

# Against the Grain

## Medical Anthropology in the Anthropocene

THE TRICK OF THE WORLD—its secret and its truth—is that it is the fountain of all things. The analytic task before medical anthropology is to contain at least the most important parts of that messy complexity and contingency, the pain and the pleasures, the sorrows and joys, the desires and remembrances, and, sometimes, the catastrophe.

The challenge of translating into words the world's seemingly effortless trick—which means fixing the flux into local and time-bound descriptions and understanding—includes, as it ever has in our best accounts of it, an awareness of power and privilege. These shield some and expose others, and this is largely a book about the exposed. If João Biehl, an editor of this volume, writes not of fountains but of “life’s onslaught,” it’s because many would speak of raging torrents rather than of refreshing wellsprings.

It is the experience of this flow that emerges here as the primary source for medical anthropology and for anthropology writ large. Because whether our local moral worlds are perceived as fountain or flood, the way we know them most intimately—even as they lurch toward an imperiled and perhaps

finite future—is through lived experience. What could be more mundane, more worldly, than the fate of each of us when faced with the truly universal (anthropologists don't use this word often, and with reason) fact of our own mortality? (We do persevere on that one.) Medical anthropology serves, in this work, as a stern reminder that life's currents include, for all of us and unequally, illness, injury, and a shared fate of finitude.

This is a book about life and death and about the aftermath of death. That alone makes it relevant to our species and to others, but *Arc of Interference* is also a book about the possibility of something more and something wonderful: across the continents, people struggle to care for one another and to make sense of suffering. Making such sense was the task of a now obscure branch of theology known as theodicy. That term may have largely disappeared, but each of this book's chapters reminds us that making sense of fate, and altering its horizons, is a task taken up in urgently in extraordinary and ordinary times, to invoke terms from the liturgical calendar, in at least some religious traditions, which David Carrasco (reviving an anthropological tradition, and also with good reason) warns are neglected at our analytic peril.

In the face of suffering, regardless of its cause, there is nonetheless relief and comfort from family, friends, and even strangers. The “care-ful ethnography” pioneered here suggests this happens after death, as well. In the land of the living, sick or injured people seek care, and caregiving is central to the journey between birth and death. As a number of these chapters show, caregiving begins before death and reliably extends well beyond it. It is, Arthur Kleinman has argued in his beautiful and (for me, at least) devastating *The Soul of Care*, “the invisible glue that holds society together.”

For the injured or ill, the search for succor occurs not before meaning making but is central to it. The quest for care, like giving or receiving it, is a fundamentally social process, as anthropologists have long maintained and as the contributors to this book show us in vivid manner. So why do we see attempts, in so many scholarly accounts of sickness and suffering, to reduce personal experience to chaff to be discarded? Why do we desocialize the obviously irreducible sociality of sickness?

I'm not referring primarily, as many revanchist (and sometimes simply resentful) medical anthropologists once did, to papers published in leading medical journals. I'm referring to the analyses proffered by many trained in psychology, sociology, demography, epidemiology, and biostatistics. I'm thinking, too, of current strains of history, political economy, and philosophy. Forget about economics, which is classed as a social science in most US universities but often reads, when it reads at all, like amateur mathematics.

If the desocialization of social science is a development profoundly to be rued—or, at least, to be recognized and named—it’s also a trend long countered by Kleinman, whose radically humanist work *Arc of Interference* honors. For decades, as this book shows, he has deplored the stripping away of context, which means not only the social milieu of local moral worlds but the history that underpins them. His plangent critique has been laid out in an oeuvre that has restored the social to our understanding of many misfortunes—and to the search for an ethical or moral perch in a world on the edge.

Human experience, even at its most interior, is social experience, lived out within local worlds enmeshed not only in physical bodies but also in broader and cosmopolitan social webs, themselves spun into global assemblages. It’s *all* social, which is why desocialization of analyses of health and sickness does violence to any shared understanding of those worlds. If at first Kleinman chafed against the category fallacies of psychiatry, he soon lifted his eyes to the desocialized social sciences, genetics, epidemiology, and the rising host of those contemplating health disparities with little attention to lived experience. Many in these traditions were looking, he and his wife and collaborator Joan Kleinman once wrote, “at anything but experience.”

