Toward Rangzen, through Rang and Zen: Contextualized Agency of Contemporary Tibetan Poet-Activists in Exile

Thesis

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Abstract

During six decades of exile and three generations of refugees, Tibetan exile political strategies and self-understandings have undergone continual change. In the last decade, amid more violent and obvious forms of protest, a “New Generation” of activists has begun publishing poetry in the blogosphere to represent their personal and political situations. Grounded in a close reading of one second-generation Tibetan refugee’s online publications, this essay proposes contextual and analytical frameworks for understanding the "subtle agency" of this poetic mode of activism. I highlight the spaces in which the traditional, doctrinal, and ideological are transformed or given new utility in contemporary Tibetan exile life and activism. I explore the manifold ways in which the individual not only maneuvers relative to normative ideology and prominent meta-discourses, but engages and occupies them from within.
For Daniel

ངས་ནི་ཐོབ་བོད་བོད་ཚོགས་པ་བོད་རྒྱལ་ལོ
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. ii
Dedication ......................................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................ iv
Vita ....................................................................................................................................................... v
List of Figures ...................................................................................................................................... vii
Part I: Frameworks, Contexts, and Stakes ....................................................................................... 1
  Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1
  Contexts ............................................................................................................................................. 3
  (Not)-Self Representation ................................................................................................................ 21
  Imagination and Stakes .................................................................................................................... 32
Part II: Close Readings ..................................................................................................................... 55
  Close Reading I: Sufferings ............................................................................................................... 55
  Close Reading II: Negotiating the Unformulated ............................................................................ 66
Part III: Conclusions ......................................................................................................................... 82
  Concluding Remarks ...................................................................................................................... 82
References .......................................................................................................................................... 88
Appendix A, Images ........................................................................................................................... 95
Appendix B, Select Posts and Poems ............................................................................................... 96
List of Figures

Figure 1. Self-Portrait with བོད་པ” projected on back..........................................................95
Figure 2. Self-portrait with “TIBETAN” projected on hands..................................................95
Figure 3. Self-portrait with “EXTINCT” projected on open hands............................................95
Figure 4. Self-portrait with “TIBETAN” projected on forearm..................................................95
Figure 5. Self portrait with གསོད་འཇོམས་projected on forehead. .................................................95
Part I: Frameworks, Contexts, and Stakes

Introduction

The 1950 invasion of Tibet by the Maoist Army was soon followed by religio-cultural persecution and human rights violations, leading to the flight from the region by thousands of ethnic Tibetans, including spiritual and former political leader ལྗོང་བུ་རིན་པོ་ཆེ.¹ Under his leadership, the diaspora became centralized, with many connected communities orbiting the Tibetan Government-in-Exile located in Upper Dharamsala (McLeod Ganj), Himachal Pradesh, India. Unlike many other diasporic or refugee populations, much of the Tibetan diaspora retains ties to their homeland, or to an imagined future Tibet, refusing citizenship in their new homes and/or maintaining ties to Tibet through the holding of “Green Books,” a document of Tibetan exile citizenship. It has been estimated that there are at least 130,000 Tibetans living in exile worldwide,² many of whom have been born outside of Tibet. With these second- and third-generation Tibetan refugees, the Tibetan Freedom³ Movement has taken on new life and inhabited new forms, including a new understanding of a Tibetan self as one who actively works towards a specific politically, culturally, and religiously motivated telos. Here, I will first explore the contexts of contemporary Tibetan exile with the goal of providing a contextual framework,

¹ Tib: Gyalwa Rinpoche; here: His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama
³ Or Independence
within and relative to which the individual must reside and develop an understanding of self and circumstance. In doing so, I aim to highlight the spaces in which the traditional, doctrinal, and ideological are transformed or given new utility in contemporary Tibetan exile life and socio-political activity.

Operating within these contexts is a New Generation of Tibetan poet-activists, individuals who must maneuver among existent systems of knowledge, complex popular imaginings of circumstance, and ambiguous constructions of self, betweenness, existence, and agency. Through a deep, contextualized examination of one second-generation Tibetan poet’s online body of work, I shall explore the manifold ways in which the individual not only self-navigates relative to normative ideology and prominent meta-discourses, but engages and occupies them from within. I will argue that her public (online) presentations of self and circumstance act as spaces of (re-presented) self-management, allowing her to create, negotiate, and/or reaffirm constructions of and discourses surrounding her own Tibetan selfhood. Throughout her work, she utilizes specific Tibet-in-Exile and Buddhist discourses and pedagogies as expressive strategies, applies particular narrative techniques, and presents a self-protagonist connected to an ideological/thematic axis, thus humanizing certain ideas, all toward her goal of garnering compassion (via visibility) and building networks of support for the Tibetan Freedom Movement. Thus the main question of this case study is not one of establishing which discourses are present in the work; instead, it is a question of how individual agency via performative self-management and creation works within, seeks to develop, and moves beyond these discourses towards the individual’s goals. Moving beyond determinism and focusing on subtle forms of agential movement, I locate the poet’s agency not only in the interstices, but in her engagement within the normative systems as well. Ultimately, I argue for a conceptualization of art-as-activism that is contextualized within contemporary Tibetan exile modes of knowing and imagination.
Creativity In-Between: Liminality, Betweenness, and Nostalgia

While over six decades, the existence of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, and interior tensions indicate that the Tibetan diaspora can hardly qualify as a monolithic community of pure liminality and communitas, the everyday discourses of Tibetans refugees as well as the practice of holding “Green Books,” suggest that there exists a shared understanding of betweenness in the Tibetan Exile imagination. Turner’s emphasis on the necessity of the dialectic between “the immediacy of communitas… [and] the mediacy of structure,” may be satisfied, here, by the fact that I am not suggesting a permanent state of communitas, only a consistent return to imagined betweenness within a now highly structured social life. As we shall see, this betweenness operates not only in the dichotomy of here-there (exile-Tibet) but also on the level of now-future (circumstances of exile-rangzen, the imagined free Tibet-to-be). Thus, for Tibetans living in the People’s Republic of China or Tibetan Autonomous Region, the second type of betweenness may be shared with their fellow Tibetans in exile.

While introducing an anthology of poetry, Bhuchung D. Sonam notes that the continual reminders “that [Tibetans] float in a bardo of statelessness.” This use of the term “bardo,”

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4 If, that is, it is possible to have “pure” liminality/communitas, as imagined by Victor Turner, in lived experience.
5 Herein, I shall discuss “imagination” and “imaginings” at some length. While I occasionally will refer to previous utilizations of the terms, it should be understood that these concepts, as deployed here, are not in formulated in specific reference to their specialized usage in other bodies of work. Here, they refer to clusters of shared narratives and discourses popular within Tibetan communities, which, while not deterministic, have significant influence on the ways in which certain elements of life are popularly conceptualized. For consideration of existent analytical frames of imagination, see: 52.
7 Ibid., 129.
8 Henceforth PRC and TAR.
which has been translated as an “intermediate” or “liminal” state, may further validate the connections here between Turner’s conceptualizations of liminality and the ways in which contemporary Tibetan circumstance is experienced and (popularly) imagined by Tibetans. While the term is most commonly applied to stages of experience beyond the gross body, there is enough precedent for its metaphorical or mnemonic utilization in the description of other life events. As the culmination of the Tibetan Buddhist soteriological process (within a single lifetime) may be located in the bardos between and including death and rebirth, a large portion of Tibetan Buddhist practice is devoted to preparation for this period. Throughout Tibetan Buddhist practice, teaching, and literature, we may see numerous mentions or thematizations of impending death, which frequently operate to draw the practitioner’s mind back to Impermanence and the need for preparation. In theory, each moment of life may serve as a mnemonic of betweenness, pending death, and the importance of preparation for the bardos of death-rebirth; clear observation of moment-to-moment changes and loss of even the most apparently permanent facets of our conventional conceptualization of existence may serve to remind us that we are in a continual state of flux, becoming, and betweenness. Thus, if moments may serve as mnemonic or symbolic bardos, it is not difficult to imagine a conceptualization of larger states or circumstances of being doing the same. Exile and occupation, as we will see below, have come to

10 (tsaṅ, Tib; from antarabhāva, Skt).
11 In the Karma Kagyu tradition, for example, six bardos are recognized, and include intermediate stages of the processes of death, waiting, and rebirth, as well as dream and meditative experience. See: Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethnics, and Death (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 86. See also: Donald S. Lopez, Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58-77.
12 It is posited that in these stages, there is a great soteriological potential. For some, Enlightenment itself may be within reach; for others, it is at least possible to steer the direction of one’s rebirth towards the circumstances that will aid in the soteriological process. Either of these possibilities, however, usually relies upon preparation and readiness for the stages between and including death and rebirth.
exist in the popular Tibetan imagination as a time of progression and becoming, perhaps facilitated by this betweenness.

