



Summer Graduation

Sussex Anthropology graduands were witnessed receiving their degrees by a record number of faculty this Summer. Pictured above are three of our recent Masters graduates, including Molly Horler, who was awarded the Epstein Prize for Best Dissertation in Anthropology. Congratulations!

This Edition

2-3: Focus On: The Asia Centre

4-5: Recent Publications from the Department of Anthropology

6: Ongoing Research : The Heritage Trail

7: Notes from the Field: Zihao Zhang on multi-sited ethnography in China

8: Graduate Profile: News Producer Rebecca Spencer

Sussex Anthropology Student Intake Rising

The department of anthropology has bucked the national trend with a significant increase in undergraduates joining anthropology courses this year - up nine per cent from 2023. This is remarkable achievement in the face of an overall downturn in university applications across the country, an increased focus on STEM subjects, and a general decrease in anthropology intake elsewhere since the Anthropology A-Level was retired.

ANTHROPOLOGY STUDENTS WIN JOSIE JOLLEY AWARD

Two anthropology students - Beth Sutton, a PhD research student, and Adam Wright, an anthropology undergraduate - were recipients of this summer's Josie Jolley awards.

The award, established in memory of PhD researcher Josie Jolley, is given to students who have made a significant contribution to the school, by showing particular care, consideration, or resilience. Congratulations to both winners.

Anthropology Seminar Series

- OCT 2ND **Sarah Tobin**, Chr. Michelsen Institute / University of Sussex
Seeking Religious Sanctuary: Syrian Refugees in Jordan's Islamic Context (in person and on Zoom)
- OCT 9 **Till Mostowlansky**, Graduate Institute, Geneva
Managers and Imams: Saving Humanity in High Asia
- OCT 16 **Charis Boutieri**, Kings College London
Beyond Words: Non-Dialogical Public Reason in (Post) Revolutionary Tunisia (in person only)
- OCT 23 **Elżbieta Drążkiewicz**, Lund University
Conspirational Clutter: Managing Past, Present and Future in the Political Spaces of Trauma Land
- NOV 6 **Malika Bahovadinova**, University of Amsterdam
Feeding White Ferocious Men: Practices of Hospitality in Migration Bureaucracy in Tajikistan
- NOV 13 **Noah Walker-Crawford**, London School of Economics
How to Sue Goliath: Climate Justice in Action
- NOV 20 **Paolo Heywood**, Durham University
Out of the Ordinary: Everyday Life and the 'Carnival of Mussolini'
- NOV 27 **Valerio Simoni**, Graduate Institute, Geneva
Title TBC

NEW PODCAST

LIMITED SERIES

WHY ARE BRITAIN'S TEACHERS ALL QUITTING?

A new three-part podcast series, produced by Sussex Anthropology's Dr Dinah Rajak, along with Dr Jane Hewitt from the school of education, and Dr Sarah-Jane Phelan (Cambridge), explores the state of British education in the aftermath of the pandemic, which saw 40,000 teachers leave the profession in the space of a single year.

Drawing on the true accounts of front-line teaching staff - presented anonymously - this series explores the producers research into the state of British education: the *Afterlife of the Pandemic in Primary Schools* project, which was funded by a grant from the Higher Education Innovation Fund and a Policy@Sussex Fellowship. To hear the podcasts, visit <https://shorturl.at/G84iS>

FOCUS ON: THE ASIA CENTER

The Asia Centre is one of the most active and influential of the major research centres associated with the Department of Anthropology.

Directed by Magnus Marsden - a Professor of Social Anthropology, and a specialist in Muslim Asia - the Asia Centre organises numerous publications, conferences, special lectures, and other events in addition to its regular seminar series. This section outlines some recent highlights.



Outreach and knowledge distribution

In the past year, Professor Marsden spoke at a conference organised by the Afghan Sikh community in London addressing in particular the issue of how to support the participation in community life of younger generations and also addressed the Khosti Afghan Sikh community in their gurdwara in Tooting.

In addition, the Edinburgh University Press - drawing on the Asia Centre's expertise - also hosted a new piece on "The

Demolition of Jeddah and the Relocation of a Neighbourhood in Turkey". Read it here: <https://tinyurl.com/3x43bkzx>

