delve much into other social dimensions that could have rounded out his interpretation of this encounter, such as gender, class, kinship, or migration. Nevertheless, this is a relevant ethnography because of its powerful contribution to social care and aging studies. Danely’s combination of vivid storytelling, rigorous analysis, and sensitive approach make the book a reference for scholars working on care from an ethical and phenomenological perspective in various disciplines in the social sciences and early undergraduates interested in ethnographic research methods and ethnographic writing.

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Misreading the Bengal Delta: Climate Change, Development, and Livelihoods in Coastal Bangladesh

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In The Hungry Tide, Amitav Ghosh’s (2004) novel of the Bay of Bengal, where the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers meet, a key character meditates on the multiple stories any landscape tells. Considering the mangrove realms of the Sundarbans around him, he reflects thus: “I had a book in my hands to while away the time and it occurred to me that in a way a landscape too is not unlike a book—a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same” (224). Another character, looking for a place to anchor her boat just before a cyclone, considers the river around her: “it was as if a hand, hidden in the water’s depths, were writing a message to her in the cursive script of ripples, eddies, and turbulence” (352). Think of these as intimate moments in reading the Bengal Delta, that South Asian site where, at much larger scales, international, national, and development agencies have sought to read changes in the land and water, often with the aim of controlling those boundaries and flows, shaping a mix of agrarian and urban worlds. Such worlds have over the last decades suffered staggering losses of life from flooding; deaths from storm surges in the Bay of Bengal, particularly in the territories of Bangladesh, have numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Today, the low-lying delta is under ongoing threat, the result of a complex mix of climate-changing monsoon dynamics and the legacies of colonial and then developmentalist and nationalist projects of land reclamation, embankment-making, and more. The lessons read out of these processes, however—primarily by agents of development—have too often been overly simplified. They evidence what anthropologist Camelia Dewan incisively names, with the title of her new book, Misreading the Bengal Delta.

Dewan’s text is a superb decolonial ethnography that examines how international, state, and local actors have enacted infrastructural interventions into Bangladesh’s seasonal flooding regimes and into the management of irrigation networks, many of which have sought to bring these processes and practices under some modernist control, almost always overlooking how colonial, capitalist, and developmentalist processes have in fact set the stage for calamities small and large. Back in the 1960s, the Dutch landscape form known as a polder—“a piece of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea” and often enclosed by embankments—was introduced to Bangladesh by the World Bank–funded Coastal Embankment Project both to control floods and to manage irrigation. By the late 1990s, however, it was clear that that control had also caused damage, rerouting sediment in ways that congested rivers and waterlogged agricultural lands, leaving them with reduced nutrient input or even uncultivable. Rather than preventing undesirable flooding, the four thousand kilometers of embankment that texture the Bangladesh coastline entrapped water instead, making storm surges, with higher water to amplify them, more damaging. Dewan writes, “This foreign solution did not translate well into a heavily sedimented, tropical monsoon delta and has resulted in longstanding—and difficult to overcome—problems of siltation and waterlogging” (p. 59). As Dewan helps readers see, hydrotheory from the North contours and often deforms local hydrosocialities, sometimes rendering more damaging the recurring disaster of cyclones, which displace people whose lands are already subsiding owing to sea-level rise and brackish-water flooding.
Most recently, Dewan shows us, problems of misreading have followed not only from the universalizing modernisms of a mid-century moment in civil engineering but also from an overemphasis in funding proposals on what one of her interlocutors called the “spice” of climate change. She reports that “project proposals rely on appealing to donors’ perceptions of Bangladesh’s low-lying floodplains as being at particular risk as global sea levels rise, making the country an ‘epicenter of climate change’” (p. 3) and a “laboratory” for Global South–targeted projects of “resilience.” What Dewan calls “climate reductive translations” make it difficult to see the range of causes behind flood disaster. The language of “laboratory,” which poses places as bounded time-spaces with universal relevance, is ill-suited to see the local, nonlinear, scale-breaking dynamics of history and politics.

Many on-the-ground researchers in Bangladesh, of course, know this. Nonetheless, Dewan observes, funding pitches and World Bank pronouncements, often delivered in English rather than Bangla, toe the line of an “official transcript” that places inundation in Bangladesh squarely in the lap of sea-level rise. The country’s minister of water resources recently declared, for example, that “Polders are necessary, especially in the light of climate change. We must thoroughly redesign our polders; we need to address the threat of rising sea levels. The southwest coastal zone is the most backward region of this country because of salinity, tidal surges, cyclones and sea level rise” (quoted on pp. 59–60). Dewan, however, found a “hidden transcript” in her Bangla-language conversations with development officials that admitted that the “passport for funding” of climate change occluded the fact that embankments, by stoppering favorable borsa (monsoon) floods, add silt to rivers and amplify deleterious jalaboddho (waterlogging) floods. “Climate reductive translations” make these processes difficult to read.

These riverine-reading errors also work hand in glove with greatly simplified accounts of social life on the delta. A United Nations Development Programme focus, for example, on women as particularly vulnerable to climate change owing to their putatively diminished role in decision-making often ends up reinscribing and naturalizing their disempowerment. This, too, is a misreading, a reduction to stereotypes that Dewan’s close ethnographic and survey work with landless women expertly refuses and complicates, revealing dramatic reconfigurations of kinship under shifting political economies of labor, rather than anything like “tradition.” A United Nations Development Programme focus, for example, on women as particularly vulnerable to climate change owing to their putatively diminished role in decision-making often ends up reinscribing and naturalizing their disempowerment. This, too, is a misreading, a reduction to stereotypes that Dewan’s close ethnographic and survey work with landless women expertly refuses and complicates, revealing dramatic reconfigurations of kinship under shifting political economies of labor, rather than anything like “tradition.” Misreading the Bengal Delta is essential reading for anyone who wishes to think critically about climate change and its local effects, about the modes through which it is made legible, and about how superficial reading may be avoided through deep decolonial, historical, and ethnographic exegeses.

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