on those dead people already. It was laying on them like layers, separate layers of earth, and all of a sudden in this class I feel it coming up like lava. It just melted away the earth from all those people. It melted away, and they became alive. And then to me it looked like they were never dead.
>
> Then I felt like the time my mother got that letter. "Why don't you come and tell me?" "Well, I have nothing to say," I think. But I start to say it and I find something. The memories come up in me like lava. So I felt I enriched myself. And I am hoping maybe I enriched somebody else. All this, it's not only for us. It's for the generations.

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From Sienna R. Craig. 2012. H
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- What did you learn about the experience of being old through Myerhoff's careful description of Basha?
- Why did Myerhoff take off her glasses, plug her ears, and wear heavy shoes and stiff gloves?
- Myerhoff describes her fieldwork experiences in detail. Identify her key fieldwork strategies.
- How would you describe the unique style of ethnographic writing found in Myerhoff's work?
- Why do you think Myerhoff's Living History Classes were so significant for Center members? How did they help Myerhoff's research?
- Describe some of the obstacles and benefits studying her "own kind" created for Myerhoff.
- Myerhoff fully engages the process of reflexivity in her ethnographic writing, reflecting on her own experience in the fieldwork process and becoming a key figure in her own ethnography. How has Myerhoff's commitment to reflexivity shaped the conclusions she draws and insights she offers?

Portrait of a Himalayan Healer

Notes on a day of fieldwork in Nepal

Sienna Craig

Sienna Craig's ethnography, set in the rural, isolated mountainous region of Lo Monthang, Nepal, population 14,000, offers a picture of a day in the life of an anthropologist as she studies Tibetan healers and their changing practices. Written like a fieldwork journal, her entries take the reader from an early morning conversation at the home of her friends and colleagues on to a school, a monastery, a royal palace, village health clinics, and farms for cultivating herbs for traditional Tibetan medicine before returning home in the evening. Together she and members of the community walk, climb, make house calls, ride horseback, say prayers, and discuss medicinal herbs and changing funding

From Sienna R. Craig. 2012. *Healing Elements: Efficacy and the Social Ecologies of Tibetan Medicine.* Berkeley: University of California Press. Some of the author's notes have been omitted.

requirements of international agencies. Craig's notes carefully guide you through the hours of the day, marking changing locations, smells, feelings, people, and issues at hand.

Cultures are never static but are constantly changing. Change occurs through internal negotiations and struggles. But in this period of intensifying globalization, communities and their cultures are encountering powerful national, regional, and global forces that are reshaping beliefs and practices of religion, healing, family, gender roles, ethnicity, sexuality, and work. As you read the following passage, pay particular attention to significant changes in the community Craig is studying—changes in religion, economic realities, the intersection of western medical practices and traditional Tibetan healing practices, and even the generational transmission of indigenous knowledge. Also pay attention to the ways these people in apparently isolated, mountainous Nepal are connected to the world beyond their local boundaries through donors, markets, the internet, foreign fundraising trips, and more. Craig's careful fieldnotes, thick description, and thoughtful reflections on these dynamics offer insight into matters anthropologists take into consideration today wherever we conduct fieldwork.

Reading Signs

It is early September 2008. The high-altitude air is tinged with autumn. I walk through the alleys of Lo Monthang, the largest settlement in northern Mustang District, Nepal. This is the time before animals have been let out to graze, before children have gone off to the new local day care, to school, or to help gather dung and tend animals. I pass white-washed homes decorated with protective door hangings above the threshold: colored yarn webs holding sheep skulls, repelling nefarious spirits and gossip. I hear the muffled sounds of cymbals, bells, and the resonant drone of Tibetan Buddhist monks calling forth another day.

*** Mustang lies in the Himalayan rain shadow; it is mostly high-altitude desert, abutting the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. Jomsom, the district's headquarters, is linked to Pokhara, the nearest city, by flights from a small airport and by trails. No all-season motor road connects the district to any urban center, although this reality is changing swiftly. *** Upper Mustang, at the center of which sits Lo Monthang [population 14,000], is home to Tibetan speakers, *tsampa* eaters,[1] and practitioners of Buddhism and Bön, indigenous religious practices of the Tibetan plateau (Snellgrove 1981; Samuel 1993).