In contemporary Tibetan poetry, as well as political discourse, betweenness has been thematized in terms of ambiguity, statelessness, and nostalgia. Within her poem “Alien,” Sonam Tsomo offers the lines “I feel like an alien/I don’t belong here/But why I’m here?/I’m tired of being a stateless citizen/. . . I’m neither here nor there/I disappear.” Sonam’s prominent influence, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, further complicates the issue of betweenness in a consideration of the contributions of memory and nostalgia to the contemporary imaginings of Tibet and exile. For many Tibetans born in exile, the “Land of Snows” becomes idealized, romanticized, “approached with a reverence and an elegiac tone reserved for people and places irretrievably lost,” despite the fact that most of these young Tibetans are only able to operate within memories belonging to someone else.

The result is a complex nostalgia built upon the stories of older generations and interwoven with the harsh realities of “the condition of exile, the condition of separation, and the condition of being physically and emotionally a ‘refugee.’” Poets such as Dhompa express this tension creatively through writing the spaces “where nostalgia and reality converge,” and where nostalgia bleeds into despair. For many young Tibetans, this nostalgia-despair manifests as poetry about quiet suffering of a parent, as reverence for and the stories and sufferings of the previous generation. In her poetry, Sonam frequently describes her memories of perceiving her mother’s “secret” pain, for example in “the deep sigh and the pauses when she talks,” and reads

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16 Or, perhaps, resulting from.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
this pain as such: “she is dying every second in exile/Remembering her home there.”\(^\text{19}\) For a child to perceive nostalgia as suffering may have profound effects on the poet’s understanding of exile and of “home.” Like Sonam, Dhompa describes her relationship with Tibet-as-“home” as emerging vicariously through her mother’s stories, as well as her mother’s sadness. She says, "it was a land that carried much of my mother's nostalgia. The halcyon days of her life were spent in Tibet. It was an object of yearning and wonder for those who belonged and those who did not -- all agreeing on the premise that there was nothing quite like Tibet."\(^\text{20}\)

“But,” Dhompa tells us, at least for the current Tibetan refugee youth generation, “if despair exists within the writing, it does so as a temporary condition, before turning towards an undertaking of the present and the political: that of political resistance.”\(^\text{21}\) As we shall see later, this experience of vicarious nostalgia and suffering, bequeathed upon the current generation of Tibetan youth, may be considered contributive to new strategies and engagements with political activism. For Dhompa, “nostalgia is political in our experience as ‘Tibetans’ and nostalgia is a recurring voice in contemporary Tibetan poetics in exile.”\(^\text{22}\) In an often quoted poem, Tenzin Tsundue says:

\begin{quote}
I am Tibetan.  
But I am not from Tibet.  
Never been there.  
Yet I dream  
Of dying there.\(^\text{23}\)
\end{quote}

\textit{19} Sonam, “Alien by sonam.”
\textit{21} Dhompa, “Nostalgia.”
\textit{22} Dhompa, “Nostalgia.”
\textit{23} See: Dhompa, “Nostalgia.”
Complex nostalgia and the circumstances of exile have further implications for young Tibetans in their understandings of self and circumstance as in flux. In an interview, Dhompa describes betweenness as a state of becoming:

Tibetan cultural identity is therefore as much a matter of constructivist “becoming” in exile, as of essentialized historical “being.” From their new cultural locations in exile, Tibetans are emerging with new writings in English that addresses their modes of existence.  

For Dhompa, and many of the hundreds of young Tibetan poets, these states of exile and “becoming” are intricately tied with the “burden of introduction, of placing ourselves; of deciphering ourselves; of associating and disassociating ourselves.” In betweenness and becoming, young Tibetans face “contradictions of identity” tied in the difficult task of “placing ourselves,” from which the theme of conceptualizing identity and space as interconnected emerges. In poetry, these contradictions often become formulated as “neither…nor,” and the places one has lived since childhood are described as “home-like” or “not-home,” and thematized in the concept of homesickness. Sonam’s blog, for example, is titled after her one-line poem, “Home:” “People say: Home is where the heart is but for me home is unseen and unreachable.” She tells her readers, “i am still kind of homesick,” that her mother “never call[s] this place home,” and refers to her childhood residence as “exile home.” In the task of self-identification, space and “home” may become integral, and the slipperiness of self-definition via a space “unseen and unreachable” may manifest as ambiguity, paradox, and emphasis on space and place within exile youth poetry.

25 Dhompa, “Nostalgia.”
26 Ibid.
27 Sonam, “Home.”
28 Sonam, “Wondering.”
29 Sonam, “Home.”
30 Sonam, “Waiting list.”
While the realities of Tibetan exile and their manifestation in exile poetics cannot easily be made to fit Turner’s (early) idealized models of liminality, I suggest that attributes of this model may suitably be applied to the betweenness expressed in Tibetan exile\textsuperscript{31} circumstances. Consider Turner’s discussions of potentiality and creativity in-between: “by way of compensation, the initiands acquire a special kind of freedom, a ‘sacred power’ of the meek, weak, and humble.”\textsuperscript{32} This privilege is the freedom of potentiality, “society's subjunctive mood, the mood of may-be, might-be, as-if, possibility, hypothesis, speculation,”\textsuperscript{33} in which the space created by the shedding of past identity allows for new possibilities of experience and definition.

In this way,

\begin{quote}
Liminality is the realm of primitive hypothesis, where there is a certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence...there is a promiscuous intermingling and juxtaposing of the categories of an event, experience, and knowledge, with a pedagogic intention.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Beyond the potentiality of becoming, Turner suggests that betweenness may offer potentiality of creating,\textsuperscript{35} describing the coincidence of liminality and creative endeavors. Within this frame, Tibetan poetics and other forms of creative expression may be manifestations of “society’s subjunctive mood,” the exploration of potentiality in an atmosphere of conceptual ambiguity and paradox. For young Tibetans, betweenness may not be a process of shedding past identity en route to donning a new, socially mandated, identity, but may point to the necessary and agential negotiations of identity formation in circumstances of complex nostalgia, betweenness, and waiting. On the other hand, one might argue that the Tibetan Buddhist system of metaphysics

\textsuperscript{31} As well as, perhaps, Tibetan circumstances in the PRC/TAR.
\textsuperscript{34} Victor W. Turner. \textit{The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual}. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 106. The “pedagogics of liminality” may be a useful frame in considering Tibetan imaginings of exile, as described below. See also: Turner, \textit{Ritual Process}, 105.
contains built-in attributes of liminality, including the high degree of ambiguity, formlessness, and paradox justified by a dual classification of reality and the unformulated vajra-ground that underlies and makes possible such attributes. However, the seemingly unprecedented prevalence of artistic and creative endeavors among exile Tibetan youth populations may, perhaps, be better read within such a framework of betweenness as parallel to Turner’s conceptualization of liminality.

**Traditions in Tibet: Poetry, Autobiography, and Creative Political Expression**

Before considering the contemporary forms of creative expression that may be derivative of this betweenness, it is worthwhile to consider the benefit of framing contemporary poetics in terms of Tibetan tradition. While contemporary Tibetan poets continue to experiment with styles from multiple locales and traditions, movements in Tibetan education and cultural preservation in exile have promoted ongoing knowledge of and engagement with “traditional” or historical Tibetan literary and other creative forms. Upon consideration of the parallels between these historical works and contemporary Tibetan poetics, it becomes clear that these precedents may have lingering influence on approaches, themes, tropes, forms, and aims of contemporary Tibetan poetry, especially when such poetry is considered for its autobiographical intent.

Janet Gyatso, in her *Apparitions of the Self*, suggests autobiographical writing has a long-established tradition in Tibet, apparently arising independent of external traditions. Perhaps emerging from the Tibetan penchant for record-keeping and, as Gyatso suggest, “the

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36 These discussions will be continued later; however, it may be worthwhile to note that these attributes exist in form and to a level beyond what is discussed by Turner as the institutionalization of liminality in monastic life. See: Turner, *Ritual Process*, 107.

