Wheels Turning: Anthropological Solidarity, Engaged Buddhism, and a Return to the 1990s

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ABSTRACT

In the conventional histories of anthropology that we tend to tell, certain decades loom large: the 1920s, for example, or the 1980s. This article experiments with a comparative reading of a decade closer to our fraught present: the 1990s. With an eye to the discipline's current impasses, and with the benefit of some three decades' distance, I join others in beginning to historicize '90s sociocultural anthropology, tracking its turns amid the cultural moods and political conditions of that moment. I do so by rereading this history obliquely, alongside the history of an adjacent intellectual and social formation, that of engaged Buddhism. Considering how anthropologists and engaged Buddhists grappled, through the 1990s, with a set of related questions—about interdependence, suffering, and engagement—reveals ethical ambitions and political shortcomings that continue to shape pressing debates in both fields today, not least about the promises and practices of solidarity.

In this article, I take us back to the 1990s. I do so not out of nostalgia, but because I think there might be lessons there for anthropology in the present, especially for one of the most pressing questions facing the discipline today: What does it mean to be in solidarity with the people that we study? It isn't news that the problem of solidarity, though it has long drawn the discipline's attention, going back as far as Durkheim, has become an ever more central concern of anthropologists over recent years (Jacobs, 2022; Hemer, 2023). Prompted in part by struggles for racial justice, anthropologists are increasingly asking what it might mean to combine our hallmark "thick description" with the "thick solidarity" that Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange (2018: 196) have called for, a practice that "layers interpersonal empathy with historical analysis, political acumen, and a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted"—something more than the thinness of empathy alone. Indeed, the promise of anthropological solidarity, even if infrequently realized and routinely problematized (Teitelbaum, 2019), is oftentimes held up as one of our potential redeeming features, especially in the face of critiques of the extent to which the discipline remains ensnared in a set of liberal binds (Jobson, 2020; Ihmoud and Cordis, 2022).

Solidarity has been there all along, as an organizing principle and political ambition: a certain commitment to "working *alongside* instead of *on behalf* of a particular group" (Schuller 2023: 600). But the past decade or so has seen it gain wider currency, owing as much to the resurgence of certain left-wing politics in many parts of the world, as it does to set of technological transformations that demand and make possible expressions of solidarity with people both near and far—from Myanmar, to Palestine, to Sudan, to Ukraine. At the same time challenges remain: the crackdowns, in cities around the world, on students protesting Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza in 2024 were stark reminders of the violence with which expressions of transnational solidarity can be met. But what might also remain is a skepticism about what Mie Inouye (2023, 18) calls "the possibility or even desirability of solidarity across difference." Of the protests that followed the 2020 police murder of George Floyd, Inouye writes: "Even though we recently experienced one of the most remarkable displays of interracial solidarity in our country's history, interracial solidarity—and solidarity across any form of difference for that matter—seems less plausible now than it did before 2020" (18).

Such developments and challenges have drawn the theoretical and ethnographic attention of anthropologists, even as they have prompted an ethical and political reckoning for the discipline specifically. For Theodoros Rakopoulos (2016), drawing from his work on practices of solidarity organizing in austerity-burdened Greece, solidarity might be best approached as "bridge concept" that unites "diverse ideological elements with local practices embedded in social relationships." To approach solidarity in this fashion is to frame it as a quintessentially anthropological question. And for a discipline whose theoretical and methodological value largely rests on the relationship between sameness and difference, it makes sense that anthropology has an increasing amount to say on the topic. Some anthropologists have homed in on solidarity's material dimensions, the objects and bodies that produce and coordinate connection across difference, rendering it an embodied structure of feeling (Muehlebach, 2017). Other have shown how ethnographically attending to solidarity activism can reveal hierarchies across borders that, as a result of contradictions inherent in liberal humanism, remain or are reinforced, and that might implicate the anthropologist herself (Schuller, 2023; see also Gill, 2009).

Such liberal frames, however, cannot contain solidarity. And other anthropologists have approached forms of solidarity that exist outside them in whole or in part. Daryl Li (2019), for instance, approaches transnational forms of organized Islamist violence—under the banner "jihad"—as practices of solidarity oriented toward a commitment to its own form of universalism, one counter to the universalism that grounds the US-led "international community" and its institutions. Though an anthropologist, Li makes this point by turning his ethnographic gaze away from the present and toward the not-so-distant past—to the 1990s, and especially to the Muslim fighters, who, from different racial and cultural backgrounds, came together to fight in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the wars that raged there in the wake of the Cold War.

The 1990s moment is key to the story that Li tells, a kind of high watermark of liberal hegemony, a moment that has passed but whose legacies continue to shape our present. In this article, I follow Li and others (e.g., Lepselter, 2016) in tracing some of these legacies, suggesting that there might be instructive guides and cautionary tales for us in some archives of the not-so-distant past, particularly when it comes to solidarity as both object of ethnographic attention and anthropological practice. As anthropology reimagines what forms its solidarity can or should take, ’90s anthropology, with its particular focus on “engagement,” might offer lessons and leads. I explore these, for reasons I will explain, by approaching this history obliquely, alongside an adjacent social and intellectual formation, that of engaged Buddhism. Considering how some anthropologists and some engaged Buddhists grappled, through the ’90s, with a set of related questions—about interdependence, engagement, and suffering—reveals ethical ambitions and political shortcomings that continue to shape debates in both fields, not least when it comes to solidarity.