* * *

On this crisp September morning, I round the corner past Thubchen, a fifteenth-century monastery that has been restored recently (Lo Bue 2011). I walk past a row

1. Tsampa is roasted barley flour, a staple among Tibetan communities.

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of reliquaries [shrines] and stop before the wood-and-corrugated metal door leading to a school. A window, rimmed in black and red paint, rests above the door. Between window and door hangs a trilingual signboard. There is an arc of English—"Lo-Kunphen Traditional Herbal Medicine Clinic and School"—under which is written an approximation of the same, first in Tibetan and then in Nepali. The Tibetan reads *Lo Kunphen Mentsikhang Lobdra*. The Nepali reads *Lo Kunphen Aamchi Aaushadhyalaya Skul*. My friends and colleagues, Gyatso and Tenzin Bista, run this small institution. * * *

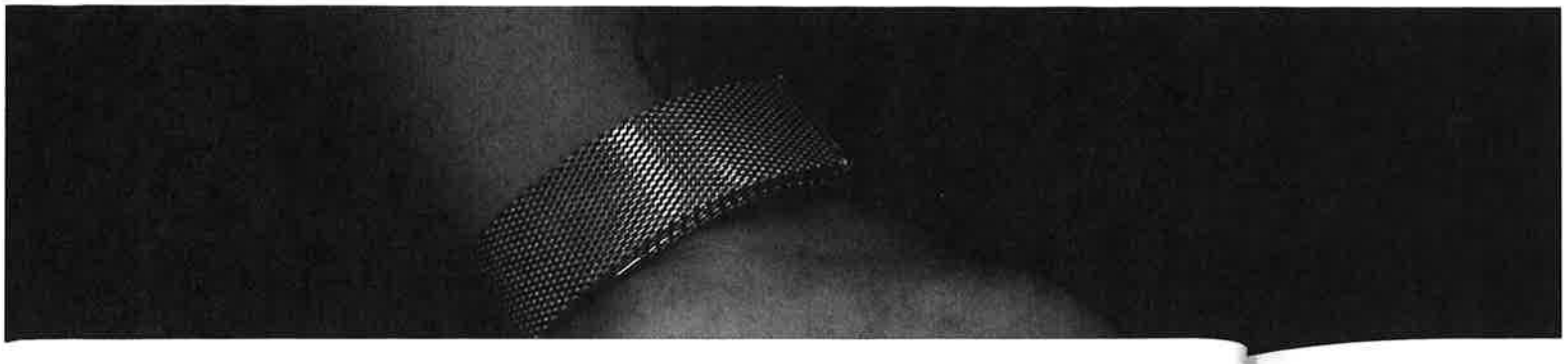
I have passed this sign many times. This morning it stops me short. I realize that, in Nepali, there is nothing *Tibetan* about this place. In Tibetan, centuries of interconnected history between Mustang and centers of Sowa Rigpa in Lhasa, Dharamsala, and beyond are implicit in the choice of names given to this institution. In English, the deceptively simple signifier "traditional herbal medicine" supplants regionally and culturally specific understandings of medicine and heath care. * * *

The only other element on the sign is, in a sense, its heart: a small rendering of Sangye Menla, the Medicine Buddha, his offering bowl brimming with *arura*, the fruit of the myrobalan tree and the "king of medicines." This sign is a mosaic, an assemblage of meaning. To understand only one of these languages is to miss the negotiations of culture and identity wrapped up in my interlocutors' efforts toward increasing the social efficacy of their practice in a new age. To see this sign simply as a handmade entrance to a marginal institution in [a] far away place is to miss the point. Certainly this is a remote locale. But it is a place connected to regimes of value and patterns of social change that stretch out from the Himalaya and Tibetan Plateau, down the Indian subcontinent, across the world, and back again.

Filled with these thoughts about identity and belonging, language and culture, tradition and contemporary life, I walk through the door and enter the courtyard of Lo Kunphen. Several students cluster around a water spigot, brushing their teeth. Older students ready the simple dining hall for breakfast, after prayers and before classes. I greet them and head toward the back door of Lo Kunphen, which lets me out beyond Lo Monthang's city wall, in front of Gyatso and Tenzin's home, the lower floor of which is devoted to an herbarium and small Sowa Rigpa museum. I climb the stairs and call out a greeting. Gyatso's familiar voice answers, inviting me in.

Mantras, IVs, and Morning Tea: 7:30 A.M.