37 This will be further established in Close reading I.

sociohistorical conditions for self-assertion”\textsuperscript{39} autobiographical forms of writing in Tibet were historically practiced by men and women, secular and monastic, poor and rich. Tibetan autobiographers tended to display an interest in “ordinary vicissitudes of the self, just for their own sake,” and in the case of Buddhist autobiography, regardless of “whether they have soteriological import or not.”\textsuperscript{40} Significantly, Tibetan autobiographic writing tends to focus on events occurring both within one’s inner life (e.g. dreams, meditative visions, contemplations, realizations,) as well as within the social world (e.g. experiences of personal significance, daily events).\textsuperscript{41} One genre with a tendency toward interior or internal focus is the Tibetan “secret autobiography,” so named not necessarily for the restrictions on audience, but for the “self secret”\textsuperscript{42} nature of the content. Written by lay people as well as Buddhist figures, the secret autobiography both sets precedent for new and employs existent literary conventions; the interpretive ambiguity possible in a “self secret” text, for example, is reminiscent of a similar ambiguity common in canonical and Tibetan Buddhist texts, hagiographies, and, in some cases, historiographies. I suggest that this ambiguity, or self-secrecy, has carried on in contemporary Tibetan poetics, and has become a problematic issue for the writers attempting to work in multiple languages. In response to an interview question on her use of English, Tibetan, and Hindi languages, Sonam described to me the craftsmanship required to write poetry in Tibetan, pointing to “hidden meanings” that emergent in both word choices and technique.\textsuperscript{43} While Sonam expresses frustration about the difficulty in translating these hidden meanings into English, a

\textsuperscript{39} Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 122.
\textsuperscript{40} See: Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 101, 102, and 112.
\textsuperscript{41} Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 103.
\textsuperscript{42} Self-secret texts having “meaning not denoted directly,” See: Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 7. See Close Reading II.
\textsuperscript{43} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
language which she finds to be much more direct, the close readings of her poetry\textsuperscript{44} show some degree of success in carrying interpretational ambiguity to English-language versions.

While a full history of Tibetan poetics is not possible in this space, highlighting several elements of historic forms of Tibetan poetry may be valuable to our understanding of the contemporary poetics trend. First, we may note the inadequacy of the “genre” construct in the categorization of written forms, for Tibetan literary traditions easily blend poetry, autobiography, and prose in a number of different formats.\textsuperscript{45} Contemporary Tibetan writers show similar flexibility; Sonam, for example, quickly maneuvers between poetry, lyrics, news articles, prose, and a number of other formats. Second, we may take note of the Tibetan history of “poet-saints” or “poet-sages” as a point of cultural pride among diasporic Tibetans, who may trace the interweavings of poetry, Buddhist discourse, and political discourse to iconic figures such as Milarepa, the sixth Dalai Lama, and Zhabkar Tsokdruck Rangdro.\textsuperscript{46} Third, this incorporation of political commentary in poetry has a variety of historical precedents in Tibet, including in the street verses of Lhasa, which were known for both “impromptu wit” and the frequent purpose of “pointed political satire.”\textsuperscript{47} Finally, in contemporary Tibetan poetry we may find elements paralleling traditional Tibetan \textit{མགུར} (gur) “autobiographical collections of meditative songs,”\textsuperscript{48} many of which are still known and performed today.\textsuperscript{49} Perhaps derivative of Indian doha, gur provide poets/singers the opportunity to explore and express insights and sentiments of their Buddhist experiences in an uninhibited fashion. Thus, rather than narrative form, the gur instead

\textsuperscript{44} See: Close Readings I and II.
\textsuperscript{45} This, however, is to be expected to some degree, as “from the folkloristic perspective all performers destabilize genre conventions, whether in oral or written literature.” See: Amy Shuman and Galit Hasan-Rokem, “The Poetics of Folklore,” in \textit{A Companion to Folklore, First Edition}. Ed. Regina F. Bendix and Galit Hasan-Rokem (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 62.
\textsuperscript{46} Zhabkar Rinpoche (1781-1851), Nyigma Poet-Scholar.
\textsuperscript{48} Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 104.
\textsuperscript{49} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
offer “atemporal reflections on themes in Buddhist doctrine, even if they refer to particular events in the author’s life.” While I am not suggesting, by any means, that Sonam’s poetry is exemplary of these traditions, the parallels are sufficiently indicative of the possibility of influence to warrant deeper comparative examination of the themes, tropes, methods, and purposes. These parallels also indicate that contemporary forms of creative expression, and the possibility of utilizing poetry toward religious and political ends, are not without notable historical precedent. The degree and breadth of Tibetan individuals who are now participating in the poetic arts, however, may be unprecedented.

_Poetry in Exile_

You have the guns? I have a pen.”

….there has been a constant stream of books, magazines, articles and songs in the mother tongue. Tibetan writers have broken through the silence, [beyond] the terror, and even more of them are inspiring even more Tibetans.

“Brave is the Tibetan poet/Who ventures to write in English,” wrote Tsoltim N. Shakabpa in 2007, who estimated that approximately two to three hundred Tibetans poets-in-exile were writing and publishing in English at the time. The convention of writing poetry in English, however, is said to have commenced nearly a century ago with the scholar-monk Gendun Choephel, who experimented not only with traditional Tibetan poetic forms but also “the style of

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50 The relevance of gyur will become particularly apparent in the close readings of Sonam’s poetry. Gyatso, _Apparitions_, 104.
late nineteenth century romanticism”\textsuperscript{54} during his travels abroad.\textsuperscript{55} Again in 1959, the circumstances of exile would drive Tibetan writers to experiment with English language. Due to the relative instability of the education system and economic statuses of Tibetan communities in exile, the practice of poetry, as well as of other forms of writing in English, would remain the providence of (largely Buddhist) scholars for the next several decades. Notable among the first generation of Tibetan refugee poets is Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who, living in America and working closely with Allen Ginsburg, would publish a book of his English-language poems in 1983.\textsuperscript{56} Around this time, a cohort of Tibetan scholar-writers would publish the first English language literary journal by Tibetans, \textit{Lotus Fields}, which contained the work of prominent figures in the Tibetan government-in-exile as well as the parallel cultural movements.\textsuperscript{57} (Public) Tibetan literature and poetry in exile would continue to expand as the activity was increasingly taken up by individuals from various sectors of Tibetan exile communities and as the opportunities for publication and presentation continued to diversify. For some, writing could grant recognition and even fame within and beyond the Tibetan communities; for others, writing became a way to broaden and expand upon an already existent public persona.\textsuperscript{58}

For young, relatively unknown poets such as Sonam, these circumstances not only opened space for the practice of poetry as response to exile, but established common goals, forms, and conversations considering the implications of poetic acts. Parallel to these literary traditions and forums for publication emerged voices contributing to an ongoing discussion of how Tibetan literary arts should be approached, managed, and engaged in exile, and it has become somewhat

\textsuperscript{54} Barnet, “Extract.”
\textsuperscript{56} Barnet, “Extract.”
\textsuperscript{57} E.g. “K. Dhondup (the founder of the Tibetan Communist Party in exile and an important writer), Tenzing Sonam (later to become a noted documentary film director), the essayist and activist Lhasang Tsering, the government official Thubten Samphel, Gyalpo Tsering, and others.” See: Barnet, “Extract.”
\textsuperscript{58} A brief list of prominent writers: Buchung D. Sonam, Tenzin Tsundue, Thubten Chakrishar, Tsamchoe Dolma, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, Tsoltim Shakabpa, Lhasa Tsering, Shogdung, Jamyang Norbu, Kunsang Dolma, Tsering Woeser.
common for established Tibetan writers to publish essays and interviews advising Tibetans on the stakes and forms of Tibetan poetry. A noted influence on Sonam, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, offered the following in an interview:

I encourage younger Tibetans to think of ways they can tell the same stories in multiple forms and multiple avenues. We need to honor memory and the task of memory, because our future depends in many ways on our ability to remember, but as artists we also need to learn to take a step back from our work and ask critical questions. I think we need to guard ourselves against being caught in a stagnant pool and from using the same forms, terms and images to talk about ourselves, Tibet and the world we live in.59

Dhompa’s commentary here is notable on several grounds. First, she encourages young Tibetans to experiment, reminding them that while they must “honor memory,” they are not fully beholden to traditional forms and generic rules. This parallels discourses of exile as a period of growth and development60 and reiterates the value of critical thought that arises from Buddhist philosophy and is reengaged throughout Tibetan Buddhist teachings. Second, it imagines Tibetan poetry as operating beyond art-for-art’s-sake, which is integral to our conceptualization of art-as-activism.

