

Mediation, Then and Now: Ang Tharkay's *Sherpa* and *Memoires d'un Sherpa*

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The memoir of Ang Tharkay, a well-known Sherpa mountaineering guide and leader from the early years of Himalayan mountaineering, poses several problems for contemporary readers. The book, Memoires d'un Sherpa (A Sherpa's Memoir), fell into obscurity after its publication in 1954, but was translated from French and reissued as Sherpa in 2016. Since the original text was heavily mediated by its editor, translator, and transcriber, can we read Sherpa as Ang Tharkay's life story? I propose that we must, and that we can if we do this sensitively, with an eye for the types of mediation found in each edition and whose needs they serve. Therefore, we need to think about what mediation is, whose interests it serves, and how it works in the making and reading of Sherpa. Mediation in memoir discourse affects any account, past and present. Knowing how mediation works in Ang Tharkay's memoir is essential to hearing what climbers from Nepal had to say in the 1950s, and how it is possible, and imperative, to hear their voices now, in all their complexity, in order to challenge romantic ideas about Sherpas which persist in mountaineering writing. In so doing, we can connect the stories of early Sherpa climbers about labor issues to the concerns Sherpa climbers write about today.

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In 1960, the Belgian cartoonist Hergé published *TinTin in Tibet* in French (titled *TinTin au Tibet*). TinTin, his faithful dog Snowy, and the irritating yet loyal Captain Haddock journey to the mountains of Tibet to find Chang, TinTin's friend who was in a plane crash high in the mountains. Their guide to the crash site who aids in the search for Chang is "Tharkey," recommended to TinTin as "the best Sherpa in the district" (Hergé 13). The character is based on climber, guide, and

sirdar (expedition leader of Sherpa climbers and other workers) Ang Tharkay, who became the best-known Sherpa in the French-speaking world because of his role in helping the French national team summit Annapurna in 1950.¹ Expedition leader Maurice Herzog's best-selling account of the climb—originally published as *Annapurna premier 8000* (Annapurna, the First 8000er)—had made Ang Tharkay famous (Roberts 22). Ang Tharkay is part of Hergé's comic because to European francophones at the time, he stood in for Sherpas in mountaineering stories and embodied their virtues in any adventure tale about mountaineering, much as Tenzing Norgay would do for anglophone audiences interested in British climbing.² Ang Tharkay's presence affirms the power and the reach of Herzog's account of the Annapurna climb, which was nothing less than the story of French national pride at being the first to summit an 8000-meter peak in the wake of their humiliating defeat by Germany during World War II (see Roberts 133).

The depiction of Ang Tharkay in a popular comic is heavily mediated. His image conforms to genre expectations of the *TinTin* series, with its focus on adventure stories for children set in exotic places. "Tharkey" is the epitome of the helpful Sherpa, an image borrowed liberally from other mountaineering expedition accounts of the 1950s, which romanticize Sherpa people as unspoiled and delighted to serve climbers from the West without letting them speak for themselves or represent why they took on the dangerous work of expedition support. As Sherpa and other Nepalese climbers begin to take control of their climbing careers in the twenty-first century and speak about their lives in their own voices, they must contend with such older (and pervasive) ideas about Sherpa innocence, servility, childlikeness, and purity that have marked so many accounts about Sherpas. The existence of two early memoirs by the best-known Sherpa climbers of their generation, Tenzing Norgay and Ang Tharkay, therefore has the potential to correct the tendency to see Sherpa climbers of the 1950s only

¹ Ang Tharkay's name follows Sherpa naming conventions. His last name would have been Sherpa, but it is almost never used. In the English translation of his memoir, Ang Tharkay's son Dawa Sherpa calls him Ang Tharkay, and so I follow that convention. Where other versions of Ang Tharkay's name are used, I have included the variants. See Tenzing xix–xi for a complete discussion of Sherpa naming protocols and the history of Tenzing Norgay's names.

² We can be sure this is Ang Tharkay in *TinTin in Tibet* because in a 2016 interview with Ang Tharkay's son Dawa and grandson Renaud, Renaud relates that he found out how famous Ang Tharkay was by accident when he read a TinTin comic on a visit to France and realized that the character was based on his grandfather. In the same interview, Dawa confirms that it is his father in the comic (see Panday).

through the eyes of their employers. Paying attention to these memoirs “transforms the climbing Sherpa from being merely represented, mainly by Western authors, to ownership of their own stories” and the importance of their own, oral, ways of recounting their lives (Dhar, “Recounting”). Tenzing’s autobiographies have begun to receive critical attention in scholarship about mountaineering literature and history.³ It is imperative now, as Amrita Dhar says, to pay serious attention to Ang Tharkay’s memoir, now translated into English and released as *Sherpa* in 2016, because “it is important to understand [it and other] works as crucial testaments of the intersections of colonialism, labor, love, languages, literacy, orality, and mountaineering” (Dhar, “Travel and Mountains” 359).