Gyatso is seated on low cushions in the main room, drinking salt-butter tea. The brothers' infirm mother directs morning traffic. Two generations of this family's women perform chores as seamlessly as if playing a symphony. Gyatso's wife loads the stove with sheep and goat dung, blows embers awake, pours water into a kettle, and sets it to boil. She then breaks grassy clumps of brick tea into this tepid water and metes out a pinch of Tibetan salt. Her eldest niece carves a slab of butter from a block with the swiftness of a potter slicing clay. She tosses it into the tea churner. These acts mark a day's



beginning here: art, routine, discipline each in its own right. This place would not run without its women.

A stack of notebooks sits on a wooden table in the corner, nestled between divans laid with Tibetan carpets. Some of these books are tea-stained and once or twice soaked through by rain. Their pages contain all manner of notations, written mostly in Tibetan, at times in Nepali, or in approximations of English, sounded out. They bespeak these doctors' networks: prescription notes, names of tourists who might become school sponsors, lists of plants and other raw materials to buy in Etum Bahal or Indra Chowk, old Kathmandu neighborhoods where herb traders hawk and bargain. Beside these notebooks are religious texts wrapped in cloth, a Tibetan-English medical dictionary, and a binder whose plastic sheaves protect stacks of receipts for school expenses. These pieces of paper must be carried to Jomsom in saddlebags, then on to Kathmandu in Chinese-made totes embossed with NGO insignia, gifts from academic conferences and conservation-development workshops these brothers have attended. In Kathmandu these recollections of rupees spent are presented to a Nepali accountant who reconciles the books and sends them to British, German, and U.S. charities that help to support the school. This institution is an experiment in bridging the gaps between Gyatso and Tenzin's father's generation and the worlds their children will inherit.

Tenzin comes into the room carrying a glass bottle of a glucose and saline solution, a splice of IV tubing, and a still sterile hypodermic needle. The glucose is Nepali made, though nearly every other commercial item in this house was manufactured in China: thermoses, blankets, solar panels that charge their satellite telephone. Tenzin moves toward his mother. This woman has been unable to walk for years and has, in a sense, been waiting to die ever since her husband passed away, in 1996. For all her despondency, she is still the center of this home, the voice to which everyone defers.

Tenzin calls his niece, a senior student at Lo Kunphen. They prop up the old woman so she can receive this IV infusion. I ask Tenzin why he has chosen to give this biomedical treatment to his mother. "It gives her strength, since she struggles to eat," he responds. The old woman seems calm until Tenzin produces the needle. Then she wriggles, moans, covers her eyes. The niece struggles to still her grandmother.

Seeing the task will not be easy, Tenzin calls for Gyatso. These sons reassure their mother. Then, deftly, Gyatso pins down her forearm as Tenzin inserts the needle past layers of weathered mountain skin into the river of a bluish vein. Tenzin tapes the needle in place, attaches it to the tubing, and hangs the glass bottle from a hook fitted to the ceiling above the old woman's perch. All the while one of the youngest members of the extended family looks on with fascination, nestled beside her great-grandmother, enfolded in layers of wool.

This simple act—needle into vein and the slow, steady infusion of sugars, salts, and water into this old woman—reminds me there are no easy ways to parse this world of healing. Neither the terms *tradition* and *modernity* nor a presumed ideological divide between Tibetan medicine and biomedicine makes much sense here (Samuel 2006).

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These Buddhist *amchi* have given a biomedical anodyne with tenderness to their ailing mother. They do so in great part because empiricism has brought them here. They know it works because their mother's cheeks flush after such infusions. Just the same, a different empiricism instructs them to conduct long-life rituals and wear protection amulets. Ultimately they will face their mother's death as part of sentient existence: one karmic turning of the wheel of life.

Masters of the Gift: 9:00 A.M.

Gyatso, Tenzin, and I move into the school's chapel (*chökhang*) and library. The phrase "someone who wears many hats" works in both English and Tibetan. This is often how I feel about these brothers. In addition to his responsibility as principal of Lo Kunphen, Tenzin is also a senior monk at Chöde Monastery, a *sakya* Tibetan Buddhist institution in Lo Monthang. Yesterday he spent half the day performing a ritual in the household of someone who had recently died. Gyatso, like his father before him, is the householder-priest (*nakpa*) and doctor to the royal family of Lo. Since 2003 he has also been the chairman of the Himalayan Amchi Association.