More explicitly connecting art to activism are the commentaries of Tsoltim Shakabpa, a senior contemporary Tibetan poet-activist who encourages young Tibetans to write in both English and Mandarin; English for its somewhat universal appeal, and Mandarin to “make the Chinese reading public aware of the Tibetan political and human rights plight,” as it “is admittedly spoken and read by over a billion people who are regularly brain-washed by Chinese government propaganda.”61 Beyond the reiteration of a now fairly common discourse of the need to use poetry in raising awareness of Tibetan circumstance, Shakabpa addresses the issues arising from, as Dhompa describes it, “entrusting a language different from our mother tongue to speak

60 See: “Imagination and Stakes” section.
61 Shakabpa, “The Role of English.”
of the loss or the absence of a country,” the issue of sharing the interior in a language that is foreign. He advises:

If Tibetan poets think in Tibetan and translate their poetry into English, there may arise problems in precise translation. But if Tibetan poets think in English, those problems may be surmounted though it may possibly cloud their Tibetan heart. The ideal situation is the ability to think both in English and in Tibetan. That way, the evolution of the two languages inter-mingling with one another in a translucent manner with the heart brings about the best attributes of the poetry in mind.

For Shakabpa, even when this “ideal situation” is not possible, poetry can and perhaps should be used to spread awareness and change minds, even when the language employed is not the appropriate tool to “express what the heart feels.” The underlying goal of intercultural communication is apparent within Shakabpa’s own poetry, which has been described by a Tibetan journalist as “nostalgic yet very American.” Shakabpa and Dhompa’s advice to Tibetan poets are just two among many voices commenting on the form and function of Tibetan exile poetics and writing. A broader survey, however, would reveal a similar trend: an understanding of art as more than aesthetic, of art as activism.

These kinds of commentaries exist, in part, because of a continual broadening of the understanding of which types of individuals could, and do, participate in public artistic endeavors such as poetry. Not only are these activities encouraged in educational programs for Tibetan youth, they are encouraged culturally as well, through the wide variety of platforms for individual expression. Through film screenings, poetry readings, public talks, publishing houses,

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62 Dhompa, “Nostalgia.”
63 Shakabpa, “The Role of English.”
64 Shakabpa, “The Role of English.”
65 Barnet, “Extract.”
66 Consider the programs of study at the Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV) in Dharmasala.
conferences, and the funding for these activities, there has been a broad shift in making unofficial forms of art official and representative. Adding to this atmosphere are the artists who remain unofficial, including those that have been described as Tibetan “Bread and Freedom Poets,” 67 politically inclined artists whose unofficial status means continual negotiation between their creative activism and the need to earn a living. One notable example is Mcleod Ganj’s self-proclaimed (yet largely unofficial) “celebrity,” a performance artist known as Lion Man. Often seen in his political t-shirts, engaging with tourists on the streets of Mcleod Ganj, Lion Man earns his living by charging his largely Western audiences a small fee for attendance. Performing mainly in Tibetan restaurants, Lion Man blends traditional spontaneous movement with skillfully executed traditional Tibetan dance to a soundtrack of tradition and contemporary Tibetan music, as well as Western techno and electonica. These performances are invariably framed and keyed by the politics of exile, via introductory narration of his own flight from Tibet, politically themed narrative interludes, and the names of the dances. 68 Like many Tibetan artists, Lion Man has found an online forum for the promotion of his art and the political messages therein, describing his work as “performances for freedom.” While Lion Man is but one of many contemporary Tibetan artists, his lifestyle and success among tourists is indicative of an atmosphere of creative expression in exile, and a receptiveness on the part of some non-Tibetan audiences.

**The Online Tea Houses**

The relatively recent development of online forums for public presentation and discussion of Tibetan poetry in exile arises in a context of increasing presence of Tibetan circumstance and

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68 E.g. his recently favored “Dance for Freedom”
cause online. Tibetans, as well as non-Tibetan supporters, have initiated a significant level of creative, communicative, and political grassroots movements in the last few decades. These include cultural preservation and educational movements; cultural movements, such as Lhakar; Tibetan Buddhist missionary activities; and a variety of creative forums, platforms, and independent news sites. A survey of the mission statements of these organizations reveals trends in priorities and goals. These include 1) to promote awareness of Tibetan circumstance, making suffering visible; 2) improve the living conditions and provide opportunity for Tibetans; 3) promote international patronage and engagement of the freedom movement (both from Tibetans and otherwise); 4) make political statements, share strategies, or celebrate resistance; 5) promote knowledge and preservation of Tibetan culture (as understood by the organization). While some of these organizations and websites are aimed primarily at Tibetans, the vast majority seek to communicate with a wider audience, as may be indicated by the use of English and locations of activities.

Underlying these goals, and perhaps a purpose in itself, is the objective of giving voice to Tibetans, through either representation or providing forums for individual expression of Tibetan circumstance. The online presence and publications of Tibetan writers must be contextualized in this wider network of organization and movement websites, as they are connected not only

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69 Inc. Language, cultural, traditional arts, educational, etc, programs. E.g. UVA summer program for young Tibetans- Tibetan Summer Enrichment Program (SEP), classes as TGIE, Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA), Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV).
70 E.g. Students for a Free Tibet, Tibetan Youth Congress, friendsoftibet.org, thinktibet.org, tibetsociety.com, seedsofcompassion.org, ihearttibet.org, etc.
71 White Wednesday- a community-driven movement to practice traditional Tibetan arts and language (including the wearing of traditional clothing, eating traditional Tibetan food, speaking Tibetan, performing traditional arts), and promote Tibetan businesses (eating at Tibetan restaurants, buying from Tibetan-owned businesses). See: lhakar.org.
72 Note that these online forums are not without risk, especially to those living in TAR. News sites are relevant, here, for the forum they provide for information/interpretation sharing, e.g. the chat rooms at Phayul.com.
through search engine key terms but through inclusion of a network of links and event announcements on many of the sites devoted to Tibetan circumstance. In the case of an individual blog, connectivity to the rest of the network comes mainly from the preceding. A more direct connection to these networks occurs when poets publish to websites such as tibetwrites.org, tibetanblogspot.wordpress.com, and highpeakspureearth.com, which establish spaces for the publication and dissemination of Tibetan poems and other creative works. These larger sites operate as platforms for individuals with compromised ability to establish their own websites, for translation of poetry of those writing in Tibetan, and for ease of audience accessibility to a wide variety of Tibetan voices.

The flourishing of Tibetan literature and creative expression online in the last several decades has been attributed, in part, to the dwindling of Lhasa’s “Sweet Tea Houses,” spaces for public discussion and debate which had some prominence until the early 1990s. Today, the “tea houses” have moved online, in the form of larger websites containing multiple voices, individual blogs, and both the presentations and conversations on social media platforms (e.g. twitter, facebook, youtube). These online spaces tend to be differentiated and utilized for specific purposes, as seen in Sonam’s online presence. She employs twitter almost exclusively for direct pleas for support of Tibetans and the dissemination of knowledge of human rights violations in Tibet, her blog primarily for the sharing of poetry, and facebook, where the audience may be perceived to be restricted to friends, family, and acquaintances, for a mixture of personal, political, and artistic expression. The differentiated connectivity possible through these social media sites, via subscriptions, can allow users to create individualized networks on a single

73 due to limited internet access or educational barriers
74 ཇ་གང་, ja-kang, or ཇ་མནར་མོ, ja-narmo, Lhasa colloquial
homepage, to occupy several tea houses at once. To take my own facebook page as an example, I, as an American woman with social and professional networks amongst Tibetan refugees and with connections to several Tibetan organizations, may access a personalized homepage on which Tibetan news, blogs, poems, event announcements, music videos, and photographs are the prevalent majority of information being presented to me continuously. Thus, by not only presenting material online, but by creating and utilizing existent networks, Tibetan activists and artists have unprecedented access to spaces for networking, sharing, and reception.