Through this critical, comparative and partial reading of two archives, I ask: What might be the legacies of “engagement” for contemporary understandings and practices of solidarity? And how do these current debates appear when we approach them through the 1990s, situating that decade’s anthropology in a broader political and cultural frame? I explore these questions through an oblique reading of *Turning Wheel*, the magazine of a leading engaged Buddhist organisation, published through the ’90s. Considering its issues alongside ’90s anthropology, and with a view to the discipline’s current impasses and challenges, I map a common space of concern in which some of our thinking may continue to dwell, in one way or another. I conclude by asking whether there might be something “Buddhist” not just about ’90s anthropology, but also about the way in which the history of anthropology is increasingly rendered, including in this article.

But first, why the 1990s?

Why the 1990s?

In the histories of anthropology that we tend to tell and teach, certain decades loom large: the 1920s, for instance, the time of Malinowski's *Argonauts*; or the 1980s, the time of *Writing Culture*. The 1990s, by contrast, if considered at all, tend to be treated with nostalgia, derision, or some combination of both. There are exceptions. Think of Jafari Allen and Ryan Jobson (2016, 136) who locate in the '90s important forerunners of contemporary efforts to decolonize the discipline, situating such moves in a broader "political economy of knowledge production and the relationships therein between academics, administrators, editors, and publishers." Or consider Joel Robbins (2013) who offers the 1990s as the moment when anthropology left the "savage slot," taking on the "suffering subject" as its principle ethnographic and theoretical domain, with a host of ethical and political implications for anthropology's methods, moods, and motivations. For Robbins (2013, 453), anthropology in the '90s changes "its relation to those it studies from one of analytic distance and critical comparison focused on difference to one of empathic connection and moral witnessing based on human unity."[1]

Like Allen and Jobson, Robbins (2013, 453) also zooms out—in his case, to situate this shift in a broader '90s rise of NGO culture and human rights discourse. For him, the decade saw "very large cultural transformations in the way the West understands its relation to the wider world—transformations that include the rise of humanitarian and human rights discourses and institutions in their contemporary forms as well as the emergence of the NGO as a key feature of global social organization."

Both interventions are relevant to what follows, and they inspire, in part, the somewhat oblique tack I take here (as does Ortner, 2016). In the wake of the Cold War, the 1990s were the temporal ground for an anthropology that both responded to, and was facilitated by, an apparent liberal hegemony that proved to be short lived. With the benefit now of some historical distance, we can begin to historicize its anthropology, to follow some of the adjacent paths opened by Li and Robbins, for instance, situating anthropology's moves amid the political conditions and cultural moods of that time, and with a view to what light this retelling might shed on anthropology's current condition. If, as a recent headline in *The Nation* put it, "The 1990s Were Meant to Be the End of History—Instead They Birthed the Future," what are the implications for anthropology? To think through this question is to bring anthropology and its not-so-distant past into a wider emerging conversation about the political, cultural, and intellectual afterlives of the decade (e.g., Von Eschen, 2022).

It is also to join others in asking what lessons might be gleaned from anthropology's past as the discipline navigates its current challenges and reckonings (Barron, 2023). Such challenges and reckonings, which converge, in part, around the question of whether the discipline can escape its "circular bind" of serial liberal redemption and revitalization (Ihmoud and Cordis, 2022, 826), or whether it is time instead to "let anthropology burn" (Jobson, 2020), return us to solidarity—as both promise and problem.

In a response to Inouye's reflections on contemporary possibilities for solidarity, Alex Gourevitch (2023, 59), notes that "over the past few decades, social connections have thinned and kept on thinning; we are far more disconnected than in the 1990s." It is noteworthy that both Inouye and Gourevitch turn toward religion in considering current conditions for solidarity, to the "distinctive kind of solidarity at work in religious groups, where people don't just count on each other but overcome their differences. The premise is universal: whatever else you are, whatever your flaws, you are—or at least, can become—one of us" (Gourevitch 2023, 63). We would do well to question the extent to which all religious traditions share that universal premise. But Gourevitch and Inouye are right to call attention to this elective affinity, one that has long interested anthropology, from Durkheim to Li.

Before exploring these resonances further, let us now return to the present, to set some of the scene for our journey back to not-so-distant past.

Back to the present

Discussions of anthropology's history have long been charged with "presentism," the tendency to read the discipline's past through the lens of and for the sake of its present, in George Stocking's phrasing. The charge sticks in my case. For the past decade I have been studying the place of religion amid Myanmar's democratic opening—a fraught and fleeting decade of political reforms that came to a violent end when the country's ruling generals staged a coup in February 2021. In the wake of the coup, I have, like others, been interested in understanding the relationship between the country's unfolding revolution and the world beyond the country's borders: with the diaspora communities who have lent the revolution material and symbolic support; with the "international community" which has largely ignored it; and with the communities of scholars, anthropologists and others, of which I am a part. Across each of these relationships, solidarity (and its lack) has been a central concern.