How should we pay attention? Dhar points out too that Ang Tharkay’s memoir, like Tenzing’s, is heavily mediated. Like Tenzing, Ang Tharkay was not print literate and so he appears to have worked with an editorial collaborator, an interpreter who made notes as he spoke and translated them into English, and even had a translator who translated the collaborator Basil P. Norton’s text into French (Dhar, “Travel and Mountains” 359). Moreover, like *Man of Everest*, *Memoires d'un Sherpa* went out of print soon after it was published, while the memoirs of European climbers about their roles on climbing expeditions, such as Sir Edmund Hillary’s *High Adventure*, or Maurice Herzog’s *Annapurna*, are still in print. Herzog’s book has sold more than 11 million copies, been translated into 40 languages, and was required reading in French schools for many years (see Roberts 22). Meanwhile, for decades, Ang Tharkay’s own version of events on Annapurna was almost unknown.

In 2016, however, *Memoires d'un Sherpa* was translated into English and is now available from Mountaineers Books as *Sherpa*, with accompanying annotations and paratextual material by Ang Tharkay’s relatives. The reissue of *Sherpa* therefore presents an opportunity to examine Ang Tharkay’s story as Dhar recommends we should, but it is important too not to simply see the text as an example of an unmediated life story of an Indigenous person. It is vital that Indigenous people, including Sherpas, have ownership of their own stories. At the same time, it is important to see how mediation works in the production of any life story, particularly these types of stories, as a way to produce meaning rather than distort it. The voices in a memoir by an

³ Scholarly investigations of Tenzing Norgay’s memoirs include Slemon; Hansen; Rak 163–172.

Indigenous person should not be seen as pure and uncorrupted, which would reinstall romantic ideas about Sherpa people as unspoiled, part of nature rather than culture. Nor should we think about collaborative texts with Indigenous people as rendering the Indigenous story tellers as not capable of full representation. Stephen Slemon does this in his treatment of Tenzing Norgay, where he puts the word *autobiography* into quotation marks as “autobiography” because he does not think it should be attributed to Tenzing. In his analysis of the different answers Tenzing gives about who summited Everest first, Slemon writes: “[P]erhaps it is in the space between Tenzing’s two strategic answers that a kind of subaltern human agency might be said to have found a voice” (Slemon 38). But in that “perhaps” and “might be said” is a denial of what it means to pay attention to what Tenzing does say. Gayatri Spivak in her revisiting of her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” took up this question, saying that of course the subaltern does speak. It is a failure of communication to assume that the subaltern does not. It is rather that “it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting” of that speaking (Spivak 64). Mediation does not mean that Tenzing, or Ang Tharkay, cannot speak in a collaborative text. If we do not understand the work of Ang Tharkay and Tenzing Norgay as testimony, Amrita Dhar says, “we continue to exclude some of the most vitally important voices of mountain history” (Dhar, “Travel and Mountains” 359). We do that when we assume that works of memoir are not intersubjective and not collaborative. We need to pay attention to what does happen in the work of mediation, including what possibilities it forecloses and what possibilities it opens up for the communication of Sherpa experiences and ways of knowing as they interact with other knowledge systems.

Therefore, we need to think about what mediation is, whose interests it serves, and how it works in the making and reading of *Sherpa*. Mediation in memoir discourse affects any account, past and present. Knowing how mediation works in Ang Tharkay’s memoir is essential to hearing what climbers from Nepal had to say in the 1950s, and how it is possible, and imperative, to hear their voices now, in all their complexity. As Linda Tuhivai Smith says, Spivak challenges all scholars to take Indigenous intellectual work seriously. The problem is not with speaking, but how we listen and take seriously what we hear (see Smith 81). Listening for mediation is essential in this process.

What is Mediation in Memoir?

In *False Summit*, I argue that one of the best ways to understand more widely what climbing means is to read the memoirs and expedition accounts of a wide variety of climbers with a view to listening to what they say, in context. Memoirs and other life writing accounts do several important things which are important to climbing history and culture. They are acts of witness that other climbers use to understand how to do a climb or what happened during one; they build (and destroy) reputations within the public record; they bring into view the thoughts and reflections of their subjects; and finally, they are mediated accounts of experience between climbers and the social worlds they inhabit (see Rak 9–11).