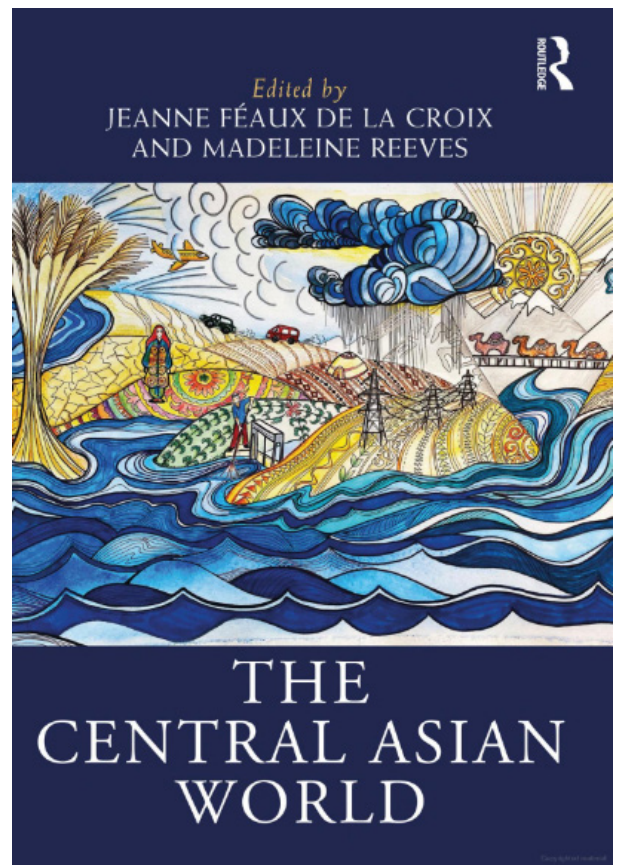
New Researcher Development

Continuing with its long-standing tradition, the Asia Centre also ran their customary PhD workshop in Spring. This was followed by the Centre's Annual Lecture, this year given by Dr Omar Kasmani (Freie Universität, Berlin), who spoke on the topic of "Queer Companions: A Subhet on Intimacy"

Asia Centre Scholars In Landmark New Collection

In the recent anthropological landmark book that critically explores "Central Asia" at the intersection of post-Soviet, Persianate, East and South Asian worlds, **Magnus Marsden, Diana Ibanez-Tirado** and **Elena Borisova** have their individual chapters published.

Elena explores the live hierarchy of language choices in Tajikistan; Magnus writes about the anthropology of hospitality in Central Asia, and Diana about cosmopolitanism amongst Muslim female traders working between China and Tajikistan. Their contribution to this important volume highlights the department's expertise in on Central Asia and Eurasian studies from a perspective of migration and mobility.



Workshop Series for Exiled Afghan Scholars

The Asia Centre has this continued in its tradition of collaboration with, and support for, the Afghan scholarly community which, amongst other things, has previously included arranging the hosting the Afgahn Institute of Strategic Studies here at the University of Sussex, and organising a guest lecture by Afghanistan's Ambassador to the United Kingdom.

This year, the Asia Centre organised three workshops for students and exiled researchers from Afghanistan living in the UK. These focused on research proposal writing, academic publishing, and networking, and were organised with the support of funding from Research England and the AHRC, and in collaboration with CARA (Council for At-Risk Academics).



Sussex Anthropology's Dr Diana Ibañez-Tirado recently represented the discipline in The Times' 2024 guide to choosing a university course. A Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology, Dr Ibañez-Tirado - whose own research focuses on interdisciplinary approaches, and has included work on temporality, mobility, and trade across China and Central Asia - emphasized the range of the discipline's interests, including in religion, gender, kinship, geopolitics and security, climate change and sustainability, robotics and AI, migration, human rights, social media, health, capitalism, and indigenous activism, in one of the most widely read and respected newspapers in the world.

Asia Centre Seminar Series

Friday 11th October 13:00 -14:30
30 Ammara Maqsood (Department of Anthropology, UCL). 'The place of difference: reflections on the possibilities of Hindu-Muslim friendships in Karachi'. Location: C333

Tuesday 22nd October 13:00 – 14:30
Garima Jaju (Smuts Research Fellow, Centre of South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge) 'Isha's Wait: money, love, and kinship in the wake of domestic violence in India'. Location: C333

Friday 8th November 13:00 – 14:30
November Philippa Williams (School of Geography, Queen Mary University) TBC. Location: C333

Friday 15th November 13:00 – 14:30
November Filippo Osella (School of Global Studies, University of Sussex) 'Researching religious infrastructures in Chattogram, Bangladesh'. Location: C333

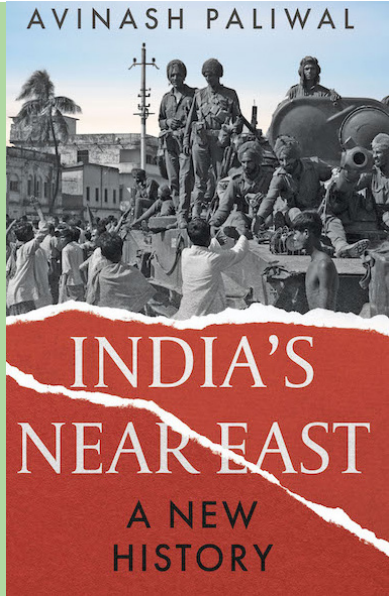
Friday 22nd November 13:00 – 14:30
November Book talk by Avinash Paliwal (SOAS, University of London) 'India's Near East: a New history'. Location TBC