For scholars, these discussions about solidarity have often unfolded in tandem with a growing concern in Burma studies regarding what it might mean to decolonize that field (Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung, 2021; Tharaphi Than, 2021). Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung (2021), for example, have critiqued the ways in which "knowledge production about Burma has been dominated by white researchers, writers, and journalists, ranging from George

Orwell to contemporary writers, journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and others." They call on foreign researchers to "return resources back to us before telling us what is morally right." Rose Metro (2023, 184) picks up on their intervention, laying out some of the ways in which "scholars from formerly colonizing countries who work with Myanmar people can participate in the work of decolonization." Insofar as this entails working "with our colleagues from many different backgrounds to build the kind of home for ideas that we would want to inhabit" (184), it might be considered a form of solidarity work.

Scholars have not been alone in thinking through such questions. "Gratitude for a spiritual abode" is the title of one post from 2022 at Insight Myanmar, a website and podcast managed by A Better Burma, a US nonprofit founded, after the coup, to support a range of humanitarian initiatives: from providing food and clean water to IDPs, to supporting civil servants who joined the country's Civil Disobedience Movement. The endeavor grew out of the work an American meditator, Joah McGee, who had been working to bring foreigners into an encounter with Burmese Buddhist life, including through pilgrimage tours and a guidebook he produced for the growing number of foreign meditators who visited Myanmar during the country's political opening. In this post, he appeals to "foreign meditators who have been fortunate enough to study with Burmese monastics in the past." Through a donation to A Better Burma, "they have the chance to give back to the monastic community that has helped them so much."[2]

Myanmar holds a special position for many Buddhists in the West, not least because of the role it has played as the home of the insight meditation techniques now practiced around the world (Braun, 2013). In a 2021 piece on the Buddhist website Lion's Roar titled, "Why Buddhists Should Support the Resistance in Myanmar," the author writes, "Many secular mindfulness practices were shaped by Burmese traditions. . . . The Buddha spoke of the dharma as a priceless gift, and we are indebted to those who have shared it with us. . . . We should see it as our karmic responsibility to support the people suffering there” (Pyle, 2021).

Such calls for solidarity appeal to notions of reciprocity and interconnection that resonate with Buddhist ideas of interdependence, which in contemporary manifestations often foreground the importance of social justice. While “interdependence” is rooted in traditional Buddhist ideas of “dependent origination,” and the interconnected web of cause and effect that it implies, the concept took on new meanings through its historical encounter with a wider cultural field, coming to entail a set of ethical, ecological, and political commitments which gave it broader resonance (McMahan, 2009). There is, in other words, a history to these recent expressions of transnational Buddhist solidarity. I want to briefly discuss one small and recent part of this history, one that has bearing on the questions about anthropology with which I opened this article, to which I will then return.

This involves taking us from Burma to Berkeley, California, and from the present back to the 1990s.

“Knowing that you are part of it”

Through the 1990s and 2000s, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) published *Turning Wheel* magazine quarterly out of Berkeley. The full set of issues was recently digitized and constitutes an archive of a cultural moment and mood, just on the brink of wholesale digital transformation (Figure 1).[3] It is a moment and mood that today feels both painfully distant and eerily familiar, especially when we read them alongside the anthropology of the same period. Burma featured often in the pages of *Turning Wheel*. American Buddhist readers were encouraged to join boycotts, to write letters to Burmese embassies, to send checks to medical teams supporting refugees on the Thai border in the wake of the 1988 uprising and crackdown.

“A spiritual disaster” is how Alan Clements (1988: 9), an American meditation teacher who had ordained as a monk in Burma in the late 1970s and early 1980s, described the situation in the Fall ’88 issue of the fellowship’s newsletter, the precursor to *Turning Wheel*. Alongside pieces by such engaged Buddhist luminaries as Thich Nhat Hanh and Joanna Macy, Clements worried for the “great pool of the Dhamma being lost to the world, and certainly lost to us as emerging Buddhists in America, Europe, Australia” (9) (Figure 2). Like other Western Buddhists, Clements felt a debt—that same karmic responsibility—to his “Dhamma brothers and sisters in Burma” (9) who had preserved, and then gifted to the world, a remarkably effective set of tools for gaining insight into the nature of reality.

Turning Wheel returned its readers to Burma throughout the 1990s. In a 1991 article titled “Burma: The Next Cambodia,” Clements warned that, because of the junta’s repression, “Buddhism in is jeopardy in Burma today” (Clements, 1991). He quoted a Burmese student: “Each day the world doesn’t respond is another day in which we suffer.” The magazine reported regularly on the trials of Aung San Suu Kyi, celebrating her Nobel Peace Prize in 1991: “For the Burmese people, this recognition of their struggle is a welcome blessing and a rare opportunity” (Howe, 1991).