All memoirs, not just ones about climbing, are mediated. Like other books, when they are published, they enter what Robert Darnton originally called the Communications Circuit, where they journey from the pens or keyboards from authors to agents, publishers, printers, booksellers, and ultimately, to readers (see Darnton 12). Books are not direct transmissions of an author's thoughts to a reader: their content is produced between the work of many actors who alter content, distribution, and even the genre of the book. The Communications Circuit has been adapted many ways, including for digital publishing (see Murray and Squires 4), but the general idea remains the same: books undergo intense processes of mediation because editors, publishers, agents, and many other people affect the book's content, how it is received, and how it circulates. In addition, what Gérard Genette called paratexts, the printed matter of a book not by the author, such as endorsements or prefaces, affect the ways in which the text will be read. Paratexts are a "zone not just of transition" between author and reader, "but of transaction," because they represent ways for a reader to understand a book and its arguments (Genette 261–262). In addition, books themselves are part of power relations within what Pierre Bourdieu called the literary field, one of the fields of cultural production marked by its own rules of engagement between producers of meaning, cultural capital, and circulation (see Bourdieu 311–313). Mediation is a way to describe how communications circulate between actors in any system, and how a medium, such as print, affects the message sent and received. Therefore, no memoirs about climbing, whether they are by Sherpa authors or not, are simply about experience. They appear within expectations of genres and their discourse, and they are produced by publishers who help to shape them. As is the case with Ang Tharkay,

significant interventions are made at the levels of editorial work, translation, and transcription. Ang Tharkay's voice appears within this web of signification.

Memoirs as a genre also have the potential to construct the identities of their writers, making visible stories we have not seen before, and changing the lives of the writers in the process. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have characterized the work of making an autobiography as "a moving target, a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present" (Smith and Watson 1). Therefore, memoirs are a matter of public record but not unreflectively so. They need to be read sensitively because they are rhetorical. What is more, memoirs are often read for their singularity, as if they are about one subject's story, but life writing scholarship for a long time has accepted that memoirs are intersubjective. Intersubjectivity means that life stories are about the stories of others just as much as they are about the self, and that the subjectivity of readers and what they bring to a life story becomes part of the reading process. Intersubjectivity therefore involves negotiations between authors and readers "aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life" (16).

This way of reading for mediation in autobiography is particularly important when the subject of a memoir has less power than the apparatus that produces it. In the case of Indigenous people in particular, there is a long history of the cultural appropriation of their stories by non-Indigenous people within academic disciplines such as anthropology, or within public discourse, and a long history of co-opting the life stories of Indigenous people (along with their cultural expressions and their land) for settler colonial purposes.⁴ The result can do violence to an Indigenous author and the stories they might want to tell. In the case of memoirs, there are many cases of non-Indigenous people collaborating with an Indigenous person to make a memoir, but the conventions of the story and uneven power dynamics in the collaboration can cause the meaning and intent of the story to be altered. Rather than say that this renders the work of making a collaboration impossible, Cree scholar of editing Greg Younging advises that awareness of mediation is essential to helping the voice of Indigenous writers live within a print medium. The work of collaboration and respect is essential to this: "[T]he key to working in a culturally appropriate way is to collaborate with Indigenous Peoples at the centre of a work. Collaboration ensures

⁴ For a definition of settler colonialism and its politics of acquisition, see Coulthard 151–152.

that works do not speak for Indigenous Peoples. It ensures that works are Indigenous Peoples speaking" (Younging 31).

At the same time, the answer to problems of mediation is not to assume that there is a pure, unmediated story out there to be told. Indigenous storytelling traditions in North America, for example, are all about mediation. It matters, for example, what season some stories are told, or who is listening, or whether the purpose is learning or entertainment. Some stories are for everyone, and some are not (see Justice 25). The work of mediation therefore does not occur outside the traditions of Indigenous peoples, including those of Sherpa people. What matters is how the work of collaboration occurs if a story travels from an oral context to print, and whether Indigenous people's ways of knowing are respected in that collaboration or not. In the case of Ang Tharkay's *Sherpa*, the first written account made in collaboration with a Sherpa, mediation is inevitably at the heart of its production, sometimes in ways that we would not find acceptable today. Identifying what kinds of mediation are at work in the text will help to know how Ang Tharkay is speaking and what he is saying about his life.

Mediation on the Level of Representation: Romanticism and Sherpas

To return to *TinTin in Tibet*, the representation of Ang Tharkay that has circulated around the world clearly needs correction by paying attention to *Sherpa*. In *TinTin in Tibet*, "Tharkey" the mountain guide attempts to turn back from the dangerous and seemingly fruitless search for Chang but he is shamed by TinTin's loyalty to an Asian person and so, he says, as a "yellow man" like Chang, he feels that he must live up to TinTin's example (Hergé 41). It is doubtful that a Sherpa would ever describe himself as "yellow" and would see himself as akin to a Chinese person, since Tibet had been annexed and occupied by China in 1959 after China brutally crushed an uprising in Lhasa (see Shetty). The decision of Tharkey to follow TinTin into danger therefore depends on a neo-colonial image of Sherpas as strong, brave, and knowledgeable, but ultimately, they are not depicted as adventurous or loyal enough on their own. That is why Tharkey is made to serve a white European employer who turns out to be a better example of loyalty than he is himself, although his climbing and guiding skills are superior to the people he serves. Sherpas, in this version of events, need European ideas of adventure in order to become their best climbing

selves. In service to European climbers, they are often pictured as realizing those selves. These same accounts are careful to say that such a climber is not motivated by money: in the comic, for example, TinTin pays Tharkay for his initial guiding work, but Tharkay comes back to help TinTin for free.

