

Everyday Cosmopolitanisms

Rewriting the Shape of the Silk Road World

The small trickling streams, now running toward the south, and a gradual descent showed that we had crossed the watershed of Central Asia and had reached the valleys of Assyria. Here and there the ruins of a fine old khan, its dark recesses, vaulted niches, and spacious stalls, blackened with the smoke of centuries, served to mark one of the great highways, leading in the days of Turkish prosperity from central Armenia to Baghdad. . . . Commerce has deserted it for many years, and its bridges and caravanserais have long fallen into decay; when with the restoration of order and tranquility to this part of Turkey, trade shall revive, it may become once more an important thoroughfare.

— SIR AUSTIN H. LAYARD, *DISCOVERIES IN THE RUINS OF NINEVEH AND BABYLON* (1853)

Agency can be strange, twisted, caught up in things, passive, or exhausted. Not the way we like to think about it. Not usually a simple projection toward a future. It's what we mean by "having a life" (as in "get a life"). But it's caught up in things. Circuits, bodies, moves, connections. It takes unpredictable and counterintuitive forms.

— KATHLEEN STEWART, *ORDINARY AFFECTS* (2007)

In this book I have tried to tell a different kind of story about the Silk Road, and about Armenia. The result has resembled the way I would tell this story to you if we had been sitting together—perhaps at a small table under a tree on Saryan Street, over a dwindling bottle of wine—in that in telling one story I nest five or six stories together, and start several more to be finished some other time. My starting point has been a story about the floors, arches, and walls of the Arai-Bazarjūl caravanserai, which I can still remember the feel of: cool hard clay, smooth stones, the scrape of gravel, the smear of ashy soil between my thumb and a red-burnished potsherd. To tell the story of the Arai-Bazarjūl caravanserai, I needed to tell

you the story of the Kasakh Valley and how it was made a world-in-particular by people like the Vač'utyans, and by people living in villages like Ambroyi, and by archaeologists and historians. But to tell the story of the caravanserai I also needed to tell you about caravanserais in particular and medieval architectures more generally—which ultimately brought me back to the aspirations of princely people like the Vač'utyans to fashion worlds in their own image, to fashion themselves as centers of worlds. And along the way I enumerated the things that made up these worlds, from roads and bridges to candles and prayers, stables, inns, the bones of saints, and the ceramic pots and bowls that set a welcoming table. But I also can't tell the story of those aspirant worlds without crossing their horizons with travelers like William of Rubruck or King Het'um—and in telling their journey stories I cross paths with other travelers in medieval and later times. As I told these stories of the Silk Road at continental scales, I found I had to start again, back up, and tell the story of how it even is that we imagine the worlds of medieval Eurasia as a road of silk. To use Pheng Cheah's words, all these other stories and worlds lie "quivering beneath the surface of the existing world."¹

This messy snarl of stories contains multiple spacetimes, each with their own protagonists and some with no clear hero. That multiplicity in turn challenges universalist ideas of cosmopolitanism which rely on one story absorbing countless others, on a single protagonist becoming the hero wherever he travels. To draw from Morrison's work on cosmologies of pepper,² the reconfiguring webs of encounter and exchange that have been dubbed "the Silk Road" thrived on mutual misrecognition as much as they did on syncretism, on people mistaking centers for edges and vice versa; or as Pollock et al. put it, "centers . . . everywhere and circumferences nowhere."³ Morrison's original example focused on the mistaking of human labor for wild nature, and resonates with broader challenges of thinking the Silk Road. But I also read misrecognition in the phenomenon by which caravan inns were central to the material practice of politics across some of the apparent cultural seams of the medieval world. Pious Karakhanids, striving for princely and beautiful power, built inns in Central Asia, as did pious Mamluks in the Levant and aspirant Seljuk Turks in Anatolia. Christian princes in Armenia, thinking of their own eternal souls, hired the same stonemasons who built caravan inns for their neighbors. My favorite kind of "misrecognition" is *metaphor*—to see one thing and understand it by way of something else. As we read in inscriptions and texts, warm, safe, hospitable places for travelers to sleep were understood as mutual metaphors for the world, and for the self—as stopping places for the immortal human soul. These institutions—which would also include the blacksmiths, bakers, cooks, millers, and shepherds living in adjoining villages—did more work on the Silk Road than just the very important task of giving tired and hungry travelers a place to sleep. They also provided an opportunity at the levels of political narratives and the experiences of travelers for worlds to come together, if just for the night.