Looking through these pages from today’s vantage, there is something almost quaint, even poignant, about the world they depict, or at least the way in which it is rendered: about the connections forged or imagined between Buddhists in the West and Buddhists in Asia; about the emergent critique of connections between US empire and the violence of oppressive regimes around the world; about the commitment, as one editorial put it, to working "together to save all sentient beings." Indeed, that editorial, by Susan Moon (1998), which reflects on the two decades since the founding of Buddhist Peace Fellowship, captures the sentiment and sensibility especially well:

> So it's ideas that hold us together, like: "*Nobody's free till everybody's free*." . . . Twenty years is enough time for babies to be born and grow up and have babies. For thousands of people to say they are members of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, and for those people to work together to save all sentient beings. For letters to be written, for demonstrations to happen, for monks to be released from prison, for medicine to be sent to the Burma border, for gardens to grow, for many people to work together within the system, and in the cracks and at the edges of the system, to change the system.

The '90s were far from a "holiday from history," as some have characterized the decade. With the end of the millennium fast approaching, and with the full implications of the Internet rushing into view, Buddhists were drawing places like Berkeley and Burma together in ways that rested on recognizing one's entanglement with forms of suffering on the other side of the world, and on the circulation, across the Pacific Ocean, of Buddhist concern and of Buddhist print—magazines, petitions, letters, checks—all just before the colossal onset of the digital.

As the ’90s unfolded as a moment of apparent liberal hegemony—and as Burma’s Aung San Suu Kyi came to occupy, alongside Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama, an exalted position in a global pantheon of ’90s human rights icons—engaged Buddhists imagined new ways of engaging with the world and its multiple crises and conflicts, all of which regularly drew the attention of *Turning Wheel* readers: Burma, but also Tibet, the first Gulf War, AIDS, nuclear proliferation, hunger, homelessness, and the looming threat of what was still mostly referred to as global warming. There is, for example, the report from BPF’s national coordinator, Alan Senauke, in the Winter 1994 issue of the magazine, sandwiched between pieces about nuclear testing in Nevada and classifieds that include calls for donations of household items for a women’s shelter in Berkeley. The report notes that:

> In recent years BPF has been deeply committed to international issues of human rights—in Burma, Tibet, Thailand, Bangladesh, and elsewhere. Often BPF and *Turning Wheel* have given voice to suffering and to accomplishments that would otherwise go unheard by most of us. We are aware, as well, of the great and growing suffering in our own midst, in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods. . . . Without judging, can we feel the great pain that causes neighbor to harm neighbor, and can we turn that pain to something that is life-giving? (Senauke, 1994)

Such questions, about interconnected manifestations of suffering near and far, were central to the engaged Buddhism the came to prominence in the 1990s. Drawing inspiration from Asian Buddhist figures—again, Aung San Suu Kyi and the Dalai Lama, as well as Thich Nhat Hanh and B. R. Ambedkar—a growing number of Buddhists in the West sought to link their Buddhist practice to progressive social causes and human rights struggles, rethinking the place of Buddhist detachment in the process. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship was at the heart of this story (Simmer-Brown, 2000; Baroni, 2017).

At the end of the 1990s, Christopher Queen (2000, 10) argued that engaged Buddhism, though grounded in traditional texts and teachings, emerged in a new "context of a global conversation on human rights, distributive justice, and social progress": the same context in which Robbins (2013) located anthropology's turn toward the suffering subject. The transformations brought by this engaged Buddhism were so profound that they constituted, according to Queen, a "a fourth turning" of the wheel of dharma, a new chapter in Buddhism's history. For Queen, this turning could be defined by three characteristics (2000, 12): an awareness of the interdependence of all things; an identification with the suffering of others; and an imperative to act to resolve that suffering, captured in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, one of *Turning Wheel's* most frequently profiled voices: "Once there is seeing, there must be acting." The attributes are woven through the issues of the magazine across the years. Consider, for example, another editorial (Moon, 1994), from the Summer 1994 issue:

> Sometimes just bearing witness to the suffering in the world is what we can do—by reading the newspaper, for example. One of the extra causes of suffering for people in places like Bosnia is the feeling that nobody cares elsewhere in the world. So reading the reports of people who bring us the news is a way of bearing witness, even when we want to turn away. . . . Even reading this issue of *Turning Wheel* is a way of knowing that you are part of it.

With the benefit of some two decades of historical distance, scholars (and practitioners) have begun to historicize this manifestation of engaged Buddhism, not least by attending to its whiteness, and, relatedly, to the way in which this version of engaged Buddhism risked painting, by implicit contrast, Asian Buddhists as somehow aloof and politically disengaged, along with earlier iterations of Buddhist practice (Hsu, 2022). These racial dynamics have been the subject of a recent reckoning in American Buddhist organisations like BPF (Gleig, 2019, 294). Insofar as this has entailed efforts, on the one hand, to rethink what counts as genuine solidarity across difference (Han, 2021), and on the other, to foreground the role of Asian communities in the telling of Buddhism's history in America (Moon, 2020), this reckoning resonates with developments in contemporary anthropology, including moves to centre the previously marginalized and erased contributions of nonwhite scholars to the discipline (Allen and Jobson, 2016). In both fields there appears to be a growing desire and need to grapple with both the political and ethical ambitions and limitations of the 1990s.