**Sonam**

Within these contexts, we finally return to Sonam Tsomo, a young second-generation Tibetan refugee raised in the Tibetan exile community of Bir, in Himachal Pradesh, Northern India. I first met Sonam during extended fieldwork in an American Tibetan Buddhist meditation center in Columbus, Ohio; a soft-spoken and thoughtful woman, she is characteristically kind and compassionate. As I would later learn, upon a brief stay with her family in Bir during the 2011 བོད་ལྷོར་གསར་, she grew up surrounded by a large extended family and a flourishing Tibetan refugee community. The family members speak primarily a hybrid form of Tibetan language among themselves, some speaking little to no English, and actively practice “Tibetanness” and “Tibetan lifestyle.” As with many Tibetan and Tibetan diasporic families, several members

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76 Tib: Losar, or Tibetan New Year
77 In most cases in Northern India, this is one of several forms of a language which is unique to the diaspora, often incorporating elements of English and Hindi, as well as facets from multiple dialects of colloquial and (traditionally) literary Tibetan.
78 Throughout this paper, I discuss Tibetanness not as some essential quality referring to a specific cultural context, but of discursively constructed life and selfhood choices, often as laid down by the community-in-exile as sites of cultural preservation.
belong to religious careers, including one brother who is a lama and another who serves as a bodyguard to H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama. As appears to be the case with many members of the diaspora in Northern India, there exists among them a continuing series of discourses about the exile circumstances and its relevancy as a frequent conversation topic. Growing up in this large, devout, and politically minded community, Sonam developed Buddhist and activist sensibilities that are reflected in her presentations of selfhood and agency in her online poetry. For the past few years, Sonam has been studying in America on scholarship to a prestigious university for her poetry. Although quiet and thoughtful in person, Sonam achieves a powerful voice in her poetry, which she publishes and archives online on her public blog entitled: “?: Home for Me is Unseen and Unreachable.” To date, Sonam has published approximately one-hundred posts on her website, many of which deal directly with the topics of Tibetan exile and diasporic circumstance. While most of the posts are poems, there are also brief reflections and reposted news stories, including stories of recent self-immolations in the area formerly known as/body (Tibet). These posts, while rarely explicitly autobiographical accounts, may be read as an “outlaw genre” of autobiography, and appear upon deep analysis to be subtly agentive (re)presentations of self and circumstance.

Within this rich atmosphere of online creative expression and political agency, we have access to a variety of individuals, works, and forums through which we may explore the issues and hand. Here, I believe it will be more productive to closely engage with the online publications and presence of one young poet than to survey the wider field. Through a close examination, themes, tropes, trends, and strategies emerge in a way not possible with a broad survey of materials. However, my analyses of Sonam’s publications and interview responses are performed and informed on the basis of a wider field of research, including my own survey of online

79 Buddhist teacher
80 See: Conclusion.
materials, field experiences and interviews performed in previous research as well as in a four-month period living with Tibetan communities in and around Mcleod Ganj, and supporting parallel research. Yet, while my conclusions and highlights herein are based upon a significantly wider research base than the poems of a single poet, I feel it most productive to examine a single body of work deeply and in terms of moments of agency and indication.

“Not-Self” Representation: Theorizing the Performative Self

Concerns Arising From Tibetan Metaphysics

Before considering the issues of autobiography and agency within contemporary Tibetan poetics, reflection on what comprises the, thus far unqualified, “auto” and the “agent” in a Tibetan system of metaphysics is warranted. The Buddhist no(t)-self\(^{81}\) is, in short, the doctrine that “there is no independent, permanent, or essential self; rather, persons are constituted by a combination of many interdependent components, each of which is constantly in flux,”\(^ {82}\) and that “what appears to be stable and unitary persons are in fact collections of impersonal and impermanent events, arising and disappearing in a beginningless process of conditioning.”\(^ {83}\) Although anatman is too a complex doctrine to be summarized so briefly, Gyatso and Collins here offer substantial grounding for a consideration of the core issues in discussing agency and autobiography of Buddhist individuals. They ask: how does one self-represent, self-reflect, or operate as an agent without an essential self?

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\(^{81}\) (Pali \textit{anattā}, Sanskrit \textit{anātman})

\(^{82}\) Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 184.

\(^{83}\) Steven Collins, “What Are Buddhists Doing When They Deny the Self?,” in \textit{Religion and Practical Reason: New Essays in the Comparative Philosophy of Religions}, edited by Reynolds Frank and Tracy David (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 64. Note that while Collins’ work is not focused on Tibetan forms of Buddhism, his attention to the shared pali canon makes these interpretations of value here.
Collins’ solution to this problem may be found directly within Buddhist metaphysics, in the “explicit meta-theory” that differentiates between “conventional” and “ultimate” language and truth:

It is true ‘ultimately’ that there is no self, but ‘conventionally’ it is possible to designate the temporary psycho-physical configuration of impersonal events we think of as person by proper names, pronouns (including ‘I’), definite descriptions, and other means of reference.\(^{84}\)

Thus while the “ultimate” truth of no-self is universally “known” to Buddhists, only an elite few have the full knowledge of it\(^{85}\) and are thus able to operate within it to a significant degree. Both discourses exist within the Buddhist community, yet, for the most part, “the denial of the self is meant to describe directly only certain kinds of experience and agency,” \(^{86}\) and the discourse of anatman tends to be utilized only in esoteric discourse and/or as a referential.\(^{87}\) As such,

It is only where matters of systematic philosophical and psychological analysis are openly referred to or presupposed on the surface level of discourse that there is imposed the rigid taboo on speaking of ‘self’ or ‘person.’\(^{88}\)

For the majority of individuals operating within samsaric existence, it is necessary to employ not only the language of self, but a sense of self as well. For us, \textit{anatman} is the stuff of abstract conceptualization, Buddhist teachings, and potentiality.

Gyatso moves beyond the partitioning of discourses of the self and posits a relationship of reliance between the two discourses. In order to experientially realize the inherent emptiness of the conventional conceptualization of self, the individual practitioner must first employ the illusion of self as a soteriological tool. In Buddhist praxis, one seeks to develop a detailed self-knowledge in a series of practices designed to loosen one’s grasp on the idea of the conventional...

\(^{84}\) Collins, “Deny,” 66.
\(^{85}\) Full knowledge being achievable only through direct experience.
self. “One should be empty of essence but full of self-knowledge,”\(^{89}\) and self-knowledge begins through observation of the illusory self. Similarly, in visualization practice, self-gaze and imaginings of the self are necessary components in early stages of practice.\(^{90}\) The result, says Gyatso, is that

…the very disciplines that induce a realization of the emptiness of the self simultaneously produce an interiorized subjectivity. As has been forcefully suggested by Foucault, disciplines that proceed by way of scrutiny, from either within or without, an create a subject where there might have not been one before.\(^{91}\)

The illusions of conventional reality, the self included, are but soteriological tools to the skillful practitioner. A temporary reification of the illusion of substantive subjectivity may be acceptable if the practice responsible for this reification ultimately propels the practitioner to diminish their attachment to the essentialized, independent subject they know as “I.” The practitioner, in fact, “endeavors to intensify subjective experience, via tantric and Great Perfection practice, but precisely so that he can separate such experience from its essentialization.”\(^{92}\)

Contrary to a cursory interpretation that no-self means, inherently, the impossibility of operation as an agent, Gyatso suggests that the theory of no-self makes possible the agency of the individual:

It is because of such emptiness that the individual can take action or change, for if there were really anything permanent or fully autonomous about the person, it is maintained, there could be no action at all.\(^{93}\)

Or, “in short, Buddhism does not maintain that there are no individuals with subjectivity and agency, but only that such subjective agents are not permanent or unconditioned.”\(^{94}\) In Tibet, for

\(^{89}\) Gyatso, *Apparitions*, 184-5.

\(^{90}\) Ibid, 230-1.

\(^{91}\) Ibid, 184.

\(^{92}\) Ibid, 269-70.

\(^{93}\) Ibid, 184.
example, individual agency is not only posited, but applauded. The highly competitive atmosphere, arising from “sociohistorical conditions for self-assertion,” such as the introduction of Buddhism and the establishment of competing schools, the hierarchy which places individuals operating autonomously over those practicing within the monastic system, and the importance placed on the hagiographies of the lineage masters may all be contributive to an atmosphere of emphasis on agency and a characteristic Tibetan “celebration of individual autonomy.” For Gyatso, not only does “… the doctrine of karma [make] personal agency virtually absolute,” the Tibetan Buddhist system makes it agency an integral facet of soteriology. Furthermore, as evidenced in transmission of Tibetan autobiographical works, agency within this system is not conceived as that of a “single, autonomous actor operating alone.” The “metaphysics of such agency- as is true of almost everything in Buddhism- would be deemed composite, interdependent, and in flux,” and must be understood relationally, in terms of community and contextuality.

