

Stretching community, bridging distance

Migration and belonging in Mustang and New York

Benjamin Linder

In recent decades, ethnographies of transnationalism and globalization have become prominent across the social sciences. Within anthropology, this turn helped redress the longstanding hyper-localism of ethnographic research, one that tended to treat categories like ‘culture’ and ‘place’ as static and bounded. *The Ends of Kinship* builds on this turn, yet in a way that beautifully retains the nuance and texture reminiscent of an earlier generation of ethnographic writing. The book charts the changing lives of people in (and from) Mustang, a remote district in northern Nepal with close ties to Tibet. Sienna Craig began traveling to Mustang over 25 years ago. Since then, the region has undergone dramatic demographic, ecological, economic, and political shifts. Increased migration – to other sites in Nepal, but also to sites abroad – is both a driver and consequence of such transformations. Aspirational out-migration has yielded rapid depopulation in Mustang, while also driving many to settle in New York City. In the wake of such dispersal, new tensions emerge, but so do new modes of connection.

One of the book’s triumphs is its insistence on considering these far-flung sites together, its recognition that understanding contemporary Mustang requires attention to the multi-scalar circulations within which it is embedded. In short, the book understands that these circulations constitute a singular process, and that the process is deeply conflicted. Such migrations promise opportunity and threaten ‘traditional’ lives. They strain cultural connections and offer new tools for their reinvigoration. *The Ends of Kinship* takes up these issues with enviable prose and remarkable depth. It explores how people from Mustang, whether in Nepal or New York, “care for one another, steward a homeland across time and space, remake households elsewhere, and confront distinct forms of happiness and suffering through this process” (p.10). The central question of the book is how a new reality, characterized by distance, reshapes a community’s sense of belonging, obligation, and cultural continuity.

Craig offers two key concepts to illuminate these dynamics: the titular ‘ends of kinship’ and the ‘khora of migration’. The first concept highlights the ambivalence faced by people from Mustang as they navigate new cultural waters, trying to maintain community and kinship ties throughout the radical dispersal of the last 20–30 years. The phrase itself is highly redolent. The term ‘ends’, in particular, resonates with diverse shades of meaning: the objectives of kinship, the demise of kinship, the completion of kinship, the locations of kinship, the boundary points between which kinship spans. The second concept derives from two separate words in Tibetan: (1) *kora*, the social and spiritual practice of walking clockwise around a sacred space; and (2) *khorwa*, the cyclical nature of existence, commonly known by the Sanskrit term *samsara*. By fusing these two concepts, the ‘khora of migration’ braids together the mundane and metaphysical, the quotidian and the grand. As applied to migration specifically, it “illustrates patterns of mobility, processes of world-making, and the dialectical relationship between loss and wonder around which diasporic experiences turn” (p.8).

Writing Himalayan lifeworlds

The book’s structure echoes the cyclical existence it describes. Its 6 sections masterfully guide readers through different stages of life in Mustang and beyond: pregnancy and birth (Part I), childrearing and education (Part II),



Top: Tsarang palace from monastery © Sienna Craig.
Above: New York street scene. Photo by Emily Xie on Unsplash.

livelihood and subsistence (Part III), marriage and gender (Part IV), ecology and place (Part V), and finally death and loss (Part VI). Each of these sections includes one fictional short story and one ethnographic chapter. Those familiar with Craig’s career will know that she has published widely beyond academic formats. In addition to her scholarship, she has also written a children’s book, poetry, the text for a book of artistic photography, and more. In *The Ends of Kinship*, the line between the creative short stories and the ethnography is always clear, but the nuance, texture, and quality of Craig’s prose shines in both genres. The book is neither a staid academic ethnography nor a self-indulgent literary foray. Craig’s writing is empathetic and poignant, bringing to life the community and characters she describes, whether they are actual friends or fictional inventions.

We are told of new tensions and strains arising from accelerating out-migration: children who cannot speak the same language as family members, new norms surrounding marriage and childbirth, a loss of connection to ancestral landscapes, the difficulties of making a living in New York, and the different difficulties of making one in Mustang. In Part VI, focused on death, Craig writes of witnessing a village funeral procession:

“I cry. Not because I knew this woman. Not because I understand the subtleties of this funerary rite or the complexities of this grandmother’s story. But because the dirges offered up as part of the ritual process for one person resonate with the loss of a way of life—if not the life force of the village itself.” (p.210)

As people (especially younger people) increasingly move away, Mustang is faced with new threats to its persistence and cohesion. As a result, the pages about death take on broader significance: the biological death of people, but also the possible death of traditional lifeways. Yet, refreshingly, the book studiously avoids fatalism. Throughout, readers are given examples of cultural maintenance, of new forms of belonging taking shape in and through diasporic circulations. Craig writes of community projects, fundraisers, cultural events, digital chat groups, religious rituals, language classes, and remittances. All of these foster a sense of community across time and space, and all of them highlight the labors of love through which people from Mustang retain (and transform) their community and its traditions. There are spaces of hope and optimism woven throughout the book, perhaps inseparable from the spaces of loss and mourning. Indeed, these are the twin-faced effects of a singular process.

Reviewed title

The Ends of Kinship: Connecting Himalayan Lives between Nepal and New York

Sienna R. Craig, 2020.

Seattle: University of Washington Press
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Pushing genres and conventions

There are at least two possible books contained within *The Ends of Kinship*. There might have been, for instance, one book about contemporary Mustang and another book about a South Asian diaspora in New York City. Alternatively, there might have been one book of literary fiction and another book of academic ethnography. Undoubtedly, its author has the knowledge, background, and ability to have pulled it off. However, in foregoing such arbitrary divisions, Craig has produced something more hybrid, exciting, and true-to-life. As she has made clear, understanding the two main field sites requires understanding them together. They are interlaced through circuits of labor and exchange, of kinship and sociality. To consider them independently would miss something crucial about both. Likewise, placing literary short stories alongside ethnographic nonfiction joins a growing body of work challenging academic writing conventions. There is a beautiful literary quality to all of Craig’s nonfiction chapters, and a keen ethnographic depth to her creative short stories. In other words, but both genres speak to and strengthen each other throughout.

The Ends of Kinship does not delve deeply into contemporary theoretical arguments, and Craig offers only passing glances at extant literatures. She jettisons traditional in-text citations throughout, though she does include a glossary, Essay on Sources and Methods, and full bibliography at the end of the book. On the one hand, some readers may feel disappointed by this. It would have been welcome to see the rich ethnographic content situated more deeply within ongoing scholarly debates. On the other hand, the book’s approach has at least two critical benefits. First, Craig’s twin conceptual pillars (i.e., the ends of kinship and the *khora* of migration) emerge from the research context itself, meaning that her discussion is less beholden to the terms of a Western intellectual cannon. Second, the lack of in-text citations and theoretical tangents lets the words breathe and reverberate. They are less encumbered by rigid frameworks, less burdened by overlaid concepts. This allows the writing to resonate more freely.

This book will hold the attention of anyone interested in Nepal, migration, or diasporic experiences. It is complex yet accessible, making it suitable for undergraduates as well. Indeed, Craig has set up a website¹ that includes, among other resources, a series of reflective writing prompts tailor-made for classroom use. *The Ends of Kinship* offers an admirable account of life in and beyond contemporary Mustang, of the stretch and strain induced by migration, and of the ties that continue to bind a community together.

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Notes

1 <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/endsofkinship>, accessed 4 March 2021.