But historicizing engaged Buddhism might also mean tracing how its rise rested on a broader structure of feeling that, toward the end of the 20th century, held up engagement as a guiding political and ethical principle, as Matei Candea and others (2015) have argued. Detachment, for many, was suspect. Engagement was virtuous. And in any event, things were always already relational and entangled in ways that made detachment impossible. By the '90s, a century of war, famine, environmental disaster, and other episodes of suffering was enough to convince many that a certain modern investment in detachment paved only a path to violence and capitalist plunder (Candea et al. 2015, 8–9). To turn through the pages of *Turning Wheel* is to encounter one especially intentional effort at putting an ethic of engagement into practice at the end of the millennium, one that approached the growing reality of local and global interconnection through Buddhist ideas of interdependence: "Even reading this issue of *Turning Wheel* is a way of knowing that you are part of it."

But if looking through this archive feels somehow almost quaint, it also feels somehow uncanny—and maybe especially for anthropologists, for reasons we will now consider.

Engaged anthropology in a strange new world

"A time of great uncertainty for anthropology, we suggest that this time is also one of enormous possibilities," wrote Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997, 26) in their introduction to *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, their landmark volume from the mid-1990s. It was a time, they suggested, in which anthropologists needed to "try to find our feet in a strange new world" (26). For Gupta and Ferguson, this meant, at least in part, rethinking the ethnographic role of "place" in a world where increasingly obvious global interconnections (e.g., Appadurai, 1990) rendered the idea of the bounded ethnographic field site less defensible, and where critiques of representation undermined ethnographers' claims to represent, holistically and authoritatively, other cultures through their work. If these changes, internal and external to the discipline, compelled anthropologists to think anew in the 1990s about their methodological practices, they also helped to raise a set of ethical and political questions that have not gone away (Figure 3). Though they have taken many forms, these questions have often involved a grappling with what anthropological "engagement" might mean.

Just as the 1990s were a high watermark for a certain kind of engaged Buddhism, so too were they the scene for a certain kind of engaged anthropology. There is an argument that anthropology, like Buddhism, has always been "engaged" in one way or another (Low and Merry, 2010, S204-S207), and that there are earlier moments in anthropology's history where a politics of engagement came to the fore. But it was in the 1990s and early 2000s that a growing number of scholars made the case for an explicitly engaged anthropology (Low and Merry, 2010, S204-S207), albeit alongside and against diverging moves, and not without resistance. This turn, for some, toward engagement took many forms, ranging from the development of more collaborative methodologies, through to approaches that emphasised "activist research" (Hale, 2006), all against a wider backdrop in which an emphasis on intimacy had perhaps, in some quarters of anthropology, "claimed the epistemological and moral high ground," over an emphasis on estrangement (Keane 2005, 62). In general, though, engagement meant affording a central place to suffering—and the work of overcoming it. It also often entailed a related, almost Buddhist, emphasis on the interdependence of all things as a guiding analytic and ethical principle: think of the turn toward the study of globalization, and to methodological multisitedness across interconnected webs.

To approach engaged Buddhism alongside engaged anthropology is not necessarily to claim a set of direct causal connections. Though consider again Christopher Queen's argument that engaged Buddhism constitutes a fourth turning of the dharma. Queen (2000, 10) suggests that this new chapter of Buddhism emerges from the combining of Buddhist teachings about liberation with "another set of ideas about the possibility of human fulfilment and happiness have emerged with the achievements of modernity." Among these ideas, Queen includes the need "to consider the effects of personal and social actions on others, particularly in the realms of speech and symbol manipulation in the Information Age, and in the policies, programs, and products of large and small institutions" (10).

In an endnote, Queen turns to '90s anthropology to expand this point, citing specifically the idea of "social suffering" as influentially developed by anthropologists Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (1997, ix): "Social suffering . . . brings into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems." A focus on structural suffering—or "structural dukkha," as engaged Buddhists called it—was central to BPF's work. As the organization put it in a 1997 document (quoted in Simmer-Brown, 2000, 42): "We feel our particular responsibility is to address structural and social forms of suffering, oppression, and violence. These are not abstractions—war, racism, sexism, economic oppression, denial of human rights and social justice, and so many other ills cause great fear and suffering for all beings."