Frames of Narrated Selfhood

Here, our discussions of self and selfhood refer not to abstract being or essence, but instead to performed or social self, a presentation of selfhood that is at once functional and circumstantial. In autobiographical texts, there is no true way to fully reconcile the signifier with the signified, and “fenced in by language, the speaking subject is primordially divided” for

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94 Ibid, 230.
95 Ibid, 122.
96 Consider the operation of the renuciatory ideal.
97 Ibid, 120. To complicate- At a certain level of spiritual attainment, and with strong connections/respect for a lineage and teacher.
98 Ibid, 229.
99 To be discussed below.
100 Ibid, 179.
101 Ibid, 181.
“…language is neither an external force nor a ‘tool’ of expression, but the very symbolic system that both constructs and is constructed by the writing subject.” Following Benstock in this, I argue that examining autobiographical representations as sites or reflections of lived experiences of personhood is not a reasonable task; that we must instead examine the strategies behind how subjects narratively represent themselves, asking why they choose these strategies/representations, and to what ends.

The forms of self-expression discussed here can be considered sites of creativity that allow for multiple interpretations or (re)presentations of selfhood. The relationship between personal experience narrative, as well as similar forms of self-expression, and self-formation, negotiation, or reaffirmation has been widely studied and discussed. Chaim Noy describes the presented-self, saying:

When it comes to identity(s)—the sociocultural categories by means of which we present and locate ourselves socially, and to a sense of selfhood—the intimate existential experience we have of being—what is unique about narrative performance is that in the instances of narration, those fleeting moments in which narratives are uttered, it presents who the narrator is at the time of narration. Who we are reflects who we have become, that is, who we are becoming while story-telling our identity.

Thus according to Noy, performances of self-presentation are more than simply snapshots of a momentary state of being; they are in themselves processes of creation and negotiation of the self, or of one of multiple selves. Here, I follow this literature in suggesting that the concept of self-management via narrative is an existent phenomenon with a repeatedly observed set of characteristics. In short, I shall approach the performances herein with set of assumptions

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established upon a large body of contemporary critical analysis: 1) that self-expressive performance with self as primary\textsuperscript{105} subject creates the space and means for presented self-management; 2) that this management of self can be used toward certain ends; and 3) that such performances best serve ends that are social in nature or are mediated by social interaction and intention.

It may be useful to draw here a parallel between self and Cooper and Brubaker’s reconceptualization of the term “identity;” rather than the bounded, static object of inherent existence implied by the term “identity,” we are better served conceiving of this same relationship in terms of “…situated subjectivity: one’s sense of who one is, of one’s location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” or in terms of the “fundamentally situational and contextual” process of identification, through which an individual draws their own connections and barriers.\textsuperscript{106} Similarly, here we have not a bounded, static, inherently existent self, but one which flexes with one’s perceptions of her own situated subjectivity, one which is mnemonic of its own inherent instability, and one which is established and developed through processes of selection rather than categorization by means of some perceived inherent quality or characteristic.

The nature of the “performed” or (re)presented self as flexible and contextual may also be found in Gary R. Butler’s work on oral discourse within an Afro-Carribean community, through which he finds that speaker “…identities are emergent attributes of the interaction itself,”\textsuperscript{107} as well as Ochs and Capps’ concept of “multiple, partial selves” arising from narrative performance. For Ochs and Capps, the multiplicity of selves comes from a creative joint process occurring between audience and narrator, for “as narratives are apprehended, they give rise to the selves

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Or occasionally, even as the secondary subject.
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that apprehend them."\(^{108}\) The narrative process joins speaker to listener, blending the already porous boundaries between self and other.\(^ {109}\) This flexible (fluid), circumstantial, and interdependent conceptualization of selves is particularly well suited for a discussion of Buddhist subjects, as anatman is already conceptualized in such a way.

Gyatso similarly notes the convenient parallels between the autobiographical self and discourses of anatman as such:

> The self that is constructed in autobiography cannot be reduced to metaphysical essence, social determined personhood, or anything else. Rather, the self is so complex and so opaque that it emerges only through adumbration and cannot be summed up in a definition. Forever in flux, as the Buddhists would say, it is constructed in time, in language, and in imagery, well suited indeed to the literary art of narration.\(^ {110}\)

In her examination of the autobiographies of tertön Jigme Lingpa, Gyatso examines the ways in which the author negotiates the selfhood necessitated by the genre and the ultimate truth of no-self, how he rhetorically separates description of subjective experience from essentialization of the subject.\(^ {111}\) In this, she points to the author’s self conception as “undecidability itself,”\(^ {112}\) built on rhetoric strategies of self-fragmentation and grounded in a “slippery ontology”\(^ {113}\) that operates as a mnemonic of the ultimate truth of the unformulated Vajra Ground.\(^ {114}\) Lingpa presents the reader “with facets of himself that make that self seem very empty and tenuous indeed,”\(^ {115}\) fragmenting the self-protagonist with the employment of his multitude of names and identities, creating paradox and inconsistencies between the fragments of self, referring to himself in the

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\(^{109}\) Ibid, 31.

\(^{110}\) Gyatso, *Apparitions*, 123.

\(^{111}\) See: Gyatso, *Apparitions*, 269-70.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, 268.

\(^{113}\) Ibid, 206.

\(^{114}\) To be discussed at greater length later.

\(^{115}\) Ibid, 231.
second person, and changing style and mood of the narration seemingly spontaneously. In the end, “while the aporias undermine the self-assertion, they also bring it into high relief. This is the trick that makes Buddhist autobiographical selfhood possible, without essentializing it.” The strategies of building ambiguity, paradox, and self-fragmentation found in Jigme Lingpa’s autobiographies may be parallel, in many ways, to similar strategies employed by contemporary Tibetan writers in their description of exile subjectivity. They operate as a means to satisfy the generic need for the “auto” in “autobiographical” while at the same time pointing towards an underlying, Ultimate truth.

To return to the Tibetan Buddhist model, briefly, it may be useful at this point to consider the theory of interdependence or dependent origination as integral to a Buddhist conceptualization of (not)self. The concept of interdependence, tendrel, has manifold layers of meaning in Buddhist canon and philosophical systems, most of which I shall not engage with here. What is of interest, however, is how the concept has been taken up by Tibetan leaders and activists, as it has been within Engaged Buddhism, in combination with the Bodhisattva ideal and as grounds for claims of mutual/universal responsibility towards problems and sufferings in the world. In short, the Buddhist ontology is grounded in the (canonical) formula that:

This is, because that is.
This is not, because that is not.
This ceases to be, because that ceases to be.

On one level, the concept has been taken up for environmental movements and constructions of global climate change. Even on this level, one may argue that “humanity's place on an

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117 Ibid, 268.
118 རེན་འབེལ་, Tib; Pratītyasamutpāda, Skt; paticcasamuppāda, Pali.
119 Specifically by Ven. Thích Nhất Hạnh.
increasingly fragile planet is inextricably linked to the future of Tibet, as the PRC’s management of the ecosystem and resources may be having global environmental impact. On another level, however, the concept of tendrel, especially when viewed in light of the Bodhisattva ideal, is especially valid in relation to the social sphere.

Even when interpreted as an abstract potentiality, the Bodhisattva is a powerful symbol of the inherent responsibility derived from compassion. With the Bodhisattva, we see that the selfishness of withdrawal from the world of samsara is contradictory to the mandates of the very compassion that was integral to the possibility of an individual’s soteriological withdrawal; one cannot be freed from samsaric existence without compassion, yet it is compassion that mandates that they postpone freedom. According to Dromtompa, once you experientially realize “profound compassion for all beings, you will simultaneously feel the nonseparation of self and others,” and

…you will feel a profound love and compassion or those beings who have not realized enlightenment. From then on, whatever you do will only be for the benefit of those many beings.