Friday 6th December 13:00 – 14:30
December Magnus Marsden (School of Global Studies, University of Sussex) 'This crazy but completely fascinating business': the Hudson's Bay Company, the Cold War, and the Persian Lamb (karakul) trade in Afghanistan, 1923 – 1970'. Location: C333

Belonging Flexibly Exhibition

This summer, Asia Centre scholars participated in the organisation of the *Belonging Flexibly* exhibition at SOAS Gallery, which was curated by photographer Moska Najib. The exhibition stemmed from the *Afterlives of Urban Muslim Asia* project, an AHRC-funded research project at the universities of Sussex, Cambridge, and Copenhagen. This project maps the migratory trajectories of non-Muslim residents in major cities in the region and explores the forms of attachment that these communities have maintained both with cities in the region and their Muslim populations.

The exhibition included photographic which explore the experiences of nultiuple diaporas - including Afghan Sikhs and Hindus, and Bukharan Jews from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. For more information, visit <https://shorturl.at/6kM2k>



Book Launch: India's Near East: A New History

The Asia Centre and Sussex's Centre for Global Insecurities Research will host a book launch for Avinash Paliwal's new history of India's foreign and domestic policy towards its 'Near East' - Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. Dr Paliwal, Reader in International Relations at SOAS, here makes a powerful argument that the Indian state has sacrificed the economic development of its own eastern

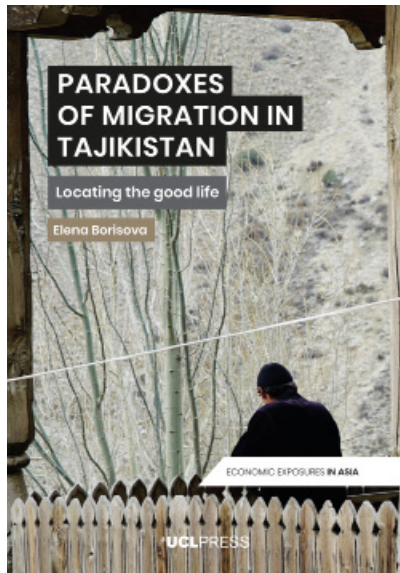
regions in order to prioritise their political stability in the context of tensions and conflicts with Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China.

Dr Paliwal will present his work on **Friday 22nd November, 13:00-14:30**. The launch is open to all, and the venue will be confirmed on the Asia Centre mailing list and University of Sussex public calendars in advance of the event.

Want to keep up with the Asia Centre?

The Asia Centre runs regular events throughout the year. To keep up to date with the centre's news, send an email to M.Marsden@sussex.ac.uk and ask to be added to the mailing list, or visit <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sussexasiacentre/>

Bennett, C. (2023). **The dead, haunting, and reordering Cambodian society after the Khmer Rouge.** In *Cambodia's Trials: Contrasting Visions of Truth*, TJNR NIAS Press.



Borisova, E. (2024). **Paradoxes of Migration in Tajikistan.** UCL Press.

Borisova, E. (2023). **Language choices, future imaginaries, and the lived hierarchy of languages in post-industrial Tajikistan.** In J. F'aux de la Croix & M. Reeves (Eds.), *The Central Asian World* (pp. 284-301). Routledge.

Borisova, E. (2023). **Ambivalences of care: movement, masculinity and presence in post-industrial Tajikistan.** *Ethnos*.

Boyce, P., & Khanna, A. (2023). **Subjectivities, knowledge and gendered and sexual transitions in India.** In *The Cambridge Handbook of the Anthropology of Gender and Sexuality* (pp. 491-519). Cambridge.

Cabezas-Pino, A. (2023). **Co-Creative Multimodal Storytelling on HIV: Activating Images through Reflexive Authorship.** *Visual Anthropology Review*.

Cartland, S., et al. (2023). **If we are to fix the education crisis the dominant ideological approach must be changed.** *Soundings*, 2023(No. 84 & 85), 154-167.

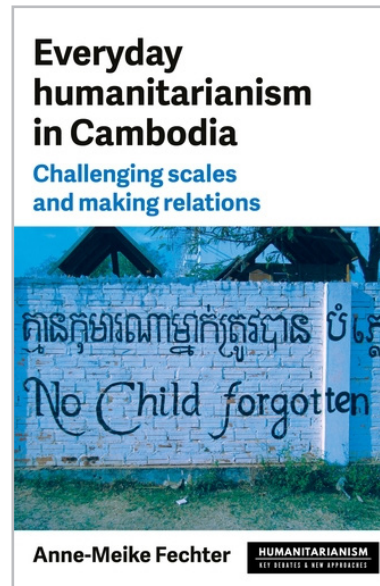
Cartland, S., et al. (2023). **From citizen to consumer: the growing corporatisation of public space.** *Culture Matters*.