But it's not just in endnotes that such connections may be found. In their comments on this article, one of its peer reviewers suggested that I consider more closely the extent to which some anthropologists and other scholars were also Buddhist practitioners during the 1990s, drawn to meditation at a time when vipassana was gaining prominence in the West, part of the dawn of the "mindfulness" era in the US and elsewhere. As luck would have it, after first submitting this article, I stumbled upon a 2012 blog post by Maia Duerr, which drew these things together in an even more direct way than I had previously expected. An executive director of BPF in the early 2000s, Duerr is also an anthropologist. In the post, titled "The Intersection of Engaged Anthropology and Engaged Buddhism," she shares remarks she gave at the 2012 meeting of the American Anthropological Association as part of a panel on "The Anthropology of Buddhism and the Buddhism of Anthropology." The remarks center on what engagement has meant for her, as both a Buddhist and as an anthropologist, reflecting on a paper she gave 16 years earlier, in 1996, at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where she completed her master's degree. Duerr (2012) writes about how both anthropology and

Buddhism have been, for her, “a kind of spiritual practice,” grounded in an effort to “bear witness,” an attunement to interconnection, and a commitment to “loving action,” or what she otherwise calls “engagement.” For Duerr, both anthropology and Buddhism are inherently engaged by virtue of the emphasis they place on experience: “Knowledge or wisdom is derived from direct experience, not from theory.” But “engagement” is also, for Duerr, about advocacy, activism, and critique. She concludes her post by citing her 1996 paper, “which feels just as true to me now as it did 16 years ago”:

> Engaged anthropology is not only ‘applied,’ but personally and often painfully involved. Ruth Behar, in her book *The Vulnerable Observer* [1996], writes that ‘anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore.’ . . . Much like mindfulness practice, I believe that engaged anthropology has to do with looking deeply at situations of suffering and conflict, going beyond dualities, and holding a space for ambiguity amidst pressure to ‘solve the problem’ or to take sides. . . . If an engaged anthropology is an anthropology that breaks our heart, engaged Buddhism reminds us, as Buddhist scholar and systems theorist Joanna Macy (2007) says, ‘the heart that breaks open can hold the whole universe.’ (129)

So the connections are there, more or less direct. But reading these two archives also sheds light on larger cultural shifts whose legacies continue to shape debates in both fields, not least about promises and practices of solidarity. That the concerns of ’90s anthropology have such resonance with the subjects covered in *Turning Wheel* might not surprise us. Anthropologists and engaged Buddhists were working in adjacent intellectual and cultural milieux—or sometimes overlapping milieux, as Duerr’s blog post suggests. They were subject to the same political and economic forces, and witness (likely via the same or similar media) to the same events and crises that marked the years leading up to 9/11. Still, that much of anthropology during the 1990s seems to have shared something of Queen's three attributes of engaged Buddhism—an awareness of the interdependence of all things; an identification with the suffering of others; and an imperative to act to resolve that suffering—warrants further exploration.

Consider three key articles, all from 1995: Ortner's "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," George Marcus's "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," and Nancy Scheper-Hughes's "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology." Each continues to appear on reading lists the world over, and though at odds with one another on certain key points, each captures something of the intellectual moment under consideration here and its emphasis on engagement. Ortner's (1995, 190) essay critiques then recent anthropological studies for avoiding thick and nuanced descriptions of resistance, resulting in works that were increasingly thin ethnographically: "thin on the internal politics of dominated groups, thin on the cultural richness of those groups, thin on the subjectivity—the intentions, desires, fears, projects—of the actors engaged in these dramas." She attributes this "ethnographic refusal," in part, to a failure of nerve stemming from the crisis of representation and its undermining of anthropology's confidence to speak authoritatively about the lived worlds that it studies. What gets lost, according to Ortner, when we start to think of ethnographies as "fictions" (Clifford, 1986, 6-7) might be precisely the unique form of engagement that anthropology offers: "the obligation to engage with reality seems to me precisely the difference between the novelist's task and the ethnographer's" (Ortner 1995, 189).

The reality that Marcus (1995, 96) seeks to engage in his essay, as is well known, is a world in which ethnography moved "out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space." The emergent methodological trend toward multisitedness gave hope that anthropology was up to the task of engaging "brave new worlds" (114) whose interconnections, across global and local scales, were, by the mid-1990s, increasingly difficult to ignore. These interconnections invariably entangled the ethnographer herself—a point on which Marcus concludes, suggesting that in pursuing multisited ethnography, the ethnographer often comes to occupy the position of an "ethnographer-activist" (113).

This figure of the ethnographer-activist is also Scheper-Hughes's focus. Wary of the kind of multisited approaches whose emergence Marcus traces, Scheper-Hughes (1995, 417) worries that an anthropology devoted to following transnational connections might entail "a parallel flight from local engagements, local commitments, and local accountability." She famously calls instead for a "barefoot" anthropology that is "personally engaged and politically committed," one in which anthropologists become "comrades (with all the demands and responsibilities that this word implies) to the people who are the subjects of our writings, whose lives and miseries provide us with a livelihood" (419–20): a kind of karmic responsibility, perhaps?

Scheper-Hughes's call for an engaged anthropology sparked debate, not least in the commentaries that accompanied the essay's publication in *Current Anthropology*. In her comment, Aihwa Ong (1995, 430) pushes back against Scheper-Hughes's take on studies of transnationalism: "Refusal to engage and understand how global forces affect our everyday lives is an intellectually untenable position for anthropologists. In other words, an ethical anthropology is not limited to working only in a single locality." But what most seemed to concern Ong are the political stakes of Scheper-Hughes's "militant anthropology": "What are the wider political implications of such ethnographies when the central moral character often appears to be the anthropologist herself? Isn't the kind of moralizing strategy Scheper-Hughes proposes a deployment of intellectual power that depends on 'liberating' the poor and hungry of the Third Word?" (430).