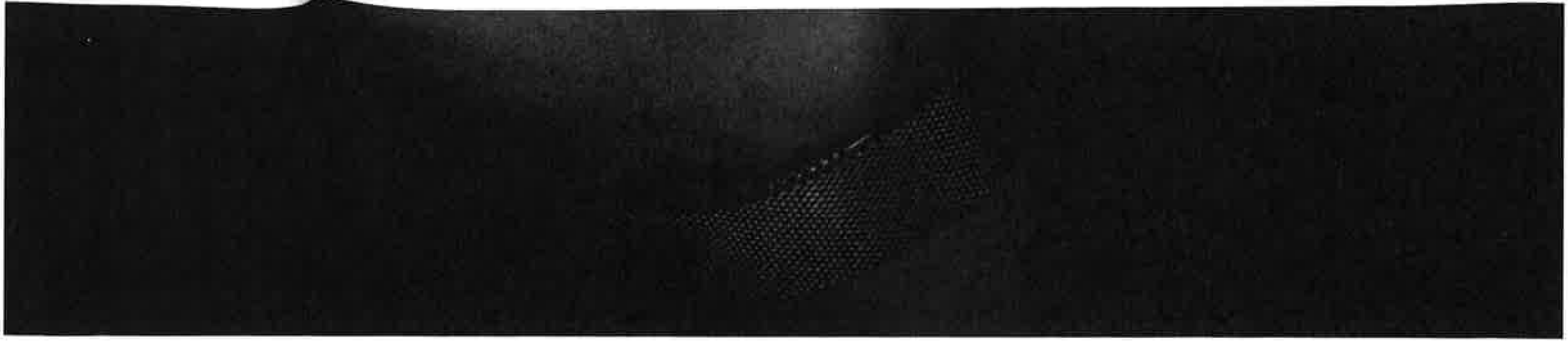
Yesterday, despite our plans to review clinic records and write a funding proposal, Gyatso was called to the palace to greet officials from across the border in the TAR [Tibet Autonomous Region]. * * *

Yesterday's unexpected visit put off our work on the grant proposal until this morning. Gyatso and Tenzin begin by reiterating to me their need for money. They struggle to raise sufficient funds to maintain this school of thirty to forty students, along with their "factory" and small branch clinics. Our current task is to craft a proposal for a London-based foundation that has normally supported only Tibetan refugees. On occasion it will accept applications from "Tibetan border peoples" such as those from Mustang.

We begin to work. A familiar process of translation ensues. In eloquent Tibetan, Gyatso and Tenzin speak of the decline of Sowa Rigpa across the Himalayas, the role of *amchi* in providing health care to rural populations, the importance of teaching and practicing *amchi* medicine, and then the punch line: the need for funds to develop a more advanced course in Sowa Rigpa in Nepal, to be based in the small city of Pokhara, and the need to expand their clinical practice in Mustang so senior students might have employment to keep them in their rural communities and so that local populations might have access to a complete pharmacy of Tibetan formulas, even those the brothers cannot produce themselves.

* * *

Gyatso and Tenzin's search for funding consumes enormous time and energy. * * * Without significant government support for Sowa Rigpa in Nepal—indeed even if such support materializes in the coming years—nongovernmental sponsorship remains



paramount. In Tibetan, *jindag* means "master of the gift." These days it is a term used to describe charitable foundations, individual sponsors, private patrons, and NGOs. Gyatso and Tenzin know me as a researcher, a translator, and a friend. But they also know me as a *jindag*. My engagement with Lo Kunphen has included raising money for the clinics and school, in part through an NGO I helped to found (www.drokpa.org). Just because I understand the nuance of an enduring Tibetan form of social relations does not make our allegiance to each other simple, though.

This morning Gyatso echoes a familiar refrain. "*Jindag* are like the wind and the rain," he says. "They come and they go. We cannot predict from which direction. But we need them for these seeds we have planted to ripen." It is an honest assessment, if also an organic metaphor voiced by a person who knows so well this earth of which he speaks.

* * *

Gyatso, Tenzin, and I are interrupted by a knock on the chapel door. A mother arrives with her son. He fell off a horse two days ago and appears to have fractured his left forearm. The boy is no more than ten. Rivulets of tears trickle down his dusty cheeks. Gyatso takes the boy's pulse from his ear, as is standard for children, feeling along his shoulder and arm. Tenzin prepares an herbal ointment mixed with rapeseed oil. The boy cringes. Gyatso tells him not to cry. The brothers have established several small clinics in villages surrounding Lo Monthang, but the work of healing still often occurs in their home.