The image of Ang Tharkay as strong and yet devoted, and as someone who is motivated by more than money, was common in European climbing accounts about Sherpas until very recently. Herzog himself in *Annapurna* praises Ang Tharkay and other Sherpas for their willingness to serve, but when Ang Tharkay declines an offer to go to the summit with him, he wonders why, after all their effort, their “trustworthiness and loyalty,” and the fact that they enjoy the mountains, Sherpas would not want to accompany the *sahibs* (masters) to the summit. “How oddly their minds worked,” Herzog muses, even as he admits that perhaps the Sherpas in their turn would find his own motivations strange (Herzog 150–151). In his account too, the Sherpas are often comically unable to climb ice and snow and must be taught to do so by the French climbers (see Herzog 123–124). Unlike many British climbers who did not even record Sherpa names in early expedition accounts, Herzog at least says who the Sherpas were on Annapurna, and he seems to understand that perhaps their motivations are different from his own. But even he pictures them within Orientalist stereotypes as eager to serve Europeans rather than as people working in a dangerous job who need the money.

According to Sherry B. Ortner, European mountaineers from the 1920s to the 1970s commonly described the Sherpas as childlike and innocent in just this way, often stressing “that the Sherpas certainly did not climb for money,” but for their love of adventure and service (Ortner 44). In such accounts they were also pictured as in need of European discipline and focus. This image of Sherpa motivations served to connect Sherpa goals to European goals, whether this was accurate or not, and to recalibrate mountaineering expeditions as idealist, and not economic, in nature (see Ortner 43–46). In the case of Ang Tharkay, the picture painted of him often is rapturous. He is often represented as indicative of the Sherpa dedication to service. Herzog’s account of Ang Tharkay, and tributes to him by other climbers, notably Eric Shipton and Michael Ward, celebrate Ang Tharkay as selfless, dedicated, cheerful, and unambitious, the best of his people (see Ward 182). But in all these accounts, Ang Tharkay’s own thoughts and motivations apart from his acts of service hardly appear. Like Tharkay in *TinTin in Tibet*, he mostly seems to say what European people want to

hear, and appears as a servant who *wants* to be there: when (unmasked) he brings tea to the climbers in bed in *A Mountain Called Nun Kun*, Ang Tharkay is praised because he did something for the climbers on his own initiative. Bernard Pierre uses this occasion to reflect that Sherpas like Ang Tharkay are “obliging” but not “servile” (Pierre 115).

Such is the picture of Ang Tharkay and the basis for his fame as a good and faithful servant. This picture is incomplete, relying only on what non-Sherpas think about Sherpa labor and culture, and not on what Sherpas have to say for themselves about the jobs they do. Climbing in the Himalayas is changing, a situation that has given rise to many laments for the days when Everest, or Annapurna, or Kanchenjunga, were unspoiled by mountain tourism (see Krakauer 24–25). But such an attitude leaves out important considerations about Sherpa labor conditions, because “unspoiled” for non-Sherpa climbers actually meant impoverishment for many Sherpas who lived in harsh mountain environments with little opportunity, and unacceptable labor conditions for Sherpa climbers who were underpaid, unprotected, and poorly compensated for difficult and dangerous work (see Adhikari). Moreover, as the British-run Himalayan Club began to regulate wages for Sherpas in the 1920s, Sherpas began to protest the type and amount of wages they received. Sherpas “had not grown up in an imperialistic society and did not automatically accept the British as superior” (Tenzing 33–34), and so Sherpa strikes and wage negotiations often formed part of the work of expeditions, even in the time of Ang Tharkay and Tenzing Norgay.

A less romanticized view of the changes to climbing means that there are now opportunities for locals within the climbing industry that can be beneficial, and Sherpas can facilitate climbing not as workers, but as owners of climbing companies. As Sherpas and other Nepalese climbers develop climbing and guiding careers of their own, they are able to travel to and live in Western countries, acquiring Western frames of knowledge that they then can use to write their own accounts or collaborate with non-Nepalese authors. More and more, Sherpa climbers are demanding better working conditions and respect as a result. Some examples are recent Sherpa labor disputes on Everest and the wide circulation of *Sherpa*, the documentary film about that dispute (see Scott-Stevenson), or the interviews with Sherpa climbers and essays by them (see Sherpa; Bashyal). Along with the publication of *Buried in the Sky* by Peter Zuckerman and Amanda Padoan, with its lengthy interview with Sherpas about their lives, labor, and beliefs about climbing, international attention is now focused on the working

conditions of Sherpas and other Nepalese people working in the climbing and tourist industries. In addition, many Sherpa no longer work for Western climbing companies, but now run their own. The recent success of Nimsdai Purja, a Sherpa climber from Nepal who specifically uses his public reach to draw attention to Sherpa working conditions (see Purja, *Beyond*; Purja, “The Politics”), also reflects the shift away from speaking about Sherpa and other Tibetan or Nepalese people in climbing, and to speaking with them or listening to them. Part of the work of listening to what Sherpa people have to say therefore involves thinking about mediation and Sherpa stories, then and now, from the Golden Age of first ascents in the Himalayas and Karakoram, to the current commercial era.