This is a stage of fruition of the Bodhisattva ideal, but it is a concept that may be experienced or sought after by individuals at a variety of stages on the soteriological path. Thus within the Mahayana Buddhist system there is an intricate connectivity between compassion and responsibility, both of which are steeped in the doctrine of tendrel. This appears to be the framework that informed the work of H.H. the Dalai Lama. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance

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124 Dromtompa (~1004-1064). Buddhist master of Tibet’s second propagation of Buddhism.
126 Ibid, 111.
lecture (1989), the language is apparent: “we are dependent on each other in so many ways that we can no longer live in isolated communities and ignore what is happening outside those communities,”\(^\text{127}\)

and,

As individuals and nations are becoming increasingly interdependent we have no other choice than to develop what I call as sense of universal responsibility. Today, we are truly a global family. What happens in one part of the world may affect us all.\(^\text{128}\)

It is only appropriate that he concludes his lecture by quoting a prayer from Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*: “For as long as space endures/ And for as long as living beings remain/ Until then, may I, too, abide/ To dispel the misery of the world.”\(^\text{129}\) Here, as compassion, responsibility, and interconnectivity merge into a conceptualization of the self’s inherent potentiality, abstract ontology become lived strategy for the development of a “sense of universal responsibility,” a sense which, notably, could produce positive movement in the push towards a “Free” Tibet.

Both the creative power over self and the potential agency offered by these types of autobiographical performance stem, in part, from their social components and the creation of intersubjectivity between audience and performer. Through mnemonics of tendrel, Tibetan authors, artists, and teachers may seek to create a specific state of mind or frame of reference within which the audiences may approach the material. While this is in some ways a potentially soteriological move, via the creation of mind states appropriate for spiritual development in a Tibetan Buddhist system, it may serve to establish a feeling of connectivity with author on the part of the audience. By establishing the philosophical grounds for such a connection, then by sharing the intimate, the performer of the (apparently) personal may gain the trust and empathy of

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\(^\text{128}\) Ibid, 282.

\(^\text{129}\) Ibid, 289.
the audience, tools invaluable if the ultimate goal of the performance is to garner support or establish connections. Noy similarly claims that “intimacy” is established in performance of the personal, and adds that it is in this realm of intersubjectivity that change is possible for all included parties. Thus a complete analysis of Sonam’s poetry must include an examination of how she engages with and develops connection to her audience, as well as how such a relationship might serve the ultimate goals of the work.

This concept of audience-performer intersubjectivity is further complicated by consideration of the underlying Buddhist discourses of self and relationships, as discussed, in the case of Japan, by Thomas P. Kasulis. In theorizing discursive (as well as lived/experiential) models of selfhood and relation, Kasulis differentiates between models of interpersonal interaction that formulate the individuals as whole units (integers) which come into contact with each other only via some third mediating factor, and models of “internal relations” that formulate relationships and forms of selfhood as contextually and socially emergent and based in a presupposed overlap between individual beings. The latter, which he terms models of “intimacy,” may arise in the Tibetan context out of Tibetan Buddhist discourses of anatman, interdependency, and impermanence. “Intimacy” and “integrity,” however, may arise to varying degrees within any given context, society, or individual, and a systemic inquiry into the prevalence of each of these models within the context of Tibetan exile may not be necessary at this point. Instead, I suggest that Sonam’s poetry may be read to apply strategies of both models, regardless of the tendencies existent in her cultural background. In some cases, the relationship between audience and Sonam-as-protagonist is clearly mediated, and connections are developed

130 Noy further notes that this process can be exclusionary as well as inclusionary. Noy, “Performing Identity,” 133-5.
131 See: Thomas P. Kasulis, Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 27-49. Consider this in terms of presupposition of “I-You” vs. “We”
132 A larger study of Tibetan Buddhist interpersonal interrelations is necessary before the prevalence of “intimacy” v. “integrity” can be assessed.
by verbal confirmations of the potential of and need for such a relationship, or by expressions of shared values and goals. At other moments, it appears that the connectivity is presupposed and such mediation is unnecessary. If, as Kasulis states, “intimacy” is both affective and somatic, then the products of such a relationship should produce both emotional and embodied response. In my personal experience with Sonam’s work, this is certainly the case, and specific elements/strategies may be intended to provoke such a response (e.g. images of immolation victims). Thus, I may suggest, connectivity reiterating moments which are based in presupposed overlap or “we-ness” (e.g. shared humanity) may operate according to a model of “intimacy.”

Imagination and Stakes

“With our thoughts we make the world.”

The stakes involved in the success of the Free Tibet Movement’s goal, eventual return to an independent Tibet, are broader than the cessation of human rights violations or the recovery of a rooted home space. They are directly tied to religious, political, and historical discourse about the nature of Tibet as a Buddhist space, “apocalyptic” prophecy, and imaginings of the nature of exile. Noting these underlying discourses which evoke the high stakes in the eventual reclamation of Tibet and the continuation of religio-historical metanarratives could shed light upon the examinations of the investment and strategies of diasporic Tibetans working in the Free Tibet Movement, regardless of individual levels of self-conscious knowledge or consideration of such discourses. An examination of Sonam’s blog-as-autobiographical-manifesto, for example,

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133 A relationship both with the protagonist-self and with the Tibetan community, as we shall later see.
134 See: The Dhammapada; quote credited to Shakyamuni Buddha.
135 Investment trends could be instilled by any number of sources beyond the individual. For example, political and religious leaders, such as H.H. the Dalai Lama, commonly speak about the return to Tibet as an ultimate goal.
136 See: Conclusion
will reveal subtle uses of and positionings relative to these discourses occurring without explicit discussion of their existence. Implicit in her discussions of rangzen, for example, are elements of this religious teleology and continuation of the progresses of the imagined community of Tibet-in-Exile within the projected imagining of the future, Free Land of Snows.

**Imagining Tibet**

A man of conscience needs to face reality and history. Yet reality and history are very harsh. As a poet, I could feel at every instant in Tibet the tension between reality and history. In the end this tension shattered the ivory tower that sheltered me.¹³⁷

In the Tibetan imagination, historical, political, ontological, and religious meta-discourses merge and overlap, and conflicts therein tend to be resolved by a system of interior logic. Tibet’s Buddhist discourses are intricately tied to its nationalistic ones, for example, as “the Tibetan idea of the inextricable connection between religion and politics (chos srid zung 'grel) implies that these are not two opposing fields of activity which are meant to be separate.”¹³⁸

This overlap may be observed within the National Anthem in a prayer for expansion of the glory of “religious-secular rule.”¹³⁹ To restore Tibet as an independent nation is to continue in the “consciously articulated myth of historical progress…” of Tibet, as well as one of religious progress,¹⁴⁰ for Tibetans “saw Tibet as a kind of holy land, a pure realm of the highest

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¹³⁹ Sonam, “Tibetan National Anthem”
opportunity for the individual’s evolutionary fulfillment.” An anonymous poet expressed this as such in the 9th century:

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\begin{align*}
\text{This centre of heaven,} \\
\text{This core of the earth...} \\
\text{Where men are born as sages and heroes}\end{align*}
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 Integral to this understanding of Tibet as a sacred space of greater potentiality is another historical-ontological narrative, one of “a civilization… touched by Buddhas,” where numerous beings occupy the physical landscape and patron deities directly oversee the spiritual progress of individuals. Tibet is imagined to be a

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\ldots\text{land blessed by the presidency of Lokeshvara,}^{144}\text{ the messiah figure believed in by the vast majority of the people. It was the land of his sacred mantra, OM MANI PADME HUM! ‘Come! Jewel in the Lotus! In my heart!’ It was therefore a place of unprecedented opportunity for the individual intent on enlightenment…}^{145}
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Yet Chenrezig is not the only deity with stakes in the protection of Tibet. It is also a land overseen by the fierce protectress deity Palden Lhamo, who in her mutual defense of the Buddhism and administration of Tibet guards both the government and institutionalized Buddhism at Lhasa. While separation from the landscape and the circumstances of exile have complicated the relationship between Tibetans and their patron deities, I suggest that these beings have not lost their significance for Tibetan communities in exile. In a prayer for the propitiation of Palden Lhama, composed in 1973, H.H. the Dalai Lama’s asks: “How could you abandon your noble blessings?”

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141 Ibid, 9.
144 Tibetan: Chenrezig. The bodhisattva (ontologically elevated figure) of compassion; associated with HH Dalai Lama.
While it is possible to identify a variety of sociohistorical and doctrinal conditions that may be contributive to the overlap or areas of unity of historical, religious, ontological, and political metanarratives, I would like to highlight, here, the ways in which the beginnings of Buddhism in Tibet are conceptualized, and how these events came to carry significant weight in contemporary exile (complex) nostalgia. While much of this juxtaposition or merging of meta-narratives has clear corollaries in pre-Buddhist Tibet, the stories surrounding Guru Rinpoche and the beginnings of Tibetan Buddhism are indicative of the trends discussed herein. The establishment of Buddhism in Tibet is imagined as a process of “taming,” through which Tibetans were elevated from previously “uncultured” and “savage” states of being; with Buddhism came a type of pathologization of pre-Tibetan ways of being and knowing. Tibetan historiography, while far from non-existent before this point, was in many ways reconstituted as narratives of progression, development, and, eventually, teleology.