"He was taking care of our sheep and goat," the boy's mother explains. "He shouldn't have been on the horse anyway. He should have been walking, collecting dung. But he never listens!" This mother seems worried and exasperated. You see, she needs his labor. The cost of hiring lowland Nepalis to herd or bring in the barley crop remains prohibitive for this family, like many others in Lo.

"Don't worry," says Gyatso. "The boy will be fine." Tenzin hands his brother the herbal mixture and two *kathag*, white silk offering scarves. Gyatso applies the ointment to the fractured bone and then bandages the boy's arm, creating a sling out of a blessing. Tenzin wraps up some of the powdery herbal mixture in a sheaf of paper. "Mix three spoonfuls of this with rapeseed oil. Change this dressing every day," he instructs. The woman pulls out a money purse that was pinned to the inside of her blouse. She attempts to hand Gyatso several hundred rupees ($2 to $3), but he exits the room, indicating that cash payment is not necessary. Instead the woman leaves a cotton satchel of dried cheese with Gyatso's elder sister, who accepts this gift.

As I watch this exchange, I struggle to square differential regimes of value. How might we reconcile the moral economy of *amchi* work and this in-kind payment of locally produced food with the political economy of becoming self-sustaining and the Excel spreadsheets over which we had just been laboring [to complete the grant application]?

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Birth of the Clinic: 1:00 P.M.

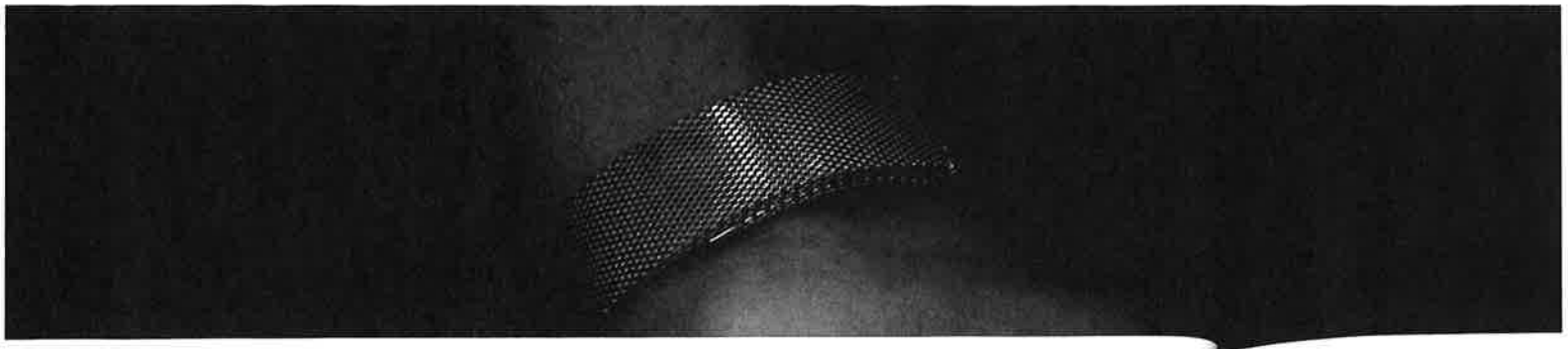
After the young boy with the broken arm departs, Gyatso, Tenzin, and I set aside our paperwork. The proposal must wait. Tenzin heads off to teach a lesson from the *Explanatory Tantra*, one of four books that comprise the *Gyüshi*. Gyatso and I saddle two of the family's horses and prepare to visit the clinics north of Monthang. * * * "This," he said, patting the horse's rump, "is Mustang *ambulance*." True enough. Just a few days before, a man from Namdo, a village near the Tibetan border, roused Tenzin from sleep with a message that his wife was severely ill. Tenzin and the husband set off in the predawn darkness. Tenzin treated the woman, left her with medicines, and rode the three hours home, only to see another patient in a nearby settlement later that day.