De Neve, G., et al. (2023). **Classes of Labour in comparative perspective.** *Dialectical Anthropology*.

De Neve, G., Carswell, G., et al. (2023). **Lockdown and livelihoods in rural South India: rethinking patronage at the time of Covid-19.** In *How to live through a pandemic?* Routledge

De Neve, G., Medappa, K., Prentice, R. (2023). **India's Gig Economy Workers at the Time of Covid-19: An Introduction.** *Journal of South Asian Development*, 18(3)

Fairhead, J., et al. (2023). **Victorine Meurent: new evidence from America and Paris.** *Burlington Magazine*, 165(1445), 35-45.



Fechter, A-M., et al. (2023). **Everyday Humanitarianism in Cambodia: Challenging Scales and Making Relations.**

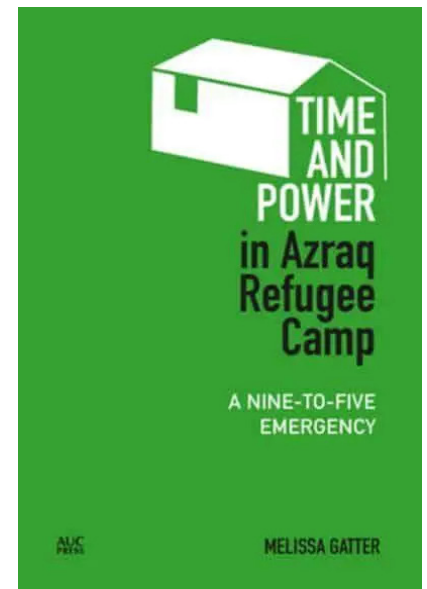
Fechter, A-M., et al. (2023). **Citizen aid celebrities? The role of charismatic founders.** In *The rise of small-scale development organisations: citizen aid actors and their role in civil society*. Routledge.

Fechter, A-M., et al. (2023). **'Every person counts': the problem of scale in everyday humanitarianism.** *Social Anthropology*, 31(1), 1-16.

Fechter, A-M., et al. (2023). **Citizen aid.** In *Elgar Encyclopedia of Development*, *Elgar Encyclopedia of Development*, 88-89.

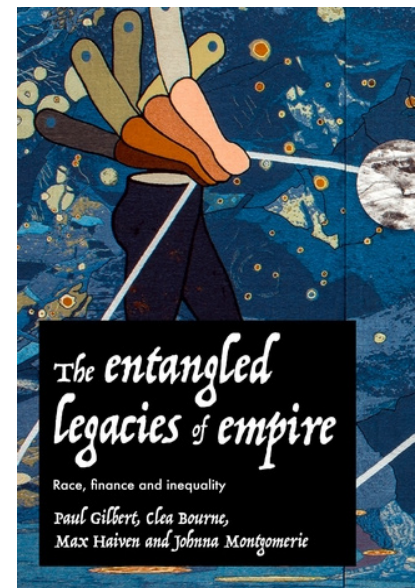
South, A., Jasminpaw, J., Hpway, J., Aung A, May E, Fechter A-M. (2023). **Protracted displacement, local economies and protection: communities and ethnic armed organisations in Myanmar.** *Humanitarian Exchange Magazine, Humanitarian Practice Network*.

Gatter, M. (2023) **Who labels the camp? Claiming ownership through visibility in Jordan.** In *Branding the Middle East*, 567-584. De Gruyter, 18 Sep 2023.



Gatter M. (2023). **Time and Power in Azraq Refugee Camp: A Nine-to-Five Emergency.** American University in Cairo Press

Gatter M. (2023). **Preserving order: narrating resilience as threat in Jordan's Azraq refugee camp.** *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 11(4):695-711.



Gilbert, P., Montgomerie, J., Haiven, M., Bourne, C. (2023). **The entangled legacies of empire: race, finance and inequality.** Manchester University Press, 352 pages.

Gilbert, P. (2023). **National resources, resistance & the afterlives of NIEO in Bangladesh.** *International Development Policy*, 16. Open Edition Journals, 1

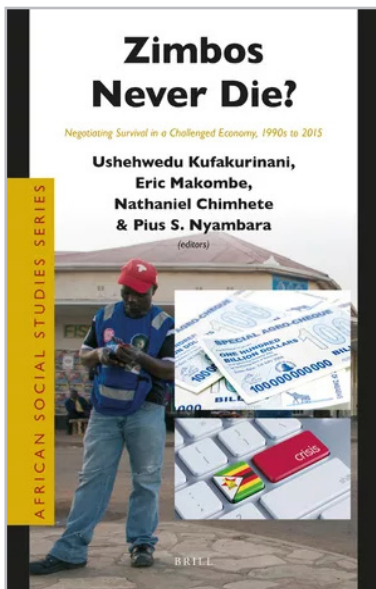
Hartviksen, J., et al. (2023). **Roadblocks on the ruta de denuncia: negotiating women's rights and resisting violences in postwar Guatemala's Northern Transversal Strip.** *Gender & Development*, 31(1), 33-52.