These arguments for different kinds of anthropological engagement in the 1990s did not entail explicit calls for "solidarity." Solidarity is not a key term for either Ortner or Marcus. Nor is it for Scheper-Hughes. As Ong suggests, the essay's related but different emphasis is on how anthropology can be a tool for "human liberation" (430). Just as *Turning Wheel* was making the case for why engaged Buddhists ought to work "together to save all sentient beings," while also documenting local and global efforts toward that end, so scholars like Scheper-Hughes were pushing for anthropology to engage the world and its people in ways that contributed to their liberation from forms of suffering in which in the anthropologist was always already implicated, from near or far. In recent years, however, such an emphasis has come under increasing strain.

As many anthropologists have reckoned with the discipline's attachment to a vision of itself as a vehicle for others' salvation (Cromer, Hardin and Nyssa, 2020), some have turned to forms of solidarity that are premised instead on "a willingness to be led by those most directly impacted," to return to Liu and Shange (2018). The extent to which this turn represents a break with the 1990s, or to which it is in some ways an extension of a conversation around interdependence, suffering, and engagement that became so salient during that decade, is hard to say. But by joining others in beginning to situate anthropology's recent history in a broader cultural and political space, and by approaching it, in turn, alongside adjacent intellectual and social histories, we might be better placed to explore such questions.

Back to the present, again: a Buddhist (history of) anthropology?

A post on the Insight Myanmar website in April 2024 reports on a Burmese monastic community which, amid the upheaval that has followed the country's 2021 coup, has benefited from the giving of overseas donors via A Better Burma. Titled "Bridging Borders: A Gratitude-filled Chronicle for Better Burma's Supporters," it discusses the difficulties faced by the community's monks and nuns because of the economic and political crisis. "Enter the compassionate hearts of overseas donors who, despite the geographical distance, felt a deep connection to the struggles faced by the Burmese monastic community," the report notes. "Your earmarked funds became a beacon of hope to them, a testament to the belief that solidarity knows no boundaries."

What counts as transnational solidarity matters for Buddhists today involved in initiatives such as Insight Myanmar, who continue to emphasise, like Alan Clements did in *Turning Wheel* in the early 1990s, the webs of interdependence that entangle them with Burmese Buddhists and their suffering, including via lineages of meditation teaching. As Joah McGee, Insight Myanmar's founder, wrote in a 2021 article on the Buddhist website *Tricycle*: "How should people living in relative freedom and safety respond to terrible events happening in far-off lands? . . . Further, how is the Buddhist practitioner to respond to a tragedy across the world? Or more specifically, the current crisis in Myanmar, the birthplace of the modern mindfulness and vipassana movement, following the February 1 military coup?"

At the same time, anthropologists who work on Myanmar have, especially in the wake of the coup, been asking similar questions: What do we owe to, and how can we be in solidarity with, “the people who are the subjects of our writings, whose lives and miseries provide us with a livelihood,” in the words of Scheper-Hughes (1995, 419–20)? These questions, which might be both old and new, are connected to wider conversations about solidarity in anthropology—conversations that are also, as we have seen, part of a reckoning with the legacies of colonization and racial injustice, prompted in part by the demand (and the need) for forms of solidarity that push beyond what might read today as a ’90s politics of suffering and saving.

The 1990s were also a moment of renewed campus activism, notably against the First Gulf War, but also in the form of the Free Burma Coalition, whose efforts, across US universities and colleges and taking advantage of the early Internet, ultimately led to PepsiCo divesting from Myanmar in 1997 (Zarni 2000). Still, there is today in anthropology, as in Buddhism, a sense, perhaps, that while the 1990s—with its turn to interdependence, suffering, and engagement—got certain things right, it also got certain things wrong. Things might, in other words, not have turned far enough, or not entirely in the right direction.

In the decade between the end of the Cold War and start of the war on terror, many anthropologists and Buddhists were highlighting existing local and global connections and imagining new ones, amid a wider coming to prominence of human rights and humanitarian discourses. Some felt themselves increasingly entangled as scholars and practitioners with forms of suffering—and liberation—at home and abroad. To return to their overlapping visions, and the cultural and political context from which they emerged, from today’s vantage feels, as we have seen, somehow both quaint and uncanny. This feeling might emerge, in part, from the fact that this was still, though barely, a world of print—of academic journals, of books printed and read in hard copy, of magazines and letter-writing campaigns—all this just before a set of digital transformations which also created new possibilities for expressions of solidarity. But there might also be more to it than that.