On this afternoon the horse lives up to its reputation. We fly over chalky paths, past verdant sedges and wildflowers that persist after Mustang's brief, bucolic summer. We arrive midday in the village of Thinker. The clinic sits above the village in a small mud-brick building. * * *

My friend opens the clinic, revealing the rudiments of health care in upper Mustang: a wooden cabinet filled with about fifty small bottles of neatly labeled Tibetan medicines, all produced by Gyatso and Tenzin, with help from senior students; a small table and bench, two chairs; a dusty but well-used clinic logbook in which the name, gender, and age of patients, a shorthand diagnosis, and prescriptions are recorded. This regime of accountability is as new as the clinics themselves, and not unrelated. Gyatso and Tenzin's father never kept such records as he traveled from neighbor to neighbor and received patients in his home. He had no clinic and no need for a written record of these therapeutic encounters. He was not accountable to foreign donors or to a nation-state. Now clinic records render the work of healing legible in new ways to people beyond this immediate social ecology. Reports generated from these logbooks can make the scope of *amchi* medicine visible to government functionaries—the district health officer, the Council on Technical Education and Vocational Training, the Department of Ayurveda at the Ministry of Health—and foreign donors. * * *

This record keeping is also part of Gyatso and Tenzin's hybrid pedagogy: part lineage-based local practice, part formalized institution. Senior students are required to spend time staffing the clinics. Logbooks hold them accountable to their own learning process and to patients because making records requires students to reflect, even briefly, on what they are diagnosing and prescribing. In addition, logbooks are windows onto which medicines are used most, what formulas need to be replenished, and what illnesses are most common in a given season. These rudimentary notes scribbled in Tibetan cursive with whatever writing implement happens to be nearby illustrate how Tibetan medicine is being made "legible" (Scott 1998) to the state and to nonstate actors like NGOs. * * *

Each year since the clinics opened, Gyatso or Tenzin have sent me copies of the logbooks or hand them to me in Kathmandu. With assistance from Lo Kunphen senior students and Dartmouth undergraduates, I have helped Gyatso and Tenzin transform these



handwritten records into computer files capable of producing a new kind of authoritative knowledge: statistics. It is helpful to report that these clinics see an average of one thousand patient visits annually during the seven months their doors are open, and that this number has continued to rise each year since the clinics opened in 2004. Or that the median age of patients is forty-two, 46 percent of whom are male. Or that sandalwood and saffron-based medicines are some of the most popularly prescribed, even though neither of these ingredients is local or affordable. Logbook analyses reveal that women suffer more from disorders of the channels (*tsa*) and of wind (*lung*), and that men have more accidents.

* * *

There is a knock on the door. Normally this clinic is open only three days a week, staffed by a Lo Kunphen student who is also preparing for his [School Leaving Certificate examinations] at the nearby high school. But word travels quickly when a senior *amchi* is in town. A local woman, middle-aged and moon-faced, stands at the door. She wears a woolen embroidered skullcap typical of upper Mustang's women of an older generation. She complains of sore, swollen knees. She lifts her frock and hitches up her petticoats to reveal fleshy, puckered skin, in marked contrast to her sun- and wind-beaten hands and face. Her knees are visibly inflamed. Gyatso directs the woman inside. She sits on the bench.

Contrary to what one might assume, this medical encounter does not begin with initial questions. Gyatso knows this woman and has treated her for years. Instead much of the therapeutic encounter flows forth from touch. Gyatso places his fingers along the woman's radial arteries, the gold and turquoise ring he inherited from his father glinting in the light. Pulse reading completed, he looks in her eyes and examines her tongue. Gyatso says the woman has a blood-wind disorder along with some infection. From here, stories of suffering spill out. "These keep me awake," she says, pointing at her knees with a look of accusation and annoyance, as if they were a barking dog. The woman asks if the disease is *nyingba*, literally "old," or if it is *drakpo*, a word that approximates "hard" or "recalcitrant." Gyatso reassures her that these pains can be addressed. He gives her two weeks' worth of medications, wrapped in pages torn from an old student notebook.

"Avoid eating too much salt, but poultice your knees with *bultog*," he says, referencing sodium bicarbonate harvested locally. This harsh, demanding place provides at once the grounds for so much suffering and also, bountifully, the possibility of antidote.

Of Sky and Soil: 4:00 P.M.

Our visit to the Thinker clinic complete, Gyatso makes a few house calls before we head back to Lo. Tenzin's horse flies. I balance in the thick steel stirrups, perched above the wooden frame of a saddle, cushioned by carpets. I am bathed in sand, wind, and dust.