The implications of this critique and of Kleinman’s written work—and of this book—are nothing short of vast, as would be evident without my own admiring comments. *Arc of Interference* interrogates a number of framing binaries that continue to chafe. In her contribution, Margaret Lock situates hers (and Kleinman’s career) in the old and fraught debate about nurture versus nature, noting that, “with the consolidation of the discipline of genetics, and the gradual formation of deterministic neo-Darwinism over the course of the twentieth century, a separation of the social and biological sciences became even more marked.” It is impossible not to think of another psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, who sought to link the “interior” psychological worlds of colonial subjects with the degrading and degraded French colonial rule he labored to end. But Kleinman’s key contributions are more numerous than efforts to bridge this ancient gap between the personal and ostensibly impersonal.

The ethics of attending to suffering, in this book sometimes termed *arts of care*, require intimate knowledge of experience. For some, those with the ability to sustain reverent attention, this is often easy to glean. All you have to do, at least to start, is ask what really matters, and surely anyone with a modicum of curiosity and empathy and persistence might cull important insights. But the aftermath of sickness reveals that many forms of expertise

are marshaled to explain away, rather than to grasp, intimate experience. When we fail to faithfully echo and amplify the demands of the afflicted, it's small wonder many are mistrustful of expertise and academics.

There are, these days, plenty of reasons to restore that trust through what is termed in these pages *care-ful ethnography*. A long-prophesied pandemic of a respiratory virus is upon us. As the hammer of COVID-19 falls unevenly across the globe, this brand of medical anthropology might itself constitute a form of care. As Carrasco has it, echoing Kleinman, ethnography itself, and even humanitarian forensics engaged in bringing up the bodies, can constitute a form of caregiving in the face of affliction.

### Fear, Flood, Fire, Foe

Unsurprisingly, given such arguments, this collection is focused on experience. It is, of course, the contributors' intention to theorize social experience, which is inevitably personal or interior—internalized and relational—as well.

The experience examined in these pages is rarely of the joyful kind. But it's important to note that the individual chapters here are the fruit of decades of work, and they tell us what really matters to these scholars. War and famine in German-blockaded Holland. Racism of varied forms. Colonial predations, including the sack of the environment, the thinning or destruction of indigenous communities and the historical trauma (and massive displacement) that ensued, sparking enduring pathologies, including depression, suicide (including even self-immolation), domestic violence, substance abuse. The degradation of the planet and epidemics and pandemics hitherto unknown or taking on new and more virulent forms.

This grim list goes on. Then again, these chapters are a tribute to a medical anthropologist whose books included subtitles such as “living a moral life amidst uncertainty and danger.” But *Arc of Interference* is no jeremiad, no catalog of wrongs. Nor is it only what Robert Desjarlais, taking a tender and philosophical turn, terms *demise writing*. There is within it much demise, and many funerals, but these chapters bring to mind smoothed bits of sea glass. Taken together, assembled, they constitute a treasure.

The pounding of sand and shards into sea glass worthy of a crown might not be a welcome metaphor for the radically egalitarian, but the reader—at least, this one—can almost see the book's contributors bent over their forges. A prime example of this patient reviewing for me, and of the value of the metaphor, is Vincanne Adams's elegant reflection on a dreadful if ontologically entrancing topic that has troubled her for years and that few other writers

could render in respectful and evocative prose. Each of these contributions surely required intense heat and years of polishing, and we're left with a gem that's both easy and difficult to read.

Easy because these chapters each condense long years of work into essays that draw on Kleinman's insights and on his decades of engagement with and in China. (Other volumes, crafted largely with his former students in China, pay more focused tribute to his work there). These chapters, these bits of sea glass, glitter with propulsive force, throwing off lessons through narrative ("A guru got up to speak to the assembled transgender women"; "Here is where the artist comes into the picture"). The heat of these narratives might make some readers shrink back in dismay, and that's why the book is hard.

In addition to the brute force of events such as wildfires, self-immolations in Tibet, and scorching deaths in the Sonoran Desert are intimate but no less molten stories about, say, the loss of the father of one of this book's contributors; he was so horrified by the indignities meted out to the bodies of his Mexican American students, who, after perishing in a car accident, were so unceremoniously piled in a frigid morgue that he took his own life.