ROADS, STONES, AND STRANGERS: IMAGINING SILK ROAD AGENCY

World-makings in multiple are not exclusive to the Middle Ages, but central to the ways we continue to imagine medieval lifeworlds, and cite them in modern projects (if metaphor is misrecognition, then for what do we misrecognize the metaphor of “the Silk Road”?). As we saw in chapter 2, part of the stickiness of the Silk Road as it has been told is the shape of that story, such that we persist in misrecognizing Marco Polo’s East-West list of places as an account of roads traveled, and insist on the Silk Road as a world encountered by a mobile, cosmopolitan subject. This modality of encounter reduces interlocutors, antagonists, and hosts alike to the category of *other*, a group which bleeds as well into the monstrous and marvelous, reducing the rhythms of maintenance and everyday life of all these otherfolk to the status of nature.

Yet, the practice of world-making in in-between places complicates the boundaries between humans and nonhumans, stones and selves and strangers, large and small worlds in other ways. One of the ramifications of this complex and vibrant worlding is recombination across the categories we use to think the past of the Silk Road. These include categories of embodied power, or gender, as they have territorialized our ways of thinking agency in the medieval past. Maintenance labor, cooking, and feeding become central to the making of everyday cosmopolitanisms, to the sustaining of cosmopolitan memories and bodies. And working in the other direction, we must contemplate that the authoring of worlds and the fashioning of self-space-time is not exclusively a masculine or male undertaking.

I like thinking with inscriptions because they frustrate disciplinary divisions between history and archaeology, between architecture and literature. I’ll use one final inscription to give a simple example, taking us back to the medieval journey into the Kasakh Valley described in chapter 1. As the high road crosses the shoulder of Mount Aragats, the spires of the monastery of Teler pierce the horizon overhead.⁴ The church, *gavit*, and belltower of the monastery still stand, having been renovated during the Soviet period.⁵ As the Soviet-era signage inside informs you, the church was constructed under the patronage of the princess Mamaxatun Vač’utyan contemporary with the caravan inn at Arai-Bazarjul (see fig. 20).

Walking inside the *gavit*, a visitor passes under the dedicatory inscription carved into the delicately arched lintel: “In 681 (1232), in thanks to God I Mamaxatun built the churches, the large and the small and the *gavit*, in my memory and that of my husband Vač’e, and the inhabitants of this holy monastery offered a mass for us every year at the feast of the Holy Cross of Varaga in all churches with sacrifice and love, and those who may go against my writing, will answer before Jesus Christ (inscribed by Mxitar).”⁶ This inscription repeats many of the themes and techniques discussed in the previous chapters; I draw attention to it here because, unlike the majority of the corpus already discussed, this inscription



FIGURE 20. The entrance to the *gavit* at Teler Vank'. The endowment inscription is located in the arched lintel above the door. Photo by the author.

reiterates that the techniques of assembly and epigraphic incorporation even at the architectural level, were not exclusive to male persons in medieval Armenia.⁷ Mamaxatun here presents as a cyborg self, knitting her futurity (and that of Vač'e) with these buildings and the communities which inhabit and sustain them, even as her inscription is written by a male mason-appendage, named as Mxitar. Mamaxatun also situates herself within sacral, feminine lineage: she names the day of her perpetual commemoration with "sacrifice and love" (*matalov ev sirov*) as the feast of the Holy Cross of Varaga. This refers to a fragment of the true cross associated with St. Hripsime, a woman and one of the first Armenian martyrs; the fragment was held in the thirteenth century at Varagavank'.⁸ Everyday rhythms related to the maintenance of a beautiful world in medieval Armenia were crisscrossed with diverse spacetimes, and active with assembled and assembling bodies which are not easily recognizable as the lonely hero of our old Silk Road stories.