We slow to a walk and dismount on the far side of the river that separates the walled city of Lo Monthang from territory beyond. Gyatso leads our sweat-soaked horses across a tawny stretch of land, down the well-worn switchback to the river's edge, where poplars

grow. We are tired, horses and humans both. We could have used a rest, but our time together is limited and the day has begun to wane. Instead we head off to Lo Kunphen's medicinal plant cultivation grounds.

The experimental cultivation of high-altitude medicinal plants is a relatively new phenomena in Nepal and has been brought forth by push-pull factors. Some species are being overharvested, in part driven by increasing demand for raw materials to service commercial production of both Ayurvedic and Tibetan formulas * * *; this trend has also been linked to increasing market prices for certain ingredients. Yet many such plants require specific soil conditions in which to grow. Some fail to germinate. Sometimes it becomes difficult to reconcile use values and exchange values when considering the lifecycle of a plant.

Interestingly, much of the cultivation of Tibetan medicines—at times combined with species distribution mapping and in-situ conservation—is being carried out by *amchi* on the fringes of the booming Asian medicine industries in China and India, rather than as part of a strategy for growth within these industries themselves. A lot of this work has been funded by conservation NGOs and bilateral research or development organizations. This cultivation project in Mustang is being funded by a grant from the United Nations Global Environmental Facility Small Grants Program, for which I helped the [Himalayan Amchi Association] write the proposal.

As Gyatso and I head toward the cultivation plots, I consider a refrain I have heard from *amchi* in Nepal: "Without plants, we are nothing. Without plants, we have no medicine. And an *amchi* with no medicine is like a bird without wings." This metaphor shifts at times—a car without gas, a teacher without students, a meal without salt, a trader without goods—yet the meaning remains constant. Without these medicinal plants, the future of Sowa Rigpa is jeopardized.

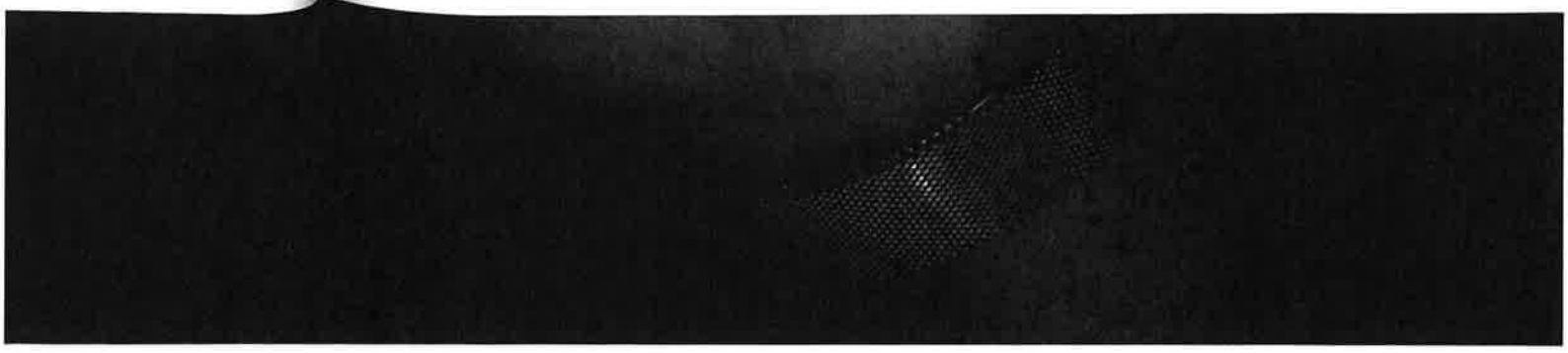
* * *

Gyatso and I hitch our horses beside the cultivation fields. I follow my friend along the raised perimeters of barley, sweet pea, and buckwheat fields toward a large plot of land rimmed by a wall of adobe brick and stone. * * *

"We have 3,000 square meters of farmland and have not used all of it. In the future we could cultivate more," my friend explains. "Water can be a problem, though. And we need to have a path to market. This will get easier when the road really comes to upper Mustang. At present it is difficult to make a profit when the price of transportation to Jomsom remains so high. But in the future, I think there will be opportunities for common people to make money by growing medicinal plants instead of only peas and barley."

* * *

Gyatso's economics are lucid. As he fiddles with the lock on the gate, he calculates the cost of water rights and labor per square meter of land, the current market price for a kilo



of barley versus a kilo of the three species of plants they are now growing and the cost of transport by horseback to the district headquarters in Jomsom, through middlemen, and then on to other markets. The profit margin is there, but barely.

