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REVIEW OF
THE ENDS OF KINSHIP:
CONNECTING HIMALAYAN LIVES
BETWEEN NEPAL AND NEW YORK
BY SIENNA CRAIG

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Sienna R. Craig's *The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives Between Nepal and New York* is about kinship unfolding through processes of migration and social change, and kinship folding people back into each other across spans of space and time. Craig frames her ethnography via the concept of *kora*, "the embodied act of walking clockwise around a sacred space," but also a Buddhist principle "that defines the nature of desire, interdependence, and cyclic existence" (p. 7). *Kora* reveals how things change and how they stay the same, how rupture and belonging co-exist, how mobility at once separates and emplaces. But the book has another guiding concept, the *lam*, a Tibetan word for 'road' or 'path,' which transmits the movements of diaspora, but also movement towards a goal, which, in the end, must be kinship itself, emerging as both a foundation for change and a key for interpreting it. Kinship makes change intelligible — to the reader, I think, as much as it certainly does for the ethnographer and the people she writes about.

The book is divided into six parts that follow the Wheel of Life, giving the ethnography a cozy and recognizable conventional structure, divided into parts about birth, marriage, subsistence, and so forth, while at the same time showing how this classic structure of ethnographic monographs can be rendered fresh and, in a way, unfamiliar. Each part intersperses fictional short stories with ethnography. The fiction complements the ethnography. There is no sense in which one is the ground against which the other figures, much less anything like its exegesis. Rather, the chapters rebound off each other, and together provide striking image of kinship in migration and change. The effect is impressive. The fiction is as ethnographically real as the ethnography is literarily true. This is a gorgeous book, one that is hard to put

down, one that I would unhesitatingly recommend to anyone at all, and a book which I think conveys the power of kinship in a manner that anyone will be able to tap into, that anyone can relate to.

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Part I is about birth and memory. ‘Blood and Bone’ is a short story about three generations of Mustang women and their (mis)fortunes with childbirth — a history of miscarriages and breeched births which never quite gets transmitted in words, or only gets conveyed in fragments, either because of death or cautious silence. As we follow these women’s experiences with pregnancy and labor their story moves from Mustang, to Kathmandu, to New York, from the comforting smell of juniper incense and the able hands of a midwife to the cold touch of the ultrasound and the precision of a c-section. The story vividly highlights how the transmission of memories of labor are interrupted by silences, death and distance, but it is also a beautiful demonstration of how the body remembers what words do not communicate. The study of kinship, historically so dedicated to language — to terminologies and their usages — here finds a wonderful example of how kinship is also embodied, passed on voicelessly, or with half-words and broken histories, and hence how its transmission can occur at the fringes of what is said. This is a theme that pervades the book.

Finding the ‘Womb Door’ is the ethnographic complement to ‘Blood and Bone’. It puts Craig’s experience with her Himalayan friends, and her own experience with pregnancy, at the center. The theme of generational distance is present here as well, but my impression is that while the short story foregrounds the silent tensioning of kinship across generations of women — the experience that gets relived but remains unspoken — the ethnographic chapter displays kinship stretched to its maximum along a geographic axis, in the “pathways that have led to this life” (p. 41), from Mustang to New York, and so many places in-between. It also captures how kinship unravels in a landscape that changes not just as an effect of migration, as a recognition of the simple fact that movement between places implies changing lifestyles, but also as modernity strikes at the ends of kinship, or as the New York end of kinship reverberates in the Himalayan end, impacting language acquisition, employment opportunities, and ritual life.

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Parents and children are the focus of Part II. “Letters from mother” concerns what the experience of becoming parents entails in a context in which one lacks ongoing interactions with parents. It again straddles the ends of kinship and social change, as the protagonist recalls her own distance from her mother and her lack of knowledge of her father in the context of her experiences in a Kathmandu boarding school, far from her home. At the same time, she contemplates her relation to her young child and to the Nepalese diaspora that connects past to present and future. “Going for Education” resumes the same theme, now with ethnographic snippets that span a long period of fieldwork. Education, whether in daycares, Nepali boarding schools, US high schools or colleges, at once estranges people from quotidian conviviality with close kin, and occasionally from obligations to them, but also creates new networks of support, based on shared origin, ethnic identity, religion. These associations of mutual care operate transnationally as well, creating spaces in New York for young Nepali-Americans to

learn about their home (while their parents work) and taking them to the Himalayas for “summer camps”. The institutions wherein education take place become sites of innovation, from which new forms of association spring. In every case in which formal education risks creating disaffection, people react to inhibit it, mitigating the changes that they are experiencing by recognizing and addressing it. By focusing on kinship in the context of a discussion of spaces of formal education, the chapter is an excellent demonstration of how the ethics of kinship can adapt to new contexts, taking in people who would not be predictable kin — and hence making kinship — while transfiguring the nature and attachment ties with specific kins people in the process, particularly those between parents and children.