Hilker, L.M. (2023). **Teaching about gender violence, with and for gender justice: epistemological, pedagogical and ethical dilemmas.** *Gender and Education*, 1-18.

Jament, J., Martin, M., Visakh, M.S., Osella, F., et al. (2023). **Covid on the Coast: Pandemic Governance and Protests in Fishing Villages in South Kerala, India.** *Journal of South Asian Development*, 18(2), 295-320.

At The Cutting Edge

Keep up with recent publications from anthropological researchers at the University of Sussex



Kufakurinani, U., Makombe, E., Chimhete, N., Nyambara, P. (eds.) (2023). *Zimbos Never Die: Negotiating Survival in a Challenged Economy, 1990s to 2015*. Brill.

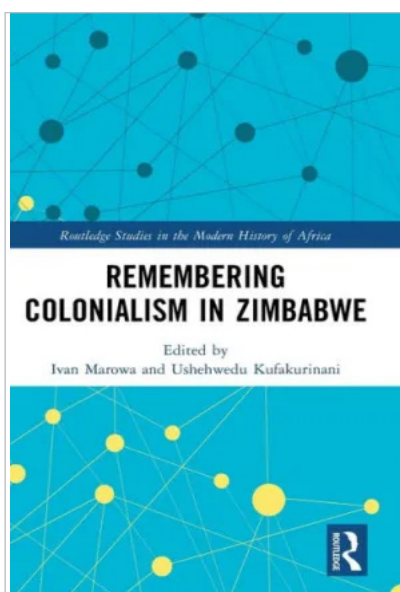
Kaur, R., Faisal, S.M., et al. (2023). **'God is with the patient people': festival, class and interreligious engagement.** In *Religions*, Mumbai Style: Events-Media-Spaces. Oxford University Press.

Kaur, R., Lombard, L., Costa, L., et al. (2023). **Magic, metaphysics, and methods.** *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 13(1), 1-5.

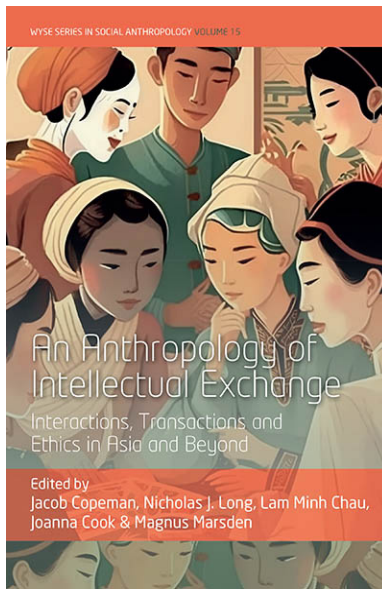
Killick, E., et al. (2023). **Indigenous transformations in the comunidad nativa: rethinking kinship and its limitations in an expanding resource frontier.** *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, 19(1).

Lock, W. (2023). **Producing nature-based solutions: infrastructural nature and agrarian change in San Martín, Peru.** *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 50(6), 2361-2380

Lock, W., & Alexander, A. (2023). **Sustainable Development Frontiers: Is 'Sustainable' Cocoa Delivering Development and Reducing Deforestation?**



Marowa, Ivan and Kufakurinani, U. (eds.) (2023). *Remembering Colonialism in Zimbabwe*. London: Routledge.



Marsden, M., et al. (2023). **Intellectual exchanges in Muslim Asia: intersections of history and geography.** In *Anthropology of Intellectual Exchange: Interactions, Transactions, and Ethics in Asia and Beyond*. Berghahn.

Marsden, M., et al. (2023). **Tensions in the art of Afghan hospitality.** In *The Central Asian World*. Routledge.

Marsden, M., et al. (2023). **Introduction: an anthropology of intellectual exchange.** In *An Anthropology of Intellectual Exchange: Interactions, Transactions and Ethics in Asia and Beyond*. Berghahn, 15-396 pages.

Marsden, M., et al. (2023). **Long distance trade and migration in Central Asia, 1500 - 1850.** In *The Cambridge History of Global Migrations*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 124-140.

Marsden, M., Anderson, P. (2023). **The ethics of commerce and trade.** In *Cambridge Handbook of the Anthropology of Ethics*. Cambridge University Press.

Mathews, M.A., De Neve, G., Ayeb-Karlsson, S. (2023). **Dimensions of wellbeing and recognitional justice of migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown in Kerala, India.** *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 10:a206, 1-10.