In her ethnographic meditation on the life and power of American conspiracy theories in the 1990s, Susan Lepselter (2016, 2) writes: "When I think of that period now, it is like an eye in a hurricane. The First Gulf War was over, and the next wars against Iraq and Afghanistan had not yet begun. The World Trade Centers were standing, enormous and unmarked against the skyline." She attunes to the uncanny "resonances" that were so central to the conspiracy theories that bubbled up and circulated across those years. "The sense of uncanny resonance becomes an expressive modality," she writes, "a vernacular theory, a way of seeing the world, an intimation of the way *it all makes sense*" (4). Approaching "the intensification produced by the overlapping, back and forth call of signs from various discourses," Lepselter (4–5) describes resonance as "something that strikes a chord, that inexplicably rings true, a sound whose notes are prolonged. It is just-glimpsed connections and hidden structures that are felt to shimmer below the surface of things. It is what makes people say, *It all fits together*. . . . [T]hat sense of resonance gives rise to the partial sense of familiarity that makes an experience classically uncanny, where the strange leads back to what you already knew."

What are we to make of the resonances across space and time that I have discussed in this essay—echoes between Buddhism and anthropology, between both and the wider cultural and political moment that Lepselter also limns, and between that moment and the present (Figure 4)? There is an argument made that anthropologists would do well to interrogate that which it has inherited from Christianity, its "theological prehistory," as Fenella Cannell (2005, 352) puts it. There might be something “Christian,” the argument goes, about some of the theoretical impulses and categories that inform anthropological understanding, particularly when it comes to matters of religion and belief. More recently, anthropologists have drawn attention to what might be the discipline’s secular conceptual foundations (Furani and Robbins, 2021), while still others have asked us to imagine the ways in which an Islamic anthropology—that is, an anthropology that not only takes Islam “seriously” but is oriented toward its vision of divine devotion—might contribute to epistemic decolonization (Moll, 2023).

But might there also be something somehow “Buddhist” about ’90s anthropology and its ongoing legacies for anthropology? This is one question raised by the comparative reading that I have pursued here. Again, this is not necessarily to imply any direct causal connections. It is, however, to note that, beyond anthropology’s presentist orientation—the way in which it is the present moment, as in Buddhism, to which attention ought to be directed—it is also difficult to ignore the extent to which ’90s anthropology shared the same concerns with interdependence, suffering, and engagement that come through so clearly in the pages of *Turning Wheel*. In his book, *Magic’s Reason*, Graham Jones (2017) makes a case for why we should read the history of early 20th-century anthropologists of magic alongside the early history of entertainment magic. Jones does not claim that anthropologists and magicians were one and the same, nor that they closely collaborated. Rather, he argues “that they were operating in convergent milieux.” Here Jones joins a growing number of scholars who have recently brought a wider lens to anthropology’s history, tracking the discipline’s turns amid broader political shifts, and with an eye not just to the present but also to adjacent spaces and groups: anthropologists of magic and magicians, for example, or engaged Buddhists and anthropologists.

But is there then also something somehow “Buddhist” about this very approach to the history of anthropology? A particular emphasis on the resonance and interpenetration of all things, perhaps captured in the Buddhist image of Indra’s net, in which every thing, every idea, is connected as knots and gems in a complex web—an image, incidentally, that the anthropologist Roy Wagner (2001) adopted, just after the ’90s, to conceptualize the “holographic worldview,” in which “everything contains everything else, at least *in potentia*” (Scott, 2014); and also an image that *Turning Wheel* adopted as the subtitle of the section in the magazine that carried short news clips from Burma and elsewhere in the Buddhist world.

In any event, the wheels keep turning. And in working through these two archives—one anthropological, the other Buddhist—from our not-so-distant and barely-digital past, I am continuing to ask: What are the legacies and lessons of “engagement” for contemporary understanding and practices of solidarity? To what extent might the vision of interdependence implied by Indra’s net afford conditions for solidarity, and to what extent might it obscure the politics and histories to which anthropologists (and Buddhists) are today calling our attention? And how do current calls for solidarity appear when we read them alongside ’90s expressions of “engagement,” with all the ethical ambitions and political challenges that those projects entailed?

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. A collection of *Turning Wheel* covers.

Figure 2. "Understanding Burma," article from the Fall 1988 issue.

Figure 3. Some glimpses of '90s anthropology.

Figure 4. Some resonances, Buddhist and anthropological.

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[1] In an endnote, Robbins (2013, 460) contends that while his account of anthropology's turn to suffering may in some respects be a North American one, the moves he traces have played out in other places too, albeit in different ways. I am grateful to Alpa Shah for pointing out that the story I tell here might also have "a North American inflection" (Robbins 2013, 460), and that things would look different if told from the perspective of British anthropology, which is true. Jonathan Spencer's (2000) retrospective of British social anthropology is helpful here. Spencer argues that British anthropology retained its distinctiveness in the 1990s, even as it expanded and even as there was a "continuing rapprochement with American cultural anthropology" (Stocking in Spencer 2000, 15), alongside an increasing acceptance and teaching of "applied" anthropology in British departments (14, 16-17)—a move that might dovetail with some of the story I tell about engagement here, though in ways I have not yet explored.

[2] "Gratitude for a spiritual abode," *Insight Myanmar*, June 5 2022, https://insightmyanmar.org/blog/2022/6/5/gratitude-for-a-spiritual-abode.

[3] The full archive is available here: https://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/bpf/

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