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Part III is about making a living across the purview of borders, navigating and transgressing them as kinship and belonging wriggle their way through neighboring frontiers and the States that administer them. Strategies of belonging are not only played out on the frontier, but in faraway settings, such as in Red Hook, Brooklyn, where the Nepalese protagonist of the short story ‘Paper and Being’ obtains his green card as a Tibetan citizen of the People’s Republic of China – a claim that was arrived at by a long and tortuous family history of conflict and tragedy involving plots of land, districts, and national borders. The ethnographic chapter is called ‘Bringing Home the Trade’, which is how Craig translates the seasonal migration known as *tshong gyug*, a “livelihood strategy that was built on navigating the cultural worlds between upland Tibetan sensibilities, the Sanskritized culture of Nepal’s middle hills and cities in north India” (p. 103). As the chapter develops, this circumscribed area of *tshong gyug* expands to take in New York and its surrounding areas, as well as including new items of exchange and barter, notably cash and industrialized North American merchandise, and to include the ethnographer’s own participation in the lives of people involved in bringing home the trade.

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Part IV is about marriage. The short story is about love, and how to maneuver it alongside kinship obligations and distance. ‘At the Threshold of Life’ begins with a wonderful ethnography of a Nepalese wedding attended by Craig in Manhattan in 2015. While Craig mostly writes in a genre where ethnographic snippets are juxtaposed, generating a surprisingly comprehensive effect (her own brand of the ethnographer’s magic), the careful, and at the same time very personal, description of the wedding provides a partial exception. It shows synthetically, through an extended case study, as it were, how Craig uses what might be called a ‘minimalist’ and ‘curtailed’ ethnographic style to provide resonant images of how kinship sets the background against which life unfolds. The rest of the chapter resumes the themes of the wedding, themselves already preempted in the short story, of how social expectations are affected by changing conceptions of what a marriage should be, as people move away from Mustang and distant values move into the region.

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Land and lineage take center stage in Part V, narrated against the backdrop of tragic events and global disruptions: the 2015 Nepalese earthquake; the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001; tensions in the Nepal-China border; climate change. The story ‘Gods and Demons’ follows the fates of a revered ritual specialist in Mustang and his sons in New York. The story centers in the equivocal diagnoses of his eldest son’s condition: where New York doctors see mental illness and prescribe medicines, his father and he see interference from *yidam* who protected their native village. In ‘The Ground Beneath our Feet’ the focus is on the changing political and ecological landscape, and its effects on subsistence activities and ties to the country. Part V very clearly resumes a theme that was first developed in Part I, concerning “what bodies remember,” including what “the body of the land remembers” (p. 177), how body and land carry kinship forth in space and time.

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The theme of the body segues into Part VI, which is about the *kora* of the life cycle. It focuses mostly on the experiences of the elderly, and how these are matched and mismatched with the lives and aspirations of younger generations. ‘Three Seasons in the Fire Monkey Year’ is a story about three women, one living in the Nepalese village of Ghiling, one in Kathmandu, and the other in Jackson Heights. It captures attachment to places, old and new, inter-generational estrangement but also novel ties of solidarity between the elderly, particularly those who remain behind. ‘Between Presence and Absence’ opens with a funeral in Nepal, moves through communication across continents via digital social networks and celebrations of culture, to reflect on ritual, death and rebirth, both Nepalese and American.

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The Conclusion also opens with death, here of two brothers who died on the same day, one passing away in Kathmandu from cardiac arrest, and the other in New York from an apparent suicide. These deaths led people in Mustang on a series of reflections on how the *kora* of migration has brought change, but also resisted it (men still tend to land and lineage, women to networks of mutual care and belonging). By tracing her own role and the events which followed these deaths, Craig considers, for one last time, how she herself is a vector in the ends of kinship, as her life and that of her Nepali friends become intertwined in ways which are difficult to unravel.