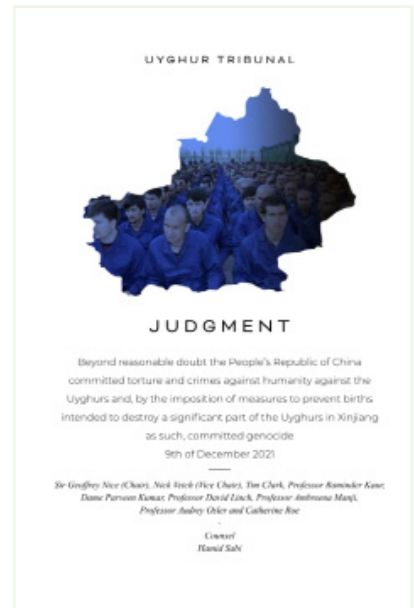
McMurray, J. (2023). **Review of 'Unruly speech: Displacement and the politics of transgression, 2023'.** *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, Wiley.

McMurray, J. (2023). **China is committing a genocide. Why was our foreign office planning to meet one of the perpetrators?** *The Guardian*, 15 Feb.

Middleton, J., Colthart, G., Dem, F., et al. [Including James Fairhead] (2023). **Health service needs and perspectives of a rainforest conserving community in Papua New Guinea's Ramu lowlands: a combined clinical and rapid anthropological assessment with parallel treatment of urgent cases.** *BMJ Open*, 13.

Mills, E. (2023). **Ambivalent Embodiment and HIV Treatment in South Africa.** In T. Sikka (Ed.), *Genetic Science and New Digital Technologies: Science and Technology Studies and Health Praxis*. Bristol University Press.

Mora, A., et al. (2023). **'Property rights are human rights': bureaucratization and the logics of rule of law interventionism in postwar Kosovo.** *PolAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, Wiley.



Nice, G., Vetch, N., Clark, T., Kaur, R., et al. (2023). **Uyghur Tribunal Judgment.** UK: ISBN & SAN Agencies Nielsen, 2 May 2023

Prentice, R., Sumon, M.H. (2023). **Social protection as technocratic fix? Labor precarity and crises of capitalism after Bangladesh's Rana Plaza collapse.** *Journal of Labor and Society*, 1-25. Brill. DOI: 10.1163/24714607-BJA10121.

Prentice, R. (2023). **Writing labour into ethical apparel production. A review of Kanchana N. Ruwanpura's Garments without Guilt?** *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 44(2), 363-365. Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: 10.1111/SJTG.12486.

Schwittay, A. (2023). **Teaching critical hope with creative pedagogies of possibilities.** *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 1-19. Informa UK Limited, 7 Mar 2023.

Sikka, T., Mills, E., & Sikka, N. (2023). **Indigenous knowledge and new materialism.** In D. Lupin (Ed.), *A Research Agenda for Human Rights and the Environment*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Styve, M.D., Gilbert, P. (2023). **'The hole in the ground that cannot be moved': political risk as a racial vernacular of extractive industry development.** *Extractive Industries and Society*, 13. Elsevier, Mar 2023.

Unnithan, M., De Zordo, S., Blystad, A., et al. (2023). **Anthropology of abortion.** In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Reproductive Medicine and Technology*. Wiley, pp. 349-364.

Unnithan, M., Pachauli, C., Chattoo, S., et al. (2023). **'Only parents can understand the problems and needs of children with thalassaemia': parental activism for thalassaemia care in Northern India.** *Anthropology and Medicine*, 30(1), 48-63.

Whitty, B., Correa, J.S., Gilbert, P., et al. (2023). **Outsourcing the business of development: the rise of for-profit consultancies in the UK aid sector.** *Development and Change*. Wiley-Blackwell,

'Reconciliation starts in our towns.'

Be it in a fragrant flower penetrating an asphalt road, a ladybird landing on a fingertip, or a shaft of light reflecting the ripples onto the underside of a canal bridge, the transcendent is all around us in urban locales even in Britain's former industrial heartlands, colloquially referred to as the Black Country. Moreover, as Canon Dr Andrew Smith, Director of Interfaith Relations for the Bishop of Birmingham, maintains, the transcendent is especially encountered in the many urban places of worship (FIGURE 1). In May 2024, we had the opportunity to explore such phenomena on an interfaith heritage trail in one of Sandwell's super-diverse neighbourhoods, Smethwick, a district adjoining Birmingham, as part of our 'Pilgrimonics' research on pilgrimage, economics and related circuits of exchange.

