

Pearls, Politics and Pistachios



Essays in Anthropology and Memories
on the Occasion of Susan Pollock's 65th Birthday

Herausgeber*innenkollektiv



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on the Occasion of Susan Pollock's 65th Birthday

edited by

Herausgeber*innenkollektiv

(Aydin Abar, Maria Bianca D'Anna, Georg Cyrus, Vera Egbers,
Barbara Huber, Christine Kainert, Johannes Köhler, Birgül Ögüt,
Nolwen Rol, Giulia Russo, Julia Schönicke, Francelin Tourtet)

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Foreword

Dear Susan,

to celebrate your birthday, your friends and students have seized this opportunity to express their gratitude towards you: a companion, a mentor through many stages of life, and irrevocably an exceptional scholar. As an editorial collective, we would like to offer you some thoughts on what has inextricably bound you to so many of us, although like all portraits we can only express part of you.

What is a companion? Perhaps a person whose friends, without hesitation, dedicate their time to put into words their friendship; they do so despite the uncertainties of a raging pandemic, knowing they may not see you in person for some time to come. Perhaps a companion is a loyal, jovial, fashionable, and culinary inspiration. Perhaps a companion is like a cat, someone who weaves in and out of your life, but you are always happy to see each other? Certainly, it is a person with whom you share your memories, thoughts, and emotions; someone who will grow with, and contradict you and will always offer support. Companions look back in fondness together at their journey, and such are the voices of the contributors alongside whom you experienced some of your formative academic years.



Your close friends know of just such a companion, whom you steered for many years and with whom you weathered the storm. Photo: Maresi Starzmann.

Your transition from student to teacher can perhaps be described as a test of character, and with determination you overcame these tests then and now – facing adversity has become second nature to you. An early PhD student was apprehensive of your advice precisely because you up the ante, another wanted out but your support transformed their struggles into friendship. In addition, the turmoils associated with political crises rife with war across Western Asia barred you from Iran. So, you decided to bring the voices of Iranian scholars to Berlin, and also to the international stage, and you provided women with a platform to be heard.

Your first project upon your return to Berlin was, unsurprisingly to your friends, food related. You recognise the importance of food, its presence or absence, and social value. Your experience includes eating warmed up Stroopwaffels, gourmet-fying tinned food, and cooking in the field. How could this not translate into food for thought on culinary practices of the past? Since your arrival, you supported the introduction of a weekly breakfast at the department with your project members and colleagues, where all attendees contributed in an egalitarian manner. These occasions were a welcoming setting to share personal and professional matters, as were some thesis advisory talks over Italian coffee. All the while, you explored the collective detriment of commensality – its impact through social and structural violence, the effects of its deprivation.

You have taught for over a decade in Berlin which translates into roughly two and a half cycles of undergraduate and graduate students, and your first ‘Berlin batch’ of PhD candidates is currently spreading their wings. Among these are many women to whom you are a feminist role model – something your friends and colleagues proudly emphasise. Your metrics, since your arrival, demonstrate the veritable impact of your teaching: under your auspices a fifth of all PhDs and a third of all Master thesis were completed. Impressive, but still these numbers hide the many students you co-advised or who sought and took your advice during their writing process. As an advisor you provide guidance on principle, regardless of your position on a paper, and urge all of your students to come by and discuss their topics. The material remains in question range from architecture, burials, stone tools, pearls, and pottery from the Neolithic to the Sasanian period, and you encourage your students to explore these materials and their materiality to trace social, economic, political, and gender dynamics. All of which are a showcase of your abilities, interests, and, ultimately, stand as a testament to your teaching capabilities and scholarly output.

Your vast knowledge of theory shapes how you teach: you include transferring ways of thinking, critique, and case studies from ‘across the pond’. Your ‘homebound’ teaching is based on real concern and is integral to your development as a person and scholar. Long-time friends of yours point to work undertaken in Michigan, Utah, and Alabama; the political convictions you developed then, have translated into challenging oppressive systems from the top-down. Your overt political stance, and your cooperation and friendships beyond departments has informed your teaching profoundly; and your students will recognise many themes and authors who have been assembled in these pages.

You made a conscious choice to make Berlin your home – a home that is no Eden. You fought hard to stay here as a professor together with Reinhard, supported by your colleagues, friends, and students. To some of the university staff you were ‘just a guest’, someone to treat as a commodity, to move and exchange among universities. But to us you were Susan, the esteemed scholar and professor at Binghamton and Berlin, the teacher, colleague, and friend. Your arguments paid off, and we could not be happier! Upon this foundation you have reconsidered the legacy of your home, again. Just as in Binghamton, you decided to explore the troubled past of the structures you faced. To you, an archaeology of Western Asia needs a conscience, and this conscience can be found in your work at home and abroad. Archaeology in, and of, Berlin and Germany would not be the same without you.

You are actively changing the more traditional landscape of German scholarship by promoting conscious choice and the importance of politics in your approach as an anthropologist. In dealing with material you always ask, “where are the people?” because whilst matter matters, so do its social implications. You have taught and written about material as part of society, how it reflects human misery, and how it can be exploited as objects for political manipulation in academic and public discourse. In the unlikely event that you have lost track of the scope of your work you can find a list of all your published research and discourse in this book.

With this book we wish to both look back together and also forge ahead. Many reasons to consider you, our companion, are provided on these next pages: dedicatory articles, memories, and heartfelt letters – we have had the pleasure to collate all of these as a steppingstone in your life. All of us editors met you as an established scholar, rigorous and strict but never without humour and empathy, who takes delight in our success, commiserates our setbacks, and shares a laugh when the time is right. We think these traits are integral to your work and to how you conduct yourself in life – underlined by those who shared your path, testified by those from whom you learned, experienced by us whom you mentored and taught.

When we first met as a collective, like any good covert operation, we used a code name: “Projekt Eden”. In our search for the book’s title, we also debated about ‘Eden’; but just as Eden never was, we agreed it should remain in this way. As an editorial collective we strove to unify our abilities to best present you with this book, but many more supporters contributed to this volume and we would like to thank all of them: the contributors for their manuscripts; the extended group of reviewers – Julia Daitche, Jana Eger, Hanna Erfttenbeck, Johannes Greger, Ilia Heit, Carolin Jauß, Johannes Jungfleisch, Ines Kachur, Moslem Mishmashtnehi, Christoph Purschwitz, Stefan Schreiber, Maria Theresa Starzmann, and Lisa Wolff-Heger – for reviewing content and form; Gabriela Castro Gessner and Benjamin Irvine for reviewing and proof-reading the English; Reinhard Bernbeck was our ‘get out of jail card’ and gave us advice when we needed it; and finally to the publishers from *ex oriente* who graciously agreed with our quest to remain an editorial collective and answered all our publishing questions and needs. This book remains a symbol of our group effort, yet the editorial collective (das Herausgeber*innenkollektiv) takes responsibility for this work and wishes to be cited as such.

Dear Susan, whilst structuring this book it became clear how diverse your influence is, and the meaning you carry in all of us – contributors, supporters, and editors. As the editorial collective we found out: to know you is to travel with you, in person, in thought, and through emotions.

We wish you nothing but happiness and good health, for you have already shaped your success!

Berlin, December 2020

*The editorial collective/das Herausgeber*innenkollektiv*

Aydin Abar

Barbara Huber

Nolwen Rol

Maria Bianca D'Anna

Christine Kainert

Giulia Russo

Georg Cyrus

Johannes Köhler

Julia Schönicke

Vera Egbers

Birgül Ögüt

Francelin Tourtet