Finally, the book offers an ‘Essay on Sources and Methods’. This is no appendix or post-script, but a very necessary comment on the ethnology of the region in which Mustang is situated, Craig’s career and biography, her relationship with fellows Himalayanists, her influences and anthropological interlocutors, and the academic and artistic work with which she is directly engaged. The Essay goes on to discuss each of the Parts that make up the book in turn, detailing the conditions under which the fiction and the ethnography were written, and clarifying some of the allusions implicit in these Parts, which may be evident to other ethnographers of the region, but which remain elusive to those unfamiliar with it. This closing Essay is a peculiar text: it blends information which many, perhaps most, ethnographies provide at the outset, to situate the reader in geographical space, historical relations, authorial preferences, and theoretical horizons; but the meta-commentaries on each of the Parts include information which readers may have expected to find in the Parts themselves, in order to an-

chor our readings in the stream of affects, relations, places, and histories which we are reading about. I have to say that despite the book providing maps of the regions investigated (both Mustang and New York, since for me much of the geography of the latter is as unfamiliar as that of Nepal), I was often lost as to where exactly some of the events were unfolding. Is this village in Mustang District? Where is Jackson Heights? I did not expect to find this information in a closing essay, and a lot of what I had just read made a different sort of sense to me after the ‘Essay on Sources and Methods’.

Yet, despite being occasionally lost while reading the book, I understand Craig’s decision to withhold this contextualization to a closing essay. *The Ends of Kinship* is an affective and aesthetic experience, where what we learn about kinship in Nepal, New York, in diaspora, is inseparable from the way we learn about it. The sort of context provided in the final essay would, I feel, have detracted from this literary-ethnographic effect. At the same time, it is wonderful to have it, and to be provided with a guide by means of which we can return to the stories and ethnographies in a new light.

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The book completes its own *kora*; or, rather, a series of *kora* laid out parallelistically, each one coming full circle before the book comes full circle. It is structured in a very effective way. The perpetual movement of the book is kinship and change, which traverses the ethnography from start to finish. Each chapter takes a theme from the Wheel of Life – starting with birth and closing with the death (“the mortal ends of kinship”), touching on lineages, gender, ritual, and so forth — and works out how kinship structures and processes these themes, and is in turn structured and processed by them. Each part is developed through the fiction-ethnography doublet; while both genres communicate the coordinates of time and space, I found that fiction, in general, foregrounds the long durée of memory and that which lies beyond it, while the ethnography foregrounds the geographical antipodes which separate and reunite people into places of belonging. It is as if fiction conveys an aphonic kinship, a shared inter-generational experience that gets transmitted in bodies and not in words, whereas ethnography conveys a taut kinship, a shared but strained conviviality that crosses through a number of ‘pathways of communication’ which remain truncated, fragmented. But this repetitive pattern does not dull the power of the book. Indeed, while with each new part I became better at predicting what to expect, Craig’s ethnography (including the short stories, which are every bit as ethnographic as the ethnography) also has an in-built chromaticism, an aesthetics of small intervals, that create gaps through which we constantly apprehend kinship in different ways (in the act of birth, in long-lost memories, in intimacy and loss) and through different mediums (paper and borders, chili powders and daycares). The overall effect is stunning.

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Two concluding confessions. I have to admit to an embarrassing narrow-mindedness. I flinched when I read in the Introduction that “The text proceeds in six parts, each of which includes a fictional short story and a chapter of narrative ethnography” (p. 11). In fact, each part also includes a very useful opening essay on what the fiction-ethnography chapters describe, and an evocative line drawing by the Himalayan artist Tenzin Norbu, and we do have

the post-conclusion Essay to provide us with any context we may have missed. But why were the short stories there at all? I am aware that there is a long and venerable tradition of experimenting with the differences and similarities between fiction and ethnography, a lineage that Craig tracks in the ‘Essay on Sources and Methods’. But I have not always had the best experiences with the fictional writings of anthropologists, and I am a staunch admirer of what Craig calls “narrative ethnography,” which has always had a very powerful literary impact on me. At any rate, it struck me that short stories and ethnographies should be kept separate — not because I subscribe to a naïve positivism which equates fiction with untruth and ethnography with an accurate depiction of social life. I felt, initially, that they should be kept separate because the truths they reveal are not quite the same.