The Many Levels of Mediation in *Sherpa*

Memoirs d'un Sherpa is a landmark in publishing work by and about Sherpa people, but the book does not appear to have been widely read at the time of its first publication. It was not reprinted or made into a paperback, and today, it is a rare book. I have found only one excerpt of it in the French youth magazine *Benjamin* in 1955 (“Ang Tharkay”). Beyond an endorsement in the original edition by John Hunt, the leader of the British 1953 climb of Mount Everest whose own expedition account was translated into French and published by the same press, Amiot-Dumont, there appears to have been no public awareness of the book at all in France or beyond it when it first appeared.

The reasons why Ang Tharkay’s autobiography did not circulate in France cannot be fully known, but one of them probably has to do with its packaging as an adventure text, which is at odds with its emphasis in the book itself on anthropological frames of reference for Sherpa thinking. Amiot-Dumont and the company which bought the publishers, Le Livre Contemporain, mostly published adventure and travel books for younger readers. *Memoires* appeared in a series called Bibliothèque de l’Alpinisme, edited by Bernard Pierre, a well-known and internationally-respected French climber (see Bell Sr. et al.), who published many travel books with Amiot-Dumont, including *Un Montagne Nomée Nun Kun* in 1955, an account of a successful French attempt on the Himalayan mountain Nun Kun. Ang Tharkay was the *sirdar* on that expedition. The cover of the French and English editions of *Un Montagne* has an exciting illustration of climbers trying to escape an avalanche, and the largest figure is that of Ang Tharkay him-

self as he falls into the snow in the foreground. *Un Montagne* is firmly placed within the tradition of adventure accounts with its opening, in its English-language edition, “fasten your belts!”, which brings readers right into the action (see Pierre 13), to its closing when against all odds, the team summits and Bernard Pierre joyfully says, “we had conquered Nun” (Pierre 174).

Unlike Pierre's book, however, the text of *Memoires d'un Sherpa* is not so firmly placed within the discourse of the adventure story. The original cover has a picture of the Himalayas rather than an exciting action shot or even a photo of Ang Tharkay. *Un Montagne's* preface by Sir John Hunt, the aforementioned leader of the 1953 British expedition to Everest, has the effect of authorizing Pierre as a good expedition leader himself, particularly since Hunt makes sure to say that Pierre climbed with him in 1950 (see Pierre ix–x). But John Hunt merely provided an endorsement for the original text of *Memoires*, found on the back cover. The original introduction to *Memoires* was not by a climber, but by someone named Basil P. Norton, who says that he wrote the text. He explains that he met with Ang Tharkay in Kathmandu, and that he used notes based on conversations with Ang Tharkay in Hindi, taken by “a mutual friend” Mohan Lal Mukherjee, who then wrote the notes in English (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 11–12). He also says that as a non-climber, he consulted many books, including Eric Shipton's memoir, and that he used information from Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, “a member of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London” (177). Fürer-Haimendorf had been to Nepal and conducted ethnographic research among Sherpa people. In 1955 he published an article about Sherpas for the *Illustrated London News* (see Fürer-Haimendorf). Later, he would write *The Sherpas of Nepal*, the first book by an anthropologist about Sherpa culture and religion.

The rhetoric of *Sherpa* reflects these multiple authorships, sometimes in awkward ways. For example, the early chapters “My Childhood” and “Travels to Tibet” detail trips Ang Tharkay made with his family. They describe his family's relationships, their poverty, how he met his wife, and the trips to Tibet that made him curious about travel. When he sees Darjeeling he says: “[F]or me, it was the discovery of a new world. I found myself immersed in the magic of modern life with its mysteries and marvels. I was like a blind man suddenly able to see.” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 27) Ang Tharkay at one point says this about his own storytelling: “May I say that I feel a bit embarrassed about telling my story? But, after all, this is an unpretentious story, told simply as

I find it deep within my memory, the only journal that I was able to keep, as I do not know how to read or write.” (67)

Ang Tharkay's style is grounded in oral tradition's dependence on memory as oracy, which involves using memory deliberately as a type of recording or record-keeping. He also is modest about his style of storytelling, and his own life and career, perhaps because it was not his idea to tell this story, although we do not know who asked him to do it.