Unlike the ahistorical accounts of early twentieth-century ethnography, these chapters are firmly rooted in time, even to the point of creating new verbs, such as *futuring* and *horizoning*, which further unmoor the notion of the ethnographic present. Jean Comaroff reminds us, in her reliably felicitous way, that anthropology "has echoed the Romantic strain inherent in Euro-modernity itself, its enduring obsession with certainties lost, with time 'lapsing,' ever receding into history." A corrective, she continues, is to be found in "a commitment to take seriously the temporal understandings of others, the distinct ontological realities they live by."

The reader knows, early on, that we are deep within the Anthropocene, with (to cite the troubling reflections of Adriana Petryna) its "epic storms from warming oceans, wildfires burning with unprecedented intensity, rising sea levels, massive crop failures, extreme heat, prolonged droughts." Many horizons are obscured in smoke and flame, but not all is lost. The "vast abrupt of climate change," she continues in considering a ballooning future of wildfires in the United States, reminds us that the "permutations of an absent horizon concept include futility and hope, as well as curiosity."

The value of this brand of anthropology should be obvious, surely, in the Anthropocene, when, as Comaroff writes, there's an "ominous sense of dread as the birds fly off and calamity seems imminent." Who among us doesn't see the future as different from the past? Who among us isn't called, or simply able, to peer toward the horizon? Who doesn't have to?

## Arc of Interference

These chapters don't need a foreword or an afterword to tie them together; they are already linked to Kleinman's work, and that (with apologies for another shiny metaphor) is golden thread enough. But it's important, at least to me, to say a few words about the individual contributions, their complementarity, their vast abrupts, their ties to the thread.

It's important to me because I know the work of these scholars well and have been engaged in some of it. Yet within their contributions—already classed as jewels—are surprises for even the most well-versed practitioners of medical anthropology. Some of the surprises, such as Petryna's work of horizoning, are novel concepts; some are fruitful reworkings of old concepts, and still others include felicitous turns of phrase.

In each chapter we find twists in the narrative that hadn't previously been shared. Many introduce new characters, who are, by definition, unique and important regardless of how commonly encountered their views may be. Most of all, though, I found myself marking "things you want to know" in each and every chapter. These, too, are situated in the flux of time. To give a few examples, and in no particular order: of wildfires in the United States, Petryna reminds us that the hour is late and some switches may well be irrevocably flipped. Desjarlais informs the reader that, in Nepal, the Buddhist Hyolmo people know that a good death "helps them to achieve liberation or a good rebirth." The period after death and before life, in the liminal realm known as the *bardo*, can last up to forty-nine days—a relief to some raised on the related notion of limbo, even though, we learn, a good rebirth requires the help of the living. (The contrast offered by the accounts of Adams and Desjarlais, working in more or less the same region, is another strength of this volume.) Carrasco, speaking from the US-Mexico border, shows how central religious readings are to the lived experience of those seeking to cross it, not only for these pilgrims, but for their transnational social networks. This set of chapters speaks explicitly to partnerships between the living and the dead, as Carrasco reminds us.

Other contributions build on understanding likely out of grasp just a generation earlier. Lock explains that the Japanese word *jibun*, "translated into English as 'self,'" implies that the "concept cannot be separate from the social realm" and that "humans have approximately 20,000 genes, and not 100,000, as had been predicted." Lock then takes her knowledge of this subject to interrogate the emerging field of molecular epigenetics.

Salmaan Keshavjee reminds us that one of the masterminds of the United Nations was Jan Smuts, an architect of apartheid in his home country. João

Biehl relates, in an altogether new fashion, the dolorous aftermath of his rapport with Catarina, the main character of his book *Vita*; she died almost twenty years ago. (All long-term ethnographers know this pain, although too few write about it as beautifully and generously as Biehl.) Janis H. Jenkins asserts, unsurprisingly to those in the trenches of care delivery, that many psychiatrists take cultural relativism much farther than do psychiatric anthropologists. (She goes further, arguing that “a sustained ethnographic approach to the experience of mental illness should productively focus on engaged processes of struggle rather than symptoms.”) Marcia Inhorn, in her study of twenty-first-century quests for conception, describes an expanding practice of “reprotravel” that links India to China (and, in her report, forty-eight other countries) to global Dubai, where, right now, more than half of all residents are from India. Lawrence Cohen writes of the experience of trans- and third-gendered people in India, whose fates, we hope, were not shortened by COVID-19 as the hammer falls with terrible force across the subcontinent, which is also the locus of David S. Jones’s reminders that we don’t fully understand either the dynamics of cardiac disease there or the carditravel that echoes Inhorn’s insights as much as, or more than, Cohen’s.