I was completely wrong. Although it is, in the end, the dynamic interplay of fiction and ethnography that makes *The Ends of Kinship* so compelling, I found that, at times, the short stories came across as more holistic than the ethnography, and therefore, if this makes sense, as striking an even more classically ethnographic chord than those chapters which are explicitly ethnographic. I often found myself trying to identify what exactly it was about the short stories that achieved this. I thought that perhaps this effect occurred because Craig admittedly writes the ethnographic chapters as fragmentary excerpts, “like a tile mosaic or quilt” (p. 12); or perhaps because, by never shying away from including her own experiences in the field as part of the ethnography, Craig creates an intimate climate that is reminiscent of other literary genres — like fiction, for instance. But it is all great ethnography nonetheless, so these could not be the only reasons. Certainly, short stories allow a degree of license, to represent inner thoughts and hidden emotions that are not always accessible to the ethnographer. Craig also uses the short stories to anchor kinship in a generational span that is difficult to achieve in ethnographic narrative, even for ethnographers who, like Craig, spend most of their professional lives engaged with the same people and their descendants. This is all true. But the main reason, I think, is that only an exceptionally attentive, sensitive and talented ethnographer, with a deep intellectual and personal commitment to the people she writes about, would even dare to write short stories which are ethnographically true, let alone succeed in doing so. The short stories are hence a testament to great ethnography. Though I have been following Craig’s usage in referring to ‘fiction chapters’ and ‘ethnography chapters’, we really should find another way to refer to both of them, one which would do justice to the ethnographic depth that the style conveys. The fact that Craig writes fantastically well also means that they are a joy to read.

My second admission is that although I make an effort to read ethnographies from various parts of the world, the Himalayas have remained, for some reason, a lacuna in my ethnographic archive. To be sure, I read a few ethnographies of the region, including some work on Tibeto-Burman kinship, but certainly not enough to judge *The Ends of Kinship* in terms of a body of local ethnographic and historical literature. So, I was reluctant to review Craig’s book, though the editors of *Kinship* assured me that my review should focus on what *The Ends of Kinship* has to say about kinship, rather than about the Himalayas or Nepal, or about migration from Nepal to New York. I hope my review makes it clear that the book did, nonetheless, have much to teach me about the region and about what kinship is for the people of Mustang and its diasporic community. What I found difficult to do is what I do by default when I read any ethnography that is not about native Amazonian peoples, the parcel of humanity I know best through my own ethnographic work and knowledge of the literature: to envisage what sorts of questions a comparative ethnology of kinship in Amazonia and the

Himalayas might ask. The impression I take away from reading the book is that there seems to be an ethnographic gulf between these regions that I have no idea how to start bridging. I do not consider this a failure on my part, much less on Craig's, because the ethnographical (geographical, historical, etc.) differences between the two regions are indeed immense. But it did make my reading of the book less 'anthropological,' in a narrow sense, and more 'existential,' as it were.

The book furthermore studies kinship stretched and tensioned along generations and across the globe. These are not topics that have received much attention in Amazonian anthropology, where neither genealogical depth nor migration emerge as important themes: the former because of the region's widespread 'genealogical amnesia' and the latter because there is nothing resembling the scale of diasporic migration that we find among Craig's informants. There has certainly been a surge in Indigenous migration toward cities in the last decades, but these are predominantly to urban areas close to native villages and legally demarcated Indigenous Lands and often reflect temporary and fluid shifts between villages and towns. There have been some excellent ethnographies of these patterns of movement, but they are very different from the sort of migrations we learn about in *The Ends of Kinship*.

There is thus little lateral comparison, of the 'ethnological' variety, that the book elicits from this reader. But the thing about kinship is we all have it. If my ethnographic experience and anthropological credentials were inadequate to understanding the book, my own biography was, in a way, a dependable comparative counterpoint. I too was born from migration, lived in many parts of the world, maintain a sense of belonging to places that can be very different, and find my family scattered across a number of different countries. Despite the very many cultural, socioeconomic and historical differences between my own life and that of the people Craig introduced me to in *The Ends of Kinship*, I kept finding resonances between my experience of kinship and the conflicts and joys that the people of Mustang and their descendants in New York and elsewhere navigate during their *kora*. I would like to think that it is a success of the book that a Brazilian citizen with no real knowledge of the Himalayas can feel at home in an ethnography of Nepalese kinship in movement.