* * *

Prayers of Aspiration: 8:00 P.M.

We leave the cultivation grounds. Horsetail clouds streak the sky, foretelling a day of rain. Gyatso and I walk slowly, clockwise as is expected, around the perimeter of the wall and back toward Lo Kunphen, horses in tow. We listen to the sounds of early evening in Mustang. Pressure cookers release steam. Donkeys bray. Children play hide-and-seek around rows of *chöten*. Tired-looking men and women return from harvest. Static-filled murmurs from satellite televisions diffuse into the cool air from the dark interiors of Monthang's few taverns.

Horses unsaddled and fed, we collapse on the same divans where we began this day. The room is bustling again. Gyatso's sister is cooking dinner. Tenzin arrives after his day of ritual attendance. Their mother orders her grandniece to give us tea and popcorn. There is not much left to do except to eat and rest, and we dive into both. I reach for more popcorn. Gyatso lets his chin droop to his chest. His eyes close. I watch him sink into sleep, letting the exhaustion of this man's life give way to a certain childlike surrender.

Then Tenzin sits down beside me with his laptop, fully charged. This is the problem of working with brothers. When one is resting, the other is ready to work. We have been discussing plans for Tenzin to visit the United States to fundraise for Lo Kunphen and see relatives in New York. I arranged a similar tour for Gyatso in 2003. The brothers alternate when it comes to foreign excursions; now it is Tenzin's turn. Tenzin's computer boots up. He loads a PowerPoint presentation, a process he has mastered, even though he speaks and reads virtually no English. As I wait for images to appear, I think of all the places these brothers have been: India, China, Bhutan, the United States, Britain, Germany, Japan, France, and Russia, including a stint as the resident doctors at a clinic in Tatarstan. This is difficult to square against the fact that about half of my own fellow U.S. citizens do not own a passport. In this sense "modernity" becomes a way of being in the world that lives within people who, according to stereotype, might seem the epitome of "traditional": a middle-aged monk with dirty robes and dirty hands, here on the edge of the world. In this sense Gyatso and Tenzin's life, and lifework, illustrate [anthropologist] Bruce Knauft's (2001) point that there are many ways of being modern in the world today. To deny the complex local-global realities of people like these *amchi* is to silence key ways that ideologies and socioeconomic influences circulate and shape contemporary life, from the power to buy things to the power to represent oneself on a national or global stage.

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"Sienna *la*," Tenzin says, with excitement, "let me show you pictures from England." Tenzin spent some time in the United Kingdom earlier this year and had occasion to lecture on the history of Mustang and the future of *amchi* practice at Oxford's Oriental Institute and the Wellcome Trust for the History of Medicine in London. He had also been blessed by an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He describes his visit aided by the digital images he took along the way. * * * He advances through a series of images with His Holiness, resting on one of him bowed before the man Tibetans can refer to, profoundly, simply, as "Presence."

I ask him about this gift of time with the Dalai Lama. "I requested his advice about our school. How to move forward, what to do about the problems we face, how to keep working toward our goals," he answers.

"What did His Holiness say?"

Tenzin's reply turns toward prayer. He chants a long, low supplication. Is this Tenzin's answer to my question or His Holiness's answer to Tenzin? Really, both are true. After the prayer Tenzin tells me the advice the Dalai Lama bestowed on him: *Keep working with a pure heart. Keep making connections around the world. Keep finding points of shared interest and collaboration with other amchi. The path forward will reveal itself through this process.* The Dalai Lama then handed Tenzin several packets of *jinden*, ritually consecrated pills made each year in Dharamsala. Medicine from blessing born. This too is efficacious practice.

ENGAGING THE TEXT, ENGAGING THE WORLD

- What questions would you want to ask the brothers Gyatso and Tenzin Bista if you could spend a day with them?
- What effect do you think an ethnography like this might have on them and their community?
- Craig provides a careful, thick description of a stack of notebooks, religious texts, and binders of receipts on a wooden table in the main room of the brothers' home. What insights does her detailed description provide?
- In what ways is the rural, mountainous way of life of the Nepalese shaping and being shaped by global forces beyond their communities?
- How do *amchis* integrate traditional Tibetan healing practices with western biomedical approaches?
- What questions would you ask Sienna Craig about her fieldwork or her ethnographic writing?