The *ethnographic open* of this book is one of its greatest charms. Cohen—like me, one of Kleinman’s students lucky enough to pursue degrees in both medicine and anthropology—also brings forth the ethnographer’s own vacillation between certainty and uncertainty, the sort of confession we feared to make as students. “I asked his cousin what she meant,” he confides to the reader, “more or less knowing.” Anthropology as an aspirational project is, as Kleinman reminded us decades ago, almost always about moving from knowing less to knowing more.

This stumbling march forward, toward knowing more, offers another reason to appreciate the treasure assembled here, scored by the filigreed detail of all extravagant ornaments. These details are important. In moments of immodesty, some anthropologists refer to this as “ethnographic detail” to trundle out the tired vignette, the vestigial exoticism, the curated conversations, the arcana, the labored reveal. But in truth, such detail may often be found in even newspaper articles about any of the topics at hand. What lends it force, in this book, are the analyses in which the specific is enmeshed—that and conversations and rumors and acknowledgment of the ethnographer’s uncertainty in moving from knowing less to knowing more while aware, as Cohen and others observe, that it’s sometimes best to ask less. Reverent listening inevitably requires silence.

Another beauty of this book is that its constituent pieces come from the borderland (in Kleinman's term, but others here speak of flux, junctures, crossroads, or a nexus) between more than one discipline. Some, like those of Jenkins and Desjarlais and Kleinman himself, emerge from among psychiatry, psychology, and anthropology. Others draw on anthropology and environmental science. Jones, a physician-historian, is also an anthropologist, whether he says so or not, and his work picks apart category fallacies while offering surprising ethnographic detail from the practice of cardiology in India. All of them link the large-scale to the local, the outside to the inside, the past to the present, and the present to our uncertain future.

What, then, of caregiving and the arts of care, which several of these chapters show to continue beyond death? If social science is a blood sport, and at times readily mocked as the arena of low-stakes and absurdly bitter feuds, a focus on caregiving and care-ful ethnography lends humility to our proceedings. And that kind of work helps preclude the notion that all ethnographic work might qualify as care-ful, in itself an adequate response to suffering. For a responsible alternative to the latter, one need only read the elegiac chapter by Carrasco. It was his father, who spent decades assisting migrants to and around El Paso, Texas, who took his life after bearing witness to too much indignity, too much grisly loss.

Carrasco's stories—of his father and of the bodies in the desert and of the *retablos* linking all of it to the world of the saints—call to mind not so much the fate of Catarina as, more precisely, Biehl's beautiful attempt to honor her posthumously with a memorial. She died not in the desert but in a place meant to be an oasis, as disheveled and confining as she found it. There, we learn, she one night called out for her mother and died. What American reader doesn't read this and think of George Floyd? Biehl's account is intergenerational, since he knew Catarina and her children, but we didn't get a chance to know Floyd in this way. If the struggle for racial justice in the United States doesn't figure prominently in this volume, there's reason to hope that this will continue to be rectified by scholars who are also writing within this broader tradition of care-ful ethnography.

This is not, as noted, a cheerful book. Although the care and caregiving of the Hyolmo Buddhists strike a merciful note, there's a dark side of caregiving, too. Care, as Biehl observes, is often "an act of frustration, a behind-the-scenes affective grappling by gendered bodies in complicity, love, and aggression, in the face of political disregard and a battered history."

A number of old dichotomies beyond nature-nurture, including the alleged distinction between communicable and noncommunicable diseases,



are exploded here. It's simply not true, as Keshavjee shows, that the former receive warranted attention while the latter do not. (Jones, too, explodes some of these myths.) Perhaps a fifth of all cancer diagnoses, and many more in some settings, are likely caused by infectious pathogens, which suggests another category fallacy to explore.