The Places of Worship Heritage Trail is an initiative of the Faithful Neighbourhoods Centre. Along with Andrew and Reverend David Gould from Smethwick's Holy Trinity Church, community leaders including Shobha Sharma, Kulbhushan Rai, Harvinder Singh Sehespal, and Shaykh Nasir Akhtar acted as tour guides on the day (FIGURE 2). The interfaith trail connects otherwise separate community hubs and residents to learn with, and from each other, to find similarities and differences, and to eat and even pray together. Those who engage in activities beyond the annual interfaith week, understand that there is a need for more community interaction to think 'not of just one community but a community of communities' as David described it—one that crosses divides between religion, ethnicity and race (FIGURE 3).

Beginning with the monumental cast-iron Galton Bridge that was opened in 1829 now tucked away behind an A-Road, we walked for several hours on a rare sunny Saturday. After an informative stop outside the New Hope Christian Centre, the urban 'pilgrims' went into the Durga Bhawan Mandir, were treated to tea, and then sprinkled with holy water during an aarti ritual (FIGURE 4). We then went past the Oldbury Jamia Masjid as we headed towards the West Smethwick Methodist Church where we chanced upon a musical performance. We ventured towards the Sikh Gurdwara Baba Sang Ji—once a theatre showing home-grown star Charlie Chaplin's performances, and a place where former prime minister John Major's performing parents worked. Here, we sat down on the floor to partake of a communal meal (langar), originally intended by Sikh gurus to break down barriers between castes and creeds. After seeing the 300 holy scriptures from British gurdwaras sent here for repair, we went past the Guru Nanak Gurdwara down the road, one of the largest in Europe with its all-day programmes and religious and musical specialists from India (FIGURE 5).

Next, we walked up a hill to the Holy Trinity Church established in 1838. On the lawn, we saw a tree planted in 2019 to commemorate Guru Nanak's 550th anniversary in an act of solidarity to the nearby gurdwara. Noting that the gurdwara gets ten times more visitors than the church, David acknowledged that they were the 'minority group' in Smethwick. We were then taken to the Abrahamic Foundation that conducted their services in English to communicate to younger Muslim generations (FIGURE 6). We ended up inside the largest mosque amongst West Midlands' numerous mosques, the Jamia Masjid, marvelling at its grand ceiling, calligraphy and vast rooms, followed by a fond farewell outside the nearby Smethwick Baptist Church.

Participants traversed the past as they navigated landmarks to do with Smethwick's industrial, colonial and migrant histories, once called the 'workshop of the world'. This included the Smethwick Glassworks of Chance Brothers that had manufactured sheet glass for London's Crystal Palace

Ongoing research: The Urban Transcendent amidst a Heritage Trail

and Big Ben; a clocking-in system for bus companies that began to employ migrants in the 1960s; and Marshall Street visited by the African-American civil rights activist Malcolm X in 1965, only nine days before his assassination in the USA—he was invited by Indian Workers Association's Avtar Singh Jouhl against the toxic racism and housing and leisure segregations that blighted Britain (FIGURE 7). A blue plaque marked a very ordinary street with an extraordinary legacy that led to the 1965 Race Relations Act.

Such landmarks raise interesting questions about the very conceptualisation of heritage including religious, socio-political and everyday insignia. They are especially pertinent in the layering of old buildings—those that have been repurposed as with the Guru Nanak Gurdwara that used to be the Smethwick Congregational Church (established 1855), and converted in the 1960s to become a Smethwick spectacle. In another instance of interfaith alliance, the Durga Bhawan Mandir, formerly the Spoon Croft pub, was bought with the help of the Sikh community in the 1990s and transformed into a Hindu place of worship.



At the end, some of us continued our walk along the Smethwick section of the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, a reminder of the serene beauty that the urban landscape can harbour, and a welcome sanctuary from the noisy hubbub of the busy traffic-congested streets. Fittingly, the canal sported a narrowboat named Shanti (Hindi/Panjabi for peace). We also learnt that, as part of the Faithful Friends on Tour, some faith leaders had visited the Golden Temple (aka Harmandir Sahib), the holiest Sikh shrine in India, staying in the Nishkam International Centre that is managed by Birmingham's Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha gurdwara. As guests of Birmingham's Sikh leaders, they received special access to the sanctum sanctorum in the centre of the holy pool, sarovar (FIGURE 8). Andrew was even compelled towards carrying the palki with the holy scripture, the Guru Ganth Sahib, to its overnight resting place in the Akal Takht building in the complex. Interfaith trips to India and Israel/Palestine in the past also included members of Birmingham's Jewish community although there are no synagogues in Smethwick.

