

Walking and Poetry as Ways of Dwelling: A Study with the Herders of the Karakoram Mountains, Pakistan

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My postdoctoral project at the Rachel Carson Center will consist in developing my PhD thesis into a book publication, so as to contribute to political and scientific discussions on environmental issues by focusing on how landscape and oral poetry merge through walking. I am currently completing my manuscript, which I have titled “*On the Becomings of Pathways: Walking and Building Roads in the Karakoram Mountains*”. This book explores the relationship that the herders of Karakoram develop on the roads they take, and describes the sensitive and symbolic relations they form with the pathways they build. The roads built by the Hunza principality, the British Raj and then Pakistan have provided the material ground on which the region’s inhabitants have met, exchanged goods and ideas, and developed the imaginaries through which they have reinvented their society. Mountainside stone pathways are also a focal point for the inhabitants. They build them through the pooling of resources and name them after a deceased. At the time of their construction, they thus become places of remembrance and prayer. Drawing on ethnography, the analysis of British archives and the translation of local poems, I describe how the entanglements between the living, invisible beings, and their built environment shape the Wakhi societies of northern Pakistan.

With the Landhaus Fellowship, I wish to complete and publish my manuscript and more particularly to work on two chapters that explore how the analysis of local poetry sheds light on the entanglements between road builders and their built environment. I will develop an analytical framework informed by poetic ecology to grasp how the composition of poetry is shaped by the perception of the environment while walking, and how listening to poetry in turn shapes representations of the landscape. By making poems and walking central to the study, I wish to offer a new perspective on the anthropology of roads and the environment.

Finally, the Landhaus Fellowship will enable me to fulfil the research agreement I signed with the inhabitants of Shimshal Valley through their local organisation, the Shimshal Nature Trust. Since 1997, the Shimshal Nature Trust has worked to preserve the local fauna and flora and to promote Wakhi culture. To reach its objectives, the Trust forms partnerships with Western scholars carrying out research in the region. At the start of my PhD, I concluded an agreement with the villagers through this local organization. We agreed on my research topic and I involved students in my work. I therefore plan to use the Landhaus Fellowship as an opportunity to develop my PhD thesis into a book publication, to support the objectives of the SNT, and to contribute to strengthening the presence of environmental studies in scientific and political debate.