Much of the current debate about decolonizing global health has neglected to mention caregiving even in passing, which, one suspects, would have disappointed Fanon. Caregiving has been largely stripped out of public health, and nowhere is this more true than in the postcolony. Call this the myopia of the healthy and well placed, a staple of our current iterations of global health. Disease control is not at all the same as caring for those afflicted by pathogens, which like other pathogenic forces—here, climate change, migration, growing inequality itself—strike some while others are spared. The vast abrupt of the current pandemic, which has left millions dead in the space of a year, has no doubt fueled new forms of structural violence and (one fears) too many old ways of explaining it away.

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged as this book was being edited and is a reminder of the perils of such suffering sweepstakes, in which one pressing concern is pitted against another. But if there's a reason I don't have a chapter in this volume, it's Ebola, which drives home several of the points made by Jones and in Keshavjee's chapter on tuberculosis. As in South Africa, so, too, across a continent under colonial rule, which was when control-over-care paradigms arose. They persist in current discussions of "health security" and are made manifest in our current status quo of COVID-vaccine nationalism, which has led so far to vaccine apartheid. Jan Smuts might not have approved, since workers are essential to the political economy he helped to usher in.

### Critical Medical Anthropologist in the Anthropocene

*Arc of Interference*, drawing on Kleinman's many arcs, reveals an astoundingly generative mind and what's at stake in fields as disparate as psychiatry, environmental science, medical anthropology, social medicine, and even philosophy and social theory.

Future biographers and historians of medical anthropology and social medicine (to say nothing of Chinese studies) will no doubt attempt to carve Kleinman's long and rich career into distinct periods. It would be easy to do by simply attending to his written work, with attention to chronology. But what strikes me, as his student and friend, is that the long arc of his

interference has focused his attention on a fairly small number of matters. These are precisely those captured in this book.

I wouldn't have asserted as much even a decade ago. I might instead have marveled at the differences between *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture* (1980) and, say, *Writing at the Margins* (1997). But instead of seeing an arc from narrowly focused medical ethnography to structural violence, it's really his ability to elicit what really matters in diverse settings and, as anthropologist and clinician, to respond. These gifts were themselves crowned by turning to his own experience in *The Soul of Care*. The golden thread of his work is less demise writing than sober reflection about what really matters, and that is often to allay suffering while confronting the fears of our own, and others', finitude.

If there's something I wish to add to this already glittering arrangement, it's a final word about Kleinman as doctor and teacher. As Biehl notes, his ethnographic corpus is "colored by his simultaneous commitments as a clinician and an anthropologist." And here, with the indulgence of the editors, I swerve to the personal, as Cohen does in describing the anxious back-and-forth between green student and exacting mentor. Familiarity with that anxiety is surely one reason I found his essay so affecting, and why many former students and trainees will smile in reading that "Kleinman's provocation, and it is never an easy one to bear, is to work toward a mode of interference of one's own."

Most of the people contributing to this collection have been, formally, students or trainees of Kleinman. (I count a few physician-anthropologists who might stake that claim.) I'd wager that a good number have also been his patients or benefited from his compassion and clinical skills, as have thousands of others, from Boston to Beijing.

And I'd like him to smile when I note that what underpins the heat that forged the jewel and the glass, and even the sea that battered the glass, is also in that borderland between encompassing devotion and respect and love. I want to express a conviction that it is love and kindness and fellow feeling that underpins Kleinman's work more than any analytic framework, ideology, or training ever could. The reader can sense that appreciation surging forth in these pages.

Of course, I know this claim wouldn't likely be encountered in a scholarly journal; it can barely fit in a book published by a university press. But it is true, and worth saying: Kleinman is a great doctor and teacher because he is, however transformed by his own experience, a loving and caring person. We knew that well before his wife, Joan Kleinman, first exhibited signs of the

early-onset dementia that would finally claim her life. *The Soul of Care* taught others what we already knew: that Arthur Kleinman would rise to the task. And that the task was sure to be hard.

And so, in the end, Kleinman's arc bends toward both justice and mercy. As seas rise, glaciers melt, and forests burn, we will all need to follow this lead. And as his students know, that will lead us not to certain places and topics, but to a full embrace of what really matters to all of us, well before we reach the *bardo*.

The book's polished gems, like Kleinman's work, stand alone and confer beauty on the journey's arc. What more fitting tribute to a physician and scholar who has devoted himself to his fellow travelers, and especially those pushed and shoved in their travails across our beautiful and riven world.

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