However, the third chapter, “Sherpa Country and its Inhabitants,” is not written in the same voice. In that chapter, Ang Tharkay quotes the British climber Eric Shipton at length in a way that he could not have done because he did not read or write, and then says that he will describe “my small Himalayan homeland in the way that a humble, uneducated mountain man knows how to do” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 34). This is followed by an ethnographic account of the Sherpa people, detailing the size of the territory as 650,000 hectares, followed by the customs of marriage, birth, death, and festivals in what reads more like an anthropological account than one Ang Tharkay might have made himself (see Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 34–42). The ethnographic section resembles Furer-Haimendorf's chapter in *The Sherpas of Nepal*, which has similar descriptions of Nepalese regions and the size of the Sherpa homelands. Even the etymology of the word “shar” “pa” as “easterner” but of an unknown Tibetan origin (Furer-Haimendorf 1) is echoed in *Sherpa* in this way: “The term ‘Sherpa’ dates back to the time of Tibetan rule, years and years ago. In Tibetan it means ‘the Eastern people,’ from the words *sher*, meaning ‘East,’ and *pa*, meaning ‘people’” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 33). Given the first two chapters and their focus, it is hard to believe that Ang Tharkay would quote Eric Shipton or speak like an anthropologist. Occasionally he “says” things like “the vicissitudes of this great adventure” (139) or “the sahibs undertook a scrupulous reconnaissance of the area” (84), things that do not sound like the rest of the text. It appears therefore that Furer-Haimendorf may have contributed material from his article and book in addition to providing advice, or that Basil P. Norton used such material liberally.

The circumstances of production for the original text help to explain how such inconsistencies came to be, and perhaps why the book was not widely read. There is another, important problem with the original text as well. Basil P. Norton's introduction to the original text begins in the following way: “It is often difficult to explain how things happen.” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 11) It is certainly true in this case, since Basil P. Norton appears to be a pseudonym. The fact-checkers for Mountaineers Books note that “it is unclear who Basil P. Norton was, or if there ever

was such a person" (181). Because Norton does not appear to be real, it is not possible to know whether his description of the composition process is accurate, and it is unknown why the real author concealed their identity. We do know that Norton could not authorize the book for the world of French climbing, since he was unknown. In an adventure series aimed at fans of climbing, this makes for an awkward juxtaposition of different kinds of styles, edited by someone who could not authorize the text as John Hunt or Eric Shipton could do. We know too that the level of mediation in the text is significant because Norton was not who he said he was, and it may be even more complex than it appears in Norton's introduction, where there are already many levels of mediation present.

According to Norton, he met Ang Tharkay in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal. Ang Tharkay "spoke only a little English" and so Norton relied on Mohan Lal Mukherjee, who transcribed and translated Ang Tharkay's story from Nepali into English (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 11). Norton "simply referred to the notes" and to Ang Tharkay's "faithful memories," fashioning the stories into a book "faithful to the truth but also readable" (12). Even if Norton were real, the Ang Tharkay's story is mediated in many ways already: he told it to Mukherjee in Hindi, which is not his first language.⁵ Mukherjee transcribed his notes into English. The book was then translated into French. In addition to these layers of mediation, Norton says that he is not a mountaineer and so read many books about climbing to give him the right context (see Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 12–13): these books, including Shipton's, would not have been written by Sherpas and probably would not include their perspectives. In addition, in the acknowledgements the editors thank Fürer-Haimendorf for reading over parts of the manuscript. The editors call him "the only expert who conducted a serious ethnographic study in the land of the Sherpas" (177). In keeping with Orientalist thinking of the time, a non-Sherpa anthropologist is cited as an expert and given considerable control over how Sherpa are to be represented, perhaps even writing significant parts of the text that Ang Tharkay could not have provided himself. A non-Sherpa editor compiled the text, presumably without consulting Ang Tharkay about how his stories were to appear.

In addition to all this, there is another layer of mediation. The book was translated into French by Henri Delgove. Delgove had translated

⁵ Who Mukherjee is, whether he actually had a role in transcription or where he did this work, remains unknown.

William Faulkner among other important authors. But *Memoirs d'un Sherpa* was not a literary work: it was part of a series about mountaineering adventure. That series included another book by Pierre called *La Conquête du Salcantay: Géant des Andes* (*The Conquest of Salcantay: Giant of the Andes*), a translation of *The Face of Everest* by Eric Shipton, and *La Face W des Drus* (*The West Face of the Drus*) by another well-known French climber, Guido Magnone.⁶ The result is a *heavily* mediated text, despite the fact that Basil P. Norton's final paragraph claims there is no mediation in the memoir at all: "This is a sincere, unaltered story told by an unsophisticated mountain man, whose singular passion it was to follow the Himalayan explorers in their attempts to conquer the world's highest peaks." (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 14)

The original edition of *Sherpa* therefore was designed to be an adventure story in keeping with the other stories in circulation about first ascents in the Himalayas and the Alps, and it was even excerpted in a children's adventure magazine to build that particular audience. But the story itself does not participate in the discourse of adventure in the same way that the other titles do, because of the anthropological frames within it, and perhaps because "Basil P. Norton" was not a recognizable person to the French mountaineering community in the way that Pierre, Shipton, and Magnone were. It is curious that Bernard Pierre shares the same first initials as Basil P. Norton, and that Pierre knew Ang Tharkay very well from the Nun Kun expedition. Ang Tharkay was in Paris in 1953 to accept an award for his work on Annapurna, at the time that he would have been interviewed for *Memoires*. It is conceivable that Pierre, with assistance, actually did write the book. But whether Pierre was in fact Norton, or if he was, why he would have hidden his identity and pretended that the book was translated from English to French is unknown. What we do know is that *Memoires* was subjected to multiple authorship and mediation in ways that probably meant that it was not well received by an audience that enjoyed reading exciting first-hand accounts of alpine adventures in Europe and the Himalayas. Sherpas were presumably of little interest to such an audience, except as background and local color, which is how they were to be seen for the next forty years.