Why We Need New Silk Road Stories

As a story told in twentieth-century Armenian and Soviet historiography, the Silk Road in the Caucasus was a linear tale of progressively developing cosmopolitanism of the rational, modern sort. In the account of high medieval Armenia narrated by the historians and archaeologists Manandyan, Babayan, Marr, and

Arak'elyan, the period of caravanserai- and bridge-building in Armenia signaled a turn away from medieval, locally bound ways of living toward a global future.⁹ In Levon Babayan's account, men like Vač'e and K'urd Vač'utan, Tigran Honenc' and Č'esar Orbelyan were "merchant princes," hybrid social actors who mastered the alchemical transformation of movable property into immovable power.¹⁰ The epigraphic and architectural records left by these princes are cited within such narratives as part of a muscular mechanism of place making, as the revenues of trade were fed into engines of patronage and capital investment which churned out the fabric of cities: Kars, Erzerum, Ani, Dvin. These named merchants are thus endowed by this story with the agency to build worlds, straddling medieval provincialism and modern globalism, medieval cyclical time and modern progressive time, like colossi. This story of the Armenian *mecatun* princes joins a compendium of popular tales of Silk Road visionaries, from Alexander the Great to Ghenghis Khan to Shah Abbas I, credited with prioritizing trade through Asia and opening up the Orient to the probing curiosity, desire, and appetites of the West.¹¹ What all these stories have in common is of course the emphasis on singular human agency over the Silk Road, which in turn is conceived as a landscape that can be brought under control and a source of prosperity that can be channeled.

At the moment, both global cultural heritage organizations and globalizing governments are dreaming along the same lines, drawn East to West. For the last several years, UNESCO and affiliated organizations have been encouraging the nations of Eurasia to align themselves, to make traditions of hospitality and material dreamings and places of transitory stopping into concrete things-in-themselves, places that can be listed, registered, visited, preserved, and made into emblems (or brands) of national character. Silk Road heritage raises a host of questions, enough to fill many other books.¹² All I will do here is raise one big one; if the *universal* of universal cultural heritage and the *universal* of the universal human subject are the same, then who is cultural heritage for? Who is it *not for*? The same question can then be asked of Silk Road line-projects like China's Belt and Road Initiatives, or the United States' sometime Silk Road Strategy, which dream of getting all of Central Asia on the path to some definition of civilization. But as Thorsten put it, "across the territory called the Silk Road can be found competing proprietorship claims over which culture or civilization holds the keys to the best of all possible worlds."¹³ In Armenia these competing claims manifest in a clash of worlds: Chinese investment companies fund a route to progress through the heart of the country, six lanes of high speed traffic from Batumi to Bandar Abbas, the dreams of the Seljuks and Safavids rebuilt in concrete and rebar. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department drives another brand of integration, labeling Silk Road sites across the country, and funding heritage initiatives that help Armenia remember its identity as an outward-looking, Christian (read: nonfundamentalist) post-Soviet state. This is the same Silk Road story written in new media, though one might cynically add that global capitalism, in "buy[ing] the world a Coke" of Silk

Road unity, adds the twist that local stakeholders—meaning the countries of the global south, people living in Yerevan and Aparan—are encouraged to aspire to be nameless, helpful bystanders in their own Silk Road future.