Altogether, the Places of Worship Heritage Trail enabled collaborative ethnography through walking and talking, and an immersion into the multi-sensorial reality of Smethwick's heritage markers, large and small, local and transnational. Another benefit was obtaining different angles through our camera lenses as we recorded places and people for a film to share with participants. Afterwards, we observed youth setting-up tents and tables outside Gurdwara Baba Sang Ji for the Nagarkirtan procession—literally meaning

traversing the town with spiritual song. But that is another story of urban transcendence. Read more about this oproject at <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/projects/pilgrimionics/>



Participant observation as a delivery driver

China is undergoing a profound transformation, shifting from its historical role as the “world’s factory” to becoming a data- and innovation-driven economy. This shift, while often credited to technological advances and platform economies, would not be possible without the indispensable contributions of its workers. Many workers have left the assembly lines, starting to ride scooters through the concrete jungles of China’s rapidly expanding cities to deliver food, groceries, electronic products, and various retail goods. This labour force, known as waimai qishou (food delivery riders), is now a critical part of the platform economy. They work for platform companies, like Meituan or Ele.me, that rely on riders’ efforts to keep urban delivery infrastructure running smoothly on a 24/7 basis.

Currently, there are over 10 million platform riders in China. Yet their working conditions seem to be more precarious than those in factories. – They lack protection under Labour Law, face higher injury rates, and encounter greater difficulties in seeking compensation for injuries. From March 2023 to June 2024, I conducted multi-sited ethnography in

Notes from the Field: PhD Candidate Zihao Zhang on multi-sited ethnography in China

Shenzhen, Beijing, and other cities of China, aiming to understand the interrelationship among labour, masculinities, and digital infrastructure. I did delivery job myself, lived in an urban village, interviewed various stakeholders, and attended court hearings of a rider’s workplace injury case. Learning to be a rider was a challenge for me. – I had to learn how to ride a scooter, navigate the algorithm-driven control of the delivery platform, and familiarise myself with the locations of restaurants and nearby residential compounds. However, with the help of fellow riders, what initially seemed overwhelming gradually became more manageable.

The days I spent with the delivery riders were unforgettable. We waited together outside malls, hoping for the next order to come through. We chatted about life, work, night dreams, aspirations, and their love stories in the cities. We rode scooters to the seaside and enjoyed barbecues on occasion. These small yet significant moments allowed me to immerse myself in the field and develop an understanding of the production and reproduction of riders’ labour, as well as masculinities. In so doing, through constantly switching between being an “insider” and an “outsider,” I came to grounded and humble understandings of what ethnography is.

GRADUATE PROFILE: Rebecca Spencer

2020 GRAD REBECCA IS A PRODUCER AT SKY NEWS



Rebecca, now a Producer at Sky News, works at the intersection of daily news cycles and long-term investigative journalism. Her role is divided between managing the logistics of covering events—like planning the number of cameras, reporters, or even helicopters for a protest—and developing her own ideas for stories that explore deeper social issues. Half of her job is rooted in the day-to-day planning and coordination required for news coverage, while the other half allows her the creative freedom to pitch, research, and produce pieces that matter to the public.

One recent investigation focused on the illegal sale of laughing gas, a project that Rebecca both pitched and led, using undercover filming to reveal the extent of the issue. The investigation reached the national agenda and was even mentioned during Prime Minister's Questions. Reflecting on the experience, she noted that she increasingly had a sense of her own capabilities - "I can make things happen if I want to." This work reinforced her interest in under-reported social issues, particularly in relation to addiction services, which she believes are severely neglected in the UK. From covering the rise of synthetic opioids to investigating poison sellers marketing suicide products, Rebecca continues to pursue stories that shed light on urgent and often overlooked matters.

Rebecca's journey into journalism began with her studies in anthropology at Sussex. She describes herself as "a complete nerd" for anthropology, a subject she found both intellectually challenging and personally transformative. A first-generation university student, she discovered a passion for understanding human behaviour and cultural differences. "It made me such a better person, being able to think about

issues from different perspectives," she explains, adding that anthropology gave her the tools to question assumptions and approach complex topics with greater depth.

Rebecca credits her anthropology degree with helping her develop the critical thinking and research skills - and particularly the instinct to reflexively challenge her own assumptions - that she now uses daily as a journalist. Through anthropology, she learned to listen and consider, rather than simply reacting to issues. This approach has become one of her strengths in journalism: "I'm very thorough because of my degree," she notes, highlighting how her background helps her think through stories from every possible angle, a trait her colleagues appreciate.

Rebecca's time at Sussex also saw her advocate for the integration of anthropology with other disciplines, including journalism, despite some opposition within the department. She believes that anthropology and journalism share a common goal of examining human behaviour and uncovering the stories that need to be told. "More anthropology-minded people need to go into journalism," she says, emphasising the need for deeper, more reflective reporting.

Looking back on her time at Sussex, Rebecca speaks fondly of the supportive environment that helped her grow both academically and personally. "I'm so glad I ended up at Sussex," she says, "it will always hold a special place in my heart". While she has built a successful career in journalism, Rebecca still contemplates returning to academia to pursue a PhD in the future. For now, she remains focused on using the skills she developed at Sussex to continue telling impactful stories.

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