This description of a text that must be peeled back like an onion to understand its production does several things: it obscures the circum-

⁶ I have yet to find information about this series at Amiot-Dumont in the archives. These titles, including *Les memoires d'un Sherpa*, are on the back cover of the original edition.

stances of its making, romanticizes the work of life writing itself, and perpetuates the familiar, colonial picture of Sherpas as unsophisticated, servile, and unambitious for themselves as they help the *real* climbers conquer. The layers of mediation that obscure the work and even identity of Basil P. Norton mean that more mediation is rendered invisible too. There is no way to know why it was that Ang Tharkay agreed to share his story, whether he was compensated for doing so, where he was when he did it, who Mohan Lal Mukherjee was, where the original English-language manuscript is now, and even if there was an English-language manuscript at all. It might seem as if these unknowns make it too hard to read this book as anything other than a work of cultural appropriation, but I would argue that it is still possible to read *Sherpa* as Ang Tharkay's story. However, a reading of *Sherpa* does need to be attentive to the different kinds of textual and paratextual rhetoric which occur.

This is the context for the reprint and translation into English of *Sherpa*. The more recent edition also had considerable paratextual work that mediates Ang Tharkay's story, although in this case, the work is presented in a more transparent way, and it includes the voices of Ang Tharkay's relatives. *Sherpa* was commissioned by Mountaineers Books, which acquired a rare copy of the text through Bill Petroske and had Corrinne McKay translate it. The press arranged for Ang Tharkay's son Dawa Sherpa and Tashi Sherpa (Tenzing Norgay's grandson) to provide an afterword and a preface respectively, and through the work of Bill Buxton and Bob A. Schelfhout Aubertijn, there is extensive fact-checking and footnoting (see Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 177).

The effect of the paratextual work, which includes the words of Ang Tharkay's relatives, helps to swing the text away from assumptions about Sherpa cheerfulness and servility. For example, an early chapter details how Ang Tharkay longed to become a mountaineer, so much so that his "imagination ran wild" when he met another Sherpa, Nim Tharkay, who had been on an expedition and who showed him the clothing he had been given (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 45). Ang Tharkay's account provides a romantic desire for adventure. In another example, the introduction describes Ang Tharkay as servile: "[T]he only thing he [Ang Tharkay] wanted was to be of service to the 'sahibs,' to help them in their audacious attempts to conquer the dangerous giants of the Himalayas, and to rejoice in their successes as if they were his own." (12) But in his afterword, Dawa Sherpa, Ang Tharkay's son, adjusts this romantic picture of a Sherpa who loved to climb and wanted to serve. He says that his father never told his children to become climbers and

that he said this to them: “My father used to tell us, ‘You must go to school to an education for a better job and for a better life. Forget about going to the mountains as a Sherpa on expeditions. Life as a Sherpa is not a joke. It is real hard and you would not earn a good salary.’” (176)

Ang Tharkay here does not sound like a Sherpa who did his job for the love of it, and he appears much more realistic about the dangerous and hardships of life as a climbing Sherpa. This view of Ang Tharkay is therefore a direct corrective to romanticism about him and about Sherpa labor conditions. At other places in the text, Ang Tharkay indicates that he went on expeditions because he and his family needed the money, and not because of an abstract love he had for the mountains, a life he calls “brutal and dangerous” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 19). At times, he says, “we were barely paid enough to eat,” and he says that he was “exhausted from fatigue” during Eric Shipton’s expedition to Everest in 1933 (35). Therefore, the text’s gaps in the narrative and paratexts by his relatives do provide a look at what it was actually like to be a Sherpa climber, and what Ang Tharkay found it to be.