A postcolonial critique might point out that this dream of the Silk Road as a trans-historical pipeline of cosmopolite wealth is an extractive and exploitative story; a feminist critique further argues that it is an androcentric and patriarchal one.¹⁴ I would add that such a story is furthermore simply boring, a barren way to imagine the improbable intricacies of human mobilities, exchanges, miseries, and dignities tangled up in the medieval and early modern world. As John Ganim argues, “there are moments when thinking about the other emerge as ways of thinking about ourselves and therefore about the responsibilities we owe to a world beyond the limits of our social horizon.”¹⁵ In the case of the medieval Silk Road, this notion of “others” incorporates both medieval temporal others, as well as the subalterns that modern globalization makes for itself. Our challenge is writing better stories, somehow reconfiguring our habits of thinking to consider world-making as a matter of care shared among humans and nonhumans, across disparate spacetimes and reconfiguring desires. Once that audacious aim is achieved, how do we excavate Silk Road subjectivities that were written but did not write, thus collapsing the apparent contradiction of “everyday medieval cosmopolitanism”? I have found myself attempting to do this by approaching the Other spaces of the Silk Road in other ways. My interest in the institution of the medieval caravan inn, which was a mainstay both of travel experience and also of local Armenian politics, is what drew me first to Armenia and to histories of the Silk Road. My first framing of the caravanserai was as a place of meeting between fellow travelers, of mobile subjects. I tried to write it as a *heterotopia* (essentially a funhouse of transcendent encounter), and as an engine for the subjectification of the travelers who stayed there on one night in their continuing journey. But in 2013–14, as we excavated the adjoining village of Ambroyi, I found my perspective reconfiguring from that of the traveler to those for whom the travelers themselves were transient strangers. I imagined the arrival of the caravanning stranger from the vantage of those for whom such arrivals were part of the quotidian labor of cooking, serving, and cleaning—the maintenance activities of the medieval Silk Road. As work on the role of service workers in mediating the “flows” of globalization continues to show, this infrastructure of accommodation both smooths the frictions of difference and also effects the transformation of both host and guest.¹⁶ The villagers at Ambroyi/Hin Bazarjuf lived and worked in a full world which contained town, church, castle, road, and travelers. We must however imagine their personhoods using tools other than (or alongside) texts, and think about the ways that the spacetimes of worldview, distance, and difference are intimately built from material things they left, including hearths, shared meals, washed dishes, and, in some cases, small things brought from over the valley horizon: a bead, an arrowhead, or a favorite bowl. And we



FIGURE 21. Glass bangle bracelet fragments excavated from Ambroyi village. Figure by the author.

can think about the ways that these village spaces abutted and were incompletely overwritten by inscriptions and historical accounts (see fig. 21).

Among the artifacts found at Ambroyi was a series of fragments of bracelets, made from colored glass. The bracelets were all shades of bright blue, ranging from a bold turquoise to a deep cobalt. Bracelets of this type are commonly found across Eurasia in the medieval period, from India to Bulgaria and beyond.¹⁷ While archaeologists have long associated these bracelets with women—to the point of using them to sex otherwise unidentifiable burials—they have not been extensively studied as an artifact category. At Ambroyi we found fragments of these ornaments all around the rooms containing ovens. We even found a fragment inside one of the larger ovens, conjuring up the cringe-inducing scenario of someone reaching their hand in to slap dough against the hot oven wall, only to hear a crack and a tinkle as the bracelet broke and fell into the hot ashes below. In asking whose labor was this cooking and feeding, I find myself unbundling similar assumptions to those challenged by Mamaxatun's inscription discussed above. Were the slender wrists that wore the imported glass bracelets at Ambroyi attached to bodies that thought of themselves as women? Or men? I do think this is an interesting question, but for the moment what I also think is as or more interesting is how these be-bangled bodies in this space—that of routine “women’s work” or “maintenance activity”—mattered in a world that contained both ovens and Orient, both the passing of days

and the passing of hungry, tired travelers. And to do this requires that I collapse road space and everyday space and let tedium and rhythm into travel, and cosmopolitanism into the quotidian. Seeing the way that stories of medieval spaces are gendered has high stakes in reconfiguring the medieval period in its own terms, as other than the long dark quotidian to which the fleet arrow of the modern can never return. Following Munn, I would work on seeing smaller worlds of the Silk Road as spacetimes run through with local politics that call on the traveler, the outside, and the universal as players in dramas staged in local landscapes. Telling the Silk Road as something more or less than an adventure story read from West to East shapes not only the landscapes that we reconstruct, but also the spaces and times it becomes possible to make.

Feeling the frictions as I tried to construct these other worlds helped me understand how we are wrapped up in stories of the Silk Road as old as Mandeville, and as mystifying. Contemporary approaches to the continent of Eurasia and the peoples living and dreaming within it are stuck in the East-West grooves worn by Marco Polo's adventure story, imagining the Silk Road as a place where time travels backward, more slowly, or not at all. The impact of the shape of Marco Polo's story matters for our own imaginaries because copies of his account were carried by the scholars and travelers who provided the first "scientific" descriptions of the Silk Road, and of our world as a whole. The *Travels* of Polo and Rustichello was required reading for Christopher Columbus in the fifteenth century, for Lord Macartney in the eighteenth, and for travel writer William Dalrymple in the twentieth.¹⁸ In the first years of the twentieth century, the philologist and famous archaeologist Aurel Stein referred to the *Travels* to navigate the human geographies of Central Asia, confident that the peoples and cultures he encountered were the same observed by Polo six hundred years earlier.¹⁹

This collapsed spacetime remains the desired destination for tourists in Central Asia, as the same narratives are deployed to shape infrastructure and tourism development in the overlapping spheres of UNESCO heritage and the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2020, the *New York Times* travel section ran a series of essays on "The Route That Made the World." Writing on the active practice of silk making in Georgia, Esi Edugyan juxtaposes descriptions of the "particular decay of the Old Soviet republics" with extensive citation of the description of Georgia from Marco Polo's *Travels*.²⁰ Even while casting aspersions on the authenticity of that text, Edugyan asserts the utility of Marco Polo's "more grounded observations" to help "imagine a past that many people here have managed to keep alive today." All of which is another way of reassuring potential tourists that the Silk Road of Marco Polo is still there, that the people of the Silk Road world have valiantly resisted modernity. I discovered at some point that freelance photographer Michael Yamashita maintains an Instagram account called @thesilkroadjourney, where he juxtaposes excerpts from the travel account of Marco Polo or from references to Zheng He's itinerary with photographs of the "same" places, people, or things in a

modern context. This practice of rakish de-temporalization dissolves modern into medieval and vice versa; these exotic peoples have never been modern, but at the same time, the cosmopolitan Silk Road is held up as the medieval world's most modern dream.

If our modern storytellers aren't casting the Silk Road as a spacetime out of time, they frequently recapitulate the East-West polarity defined by Halford John Mackinder in 1904. Mackinder followed Hakluyt in believing in the close link between geographic knowledge and national destiny; he defined Central Asia as a Pivot of History, a golden apple which could only be grasped by the West or the East.²¹ The narrative of a mysterious and enticing East giving rich gifts of civilization (but also destruction!) is dangerous because it *seems true*, simply because it's been a story people have been telling for a thousand years.²² If a feminist critique of science has a point of entry into geopolitics, it is that the total dominance of a logocentric paradigm leads the Authors of Global Destiny to mistake, when reading medieval authored worlds, narrative overlaps for transhistorical confirmations of objective fact. Thus, in the epigram at the head of this chapter Austen Henry Layard, archaeologist and imperial diplomat, seamlessly "reads" the landscape of monumental medieval infrastructure in Anatolia into a narrative of prosperity lost and regained. This narrative was inseparable from the larger human-material-temporal project within which he was at the time enmeshed, the prying of colossal chunks of ancient eastern civilization out of the sands of Iraq to use as a sort of mother dough for the British imperial mission. In musing on the potential for the "revival" of trade under conditions of "order and tranquility," Layard cites the most pernicious imaginary of the Silk Road as a transcontinental stream of abstract desire that irrigates the valleys and roads along which it passes with wealth and the cosmopolitics of profit. Of course, Layard attributes the ruined caravanserais to the failure of global commerce, rather than the disintegration of local practices of world-making and hospitable politics.

In part, I wanted to try to tell a Silk Road at a spatial scale smaller than the continental, and at a timescale shorter than the monumental. I have long been intrigued by a problem in history and archaeology, that we are so reliant on the lives and labors of people that we can't know, and who themselves couldn't know the scope of the phenomena which take center stage in our analyses. Everyday cosmopolitanism is important for me because it widens the angle of the shot, as it were, from the heroic traveler to the lifeways and practices which made roads thinkable, but which also returned the gaze of the road. I continue to be curious about everyday, ordinary, and routine practices which constitute and perpetuate global structures without necessarily seeing them for what they are. Anthropology has been concerned with the relationship between structure and individual agency for decades,²³ and my colleagues working at the scales demanded by the Eurasian steppe have been grappling with the question of how to theorize local participation in world-scale cultures in thought-provoking ways.²⁴ For me what

is important is opening up avenues of researching places like Armenia as not just local places or Silk Road places, but as complex spacetimes and resolutely centered worlds-in-themselves, which through intersection of matter, time, and desire become caught up in, as Kathleen Stewart puts it, the agency of “circuits, bodies, moves, connections.”²⁵