In the forward to *Sherpa*, Ang Tharkay’s nephew Tashi Sherpa makes sure to say that “he was an equal in an exclusive club with Shipton, Tilman, Herzog, Hillary, and of course Tenzing Norgay” (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 7). Tashi Sherpa’s words constitute another resistance to the narrative of cheerful servility. In *Sherpa*, for example, Ang Tharkay assesses his treatment by British expeditions, and finds it wanting, saying that in 1933, “life in base camp held no real appeal for us Sherpas. The expedition organizers barely treated us as humans,” denying them even the use of latrines (53). By contrast, French climbers “made no distinction between themselves and us. This was a new and very pleasant experience. This way of working filled us with enthusiasm. Never on any expedition whatsoever before, had we felt such a sense of freedom and closeness with the sahibs. We felt a bond of camaraderie between us” (125). Tenzing Norgay says similar things in *Man of Everest* about climbing with Swiss climbers. He says that the Swiss treated him “as one of the climbing team and a real expedition member” (Norgay and Ullman 197), contrasting their attitude with that of the British, who did not provide toilet facilities for Sherpas in 1953. In the same way, Ang Tharkay felt on early expeditions that Sherpa were being treated as coolies, and not as members (see Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 230–231). These observations are important for the historical record in terms of the treatment of Sherpas, but they are also important because they show what Ang Tharkay and Tenzing value: equality, dignity, and respect in work and play. It is a view of Sherpa labor which does not

ignore its difficulties or its economics, but which also makes clear when mistreatment and disrespect occur. In many early climbing accounts, Sherpa strikes are seen as inconveniences for climbers, an irritation. Ang Tharkay explains why they happen and how to work towards solutions. He describes how he did this with Eric Shipton in 1935 when Sherpas were treated like porters and not as they thought they should be treated (see Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 60).

Conclusion

In his preface to *Sherpa*, Ang Tharkay's grandson Tashi Sherpa wonders whether his grandfather would "still smile his blessings because so many after him have achieved new glories on the path his generation blazed so painstakingly" (Ang Tharkay, *Sherpa* 10). Perhaps he would: at the end of *Beyond Possible*, Nimsdai Purja says that after he climbed the fourteen highest mountains in the world in six months and six days, "it was great to know that the rep of the Nepalese Sherpa guide had also been amplified" (Purja, *Beyond* 287). In an article for *Climbing*, Purja says that his goal was to bring awareness of Sherpa ability and working conditions:

Project Possible was my way of thrusting Sherpa culture into the limelight. For too long, the climbing industry had overlooked their heroic work. As far as I was concerned, they had been the driving force behind a lot of successful expeditions above 8,000 meters—and a support network of Sherpas that performed the heavy lifting propelled most against-all-odds expeditions. (Purja, "The Politics")

Because of the work of mediation, we can know today that Purja's desire to help his own people is an extension of Ang Tharkay's own trail-blazing work, of which *Sherpa* forms a part. We can know more of what Ang Tharkay did in the mountains, and why, in his own words and in the words of his descendants. Mediation can therefore work to bring Ang Tharkay's perspective to us now, rather than obscure what he wanted to say through numerous editorial interventions, as was the case decades ago. We can never know the so-called authentic story of Ang Tharkay as he would have told it directly. But the desire to imagine Indigenous storytelling as unmediated serves to remove it from the work of culture and assign it to nature, away from Indigenous sovereignty over the stories they tell. Ang Tharkay had a complex tale to tell, and its journey to readers is of necessity complex

as well. That is the reason why it is imperative to know how *Sherpa* was and is mediated, and hear Ang Tharkay's voice today, decades after he gave his story to others.

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Mediacija nekoč in danes: *Sherpa* in *Memoires d'un Sherpa* Anga Tharkaya

Ključne besede: avtobiografska književnost / alpinizem / šerpe / Ang Tharkay / spomini / literarno posredništvo

Spomini Anga Tharkaya, znanega alpinističnega vodnika in vodje šerp iz zgodnjega obdobja himalajskega alpinizma, postavljajo sodobnega bralca pred več izzivov. Knjiga *Memoires d'un Sherpa* (Spomini nekega šerpe) je po objavi leta 1954 utonila v pozabo, a je nato v prevodu iz francoščine v angleščino leta 2016 doživela ponovno izdajo z naslovom *Sherpa*. Ker je njen urednik, prevajalec in prepisovalec občutno posegel v izvorno besedilo, se postavlja vprašanje, ali lahko *Sherpo* sploh beremo kot življenjsko zgodbo Anga Tharkaya. Zastopam stališče, da lahko, pravzaprav moramo, seveda z vso potrebno občutljivostjo in ob tem, da upoštevamo raznolikost posegov v besedilo. Slednjim je podvrženo prav vsako izdano delo, zato je treba razmisliti o tem, kaj je mediacija, čigavim interesom služi in kakšno vlogo je imela pri pisanju in branju dela *Sherpa*. Mediacija v memoarskem diskurzu vpliva na vsako pripoved, tako o preteklosti kot sedanjosti. Če želimo slišati, kaj so imeli povedati plezalci iz Nepala v petdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja ter kako povsem mogoče, celo nujno je, da slišimo te glasove v vsej njihovi kompleksnosti tudi danes, da bi postavili pod vprašaj romantične ideje o šerpah, ki vztrajajo v gorniški literaturi, je bistvenega pomena vedeti, kako deluje mediacija v spominih Anga Tharkaya. Na ta način lahko povežemo zgodbe prvih šerp o problemih dela z vprašanji, o katerih šerpe pišejo danes.

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