I have maybe written—and am trying to write—a different kind of Silk Road history. In a departure from the general trend I don’t want to argue that Armenia or the South Caucasus was the most important part of the Silk Road or the objective center of the world in the thirteenth century (*pace* Ando, Artur, and my other drinking buddies from Arai-Bazarjuf village). Ongoing research on Indian Ocean trade in the Middle Ages continues to challenge long-standing, land-centered ideas about how the world was connected. But I am fascinated by how the medieval world was knit together from worlds with centers everywhere, and by practices of hospitality and care that treated ordinary people, invisible in historical texts, as if they were important. Hospitality at different scales means that what we call Silk Road cosmopolitanism was a shared project in world making occurring in multiple spacetimes and across plural, overlapping scales.

Ultimately it matters how we tell the story of the Silk Road, how we build that place in things, peoples, and natures, because we (modern archaeologists, dwellers within globalization, earthlings, human denizens of an uncertain global future) are already tangled within its imaginaries. They are already part of the toolset we are using to build our way out of our current problems, whether insecurity, instability, precarity, peripherality, or apathy.²⁶ In myriad ways, we still live in the world(s) built in the Middle Ages; we literally and figuratively dwell in a store-room of medieval stuff, from literary tropes to laws, buildings, furniture, food-stuffs, ways of dress, ways of imagining our both our best and worst selves and our most beautiful and barbaric “others.” We also live in the worlds built with those medieval things, heirs to the uses of the medieval past to imagine the present. If I might end where I began chapter 2, with Donna Haraway’s riff on Marilyn Strathern’s still-relevant position that by writing the world differently we write a different world: “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with.” Or, as Eco wrote in his Silk Road novel, *Baudolino*, in “imagining other worlds, [we] end up changing this one.”²⁷ This argument is I think at the center of feminist work on the Silk Road like Bray’s *Technology and Gender*, which complicates the categorical roles of medieval people in making the things that made the world. Medieval weaving women were, for Bray, woven *as* women, and domestic, public, imperial, and global spaces were co-constructed around them.²⁸ Her analysis requires a scalar shift as we think about medieval global cultures, which are rooted in intimately engaged technologies as well as imperial strategies and continental movements. For my part, I remain fascinated by the history of travel through Eurasia, and I own my romantic imaginaries of travelers moving through the mountains, valleys, and deserts of medieval routes even while possessing firsthand knowledge of how

“smelly” a mountain caravanserai might have been. Critically, I do not want the account of hospitality in my narrative to imply that violence, warfare, precariousness, and other dangers were not a real part of medieval life; if anything, they are the topography of the world against which the practices of hospitality are framed. But medieval military adventure is also a story often told, and is a story that loves heroes. My hope is that, after reading this book, you return to the medieval stories of William of Rubruck, of Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, and others, and find yourself joining me in wondering about the human and nonhuman figures at the margins, the spaces they neglect to describe, the unseen hands that opened doors, made meals, brought fodder, and laid out beds.

If the medieval Silk Road seems like a route out of modern global problems, then a very relevant question to me seems to be, not just how did people in the Middle Ages imagine themselves in relation to broader worlds, but moreover, once they managed that, how did they “matter” those worlds—how did they come to *care* about and for them in the timescale and spatial extent of everyday life and work? I think care is yet another scalar problem; care operates at multiple scales and works to contract spacetimes in unpredictable ways. In thinking about how a global medieval hung together, I am infinitely more curious about care than *control* (a word that most archaeologists can’t define anyway). Care in this context is both the sense of caring-for that I described in the last chapter—of labors of care, maintenance work, and the caring of hospitality—but caring for things is also what Maria Puig de la Bellascasa has described as “relating to them, of inevitably being affected by them, and modifying their potential to affect others.”²⁹ This means taking seriously the messy implication of medieval people in the matter of caring: that bodies could be buildings, buildings could be worlds, selves could be spacetimes, meals could be universes encompassed by world-roaming bellies. The version of the medieval world that we might reconstruct using archaeological data is not “more true” than that presented by textual sources. Both medieval written accounts of lives along the Silk Road, and our assemblages of Silk Road things, are interleaved parts of mutually implicated apparatuses for making sense of spacetimes at multiple scales. In other words, they are stories within stories, worlds within worlds—and the more worlds we make of them, the better.