In Tibetan hagiographies and mythologies of Guru Rinpoche, the eighth-century Buddhist master accredited with the flourishing of Buddhism in Tibet, the historic figure becomes precious patron, deity, “tamer,” and shaper of history. In order for Buddhism to flourish in the Land of Snows, the past had to be relinquished and a story of progression imagined. Guru Rinpoche’s work of “taming” operated not only on the people, but also on the spaces of Tibet and the rich variety of beings therein. As local deities were tamed and brought to serve the purposes of the triumph of Buddhism, landscapes, communities, and lives were gradually reshaped. Within these newly-tamed landscapes and entrusted to the newly converted local deities, Guru Rinpoche is believed to have hidden precious treasure texts, containing specialized Dharmic teachings. These terma would be uncovered by prophesized individuals and, with the aid of the dakini,

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146 Padmasambhava
147 Tib: terma
148 Tib: tertön, treasure finders
would be translated and taught to an audience now sufficiently receptive and capable. The emphasis on timing of the unearthing of specific terma is integral to the construction of Guru Rinpoche as continuing influence on the history and religious progression of Tibet, for, in his wisdom, Guru Rinpoche foresaw coming moments in Tibetan history at which practitioners would not only have adequate spiritual development to be receptive and capable of utilizing these teachings, but would also, by virtue of the historical moment, have need of them. Thus the establishment and development of Buddhism in Tibet is imagined, in some ways, as a continuing legacy of a single, integral moment in Tibetan history.

The stakes of an eventual reclamation and return to Tibet, then, must be considered much greater than purely nationalistic ones. However, the ways in which Tibet has been imagined has broader influence on contemporary Tibetan poetics than can be seen in depiction of this imagined homeland or emphasis on the stakes of return. Gyatso suggests, for example, “that the radical overthrowing of past and the construction of a new cultural identity that occurred with the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet was the principle factor for the development and flourishing of autobiography.” With a reconceptualization of Tibetan existence, purpose, and movement in which the past stood both in contrast to and with continuous influence on the present and future, stories of identity reformation and progression with historical relevance began to permeate other spheres of Tibetan life. Emphasis on individual autonomy as associated with history, landscape, ontology, and soteriology, as seen in the autobiographical works of treasure finders, made possible a conceptualization of the individual’s connectivity within multiple frames and extensive networks of meaning-making.

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149 Gyatso, Apparitions, 151.
150 Ibid, 119.
Imagining the Future as History: 
Space, Time, and Apocalypse in the Tibetan Imagination

The ways in which sacrality, history, and space overlap in this imagining of Tibet, as well as the high stakes of the eventual reclamation of the region, are further complicated by a consideration of the high importance placed on the Kālacakra-tantra in exile and the mythological teleology of Shambala contained therein. While this canonical 11th century text addresses a range of topics, including relevant discussions of cosmology and time, what is of interest here is the apocalyptic prophecy of the coming “Great War” and the successive triumph by Buddhist forces centered in the buddhaverse/kingdom of Shambala. The “only genuinely apocalyptic text that has ever been accepted into any Buddhist canon,” the Kālacakra-tantra has had significant influence on Tibetan and convert imaginations, practice, and worldview. The relatively explicit rhetoric of the text in a tradition of self-secrecy and implicitness, as well as practices of open public initiation to the text in a tradition of restricted initiation and esotericism, lends this particular tantra an aura of relative accessibility and encouragement that is both grounded in and productive of the propagation of the apocalyptic Shambala mythology. The myth has been articulated as a form of “Buddhist Triumphalism,” and as such is a story of hope and progress for the many facing the circumstances of Tibetan persecution and exile.

152 Herein, I echo Nattier in the use of “apocalyptic” as referring to “a worldview that anticipates the radical overturning of the present religio-historical order as a result of action by forces operating on a cosmic (i.e. transhumant) level.” See: Jan Nattier, Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in Buddhist Prophecy of Decline (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1992), 60.
153 Ibid, 60.
154 Vesna A. Wallace, The Inner Kālacakratantra: A Buddhist Tantric View of the Individual (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 6. This apparent explicitness is paradoxical, as the content of the teachings are framed as both initially accessible and ultimately highly esoteric.
156 See Tenzin Gyatso (HH the 14th Dalai Lama) and Jeffrey Hopkins, The Kalachakra Tantra: For the Stage of Generation (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999), 65.
Shambala’s ontological status is somewhat elusive and ambiguous, for it may be discussed both/either as a physical space with metaphysical barriers of entry and as a buddhaverse within a Mount-Meru cosmology (and as such, simultaneously exists on the metacosmic level as a realm of existence and the microcosmic level as internalized potentiality). While I will not explicate the apocalyptic myth fully here, it should be mentioned that the myth of Shambala and the cosmology within the Kālacakra-tantra may be contributive to a particular Tibetan imaging of sacred geography. Even before the establishment of Buddhism on the Tibetan plateau, Tibetans have operated within landscapes imbued with sacrality and symbolic significance, with physical spaces doubling as the home of various and sometimes specific beings. Tantric conceptualizations of microcosmic reiterations of cosmological patterns may have served to foster this view of sacred landscapes, as well as to infuse geographic positionality with a degree of sacrality.\textsuperscript{157} Davidson suggests that the burgeoning significance of the Kālacakra-tantra in Tibet may be due, in part, to the text’s cosmological elements. As the first confirmation of “the locus of the true Dharma as being outside India”\textsuperscript{158} the Kālacakra-tantra’s cosmology suited existent Tibetan conceptualization of space as seen in “the indigenous of ‘hidden mystic valley’ (sbas yul) and the Terma tradition,” and “reinforced an emerging Tibetan idea that the Dharma could take refuge and hide in Tibet itself.”\textsuperscript{159} These elements of such a sacred geography have continuing presence in the exile world; not only do reiterations of the idea that Tibet operates as a space of great Dharmic importance continue to inform exile nostalgia and the stakes of return, the structure of sacred geography has been reconstituted in exile through symbolic marking of the landscape and

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\item[159] Ibid, 57.
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the organization of exile communities around the significant and sacred central spaces of Dharamsala.\textsuperscript{160}

The multiple ontological statuses of Shambala open space for multiple interpretations of the prophesied war.\textsuperscript{161} Suffice to say, the myth/prophecy indicates a future “war” between Buddhist and non-Buddhist others, which will successfully end a long period marked by both progressively worsening conditions of life and increasing need for Buddhist practice toward individual soteriological progression. With the imminent triumph of Buddhist forces, the world will enter a period of prosperity in terms of both the living conditions of beings and the propagation and practice of the Dharma. In a parallel manner to the mythology surrounding Guru Rinpoche, the concept and surrounding explications of Shambala and the “Great War” indicate a form of historic consciousness in which past-present-future relate in particular ways. Not to be mistaken with timelessness, this conceptualization of time is grounded in particular historic moments which are networked, through the providence of prophecy, rebirth, and continued presence of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, in ways beyond a strictly linear historical sense normally allows.\textsuperscript{162} Here, history and future are not only mutually influential, but merge and overlap. For example, depictions of “Tibet’s Sacred History,” which may be seen adorning walls of places of Buddhist practice, portray future figures such as Rudracakrin, leader of Shambala forces in the coming “Great War,” alongside the historic figures of Shakyamuni Buddha and lineage masters.\textsuperscript{163} In a similar vein, certain Tibetan and Mongolian\textsuperscript{164} spiritual masters meld past and present in their discussions and prayers for rebirth in Shambala, or by “furnishing the


\textsuperscript{161} E.g. as historic event, as metaphor for internal processes, as allegory for the historic context from which it emerged, etc.

\textsuperscript{162} See: Collins, “Deny,” 60, for a parallel discussion of Buddhist conceptualization of time.

\textsuperscript{163} Lopez, \textit{Prisoners}, 148.

\textsuperscript{164} Practicing a form of Tibetan Buddhism.
conditions” for conjecture of such. It is believed that the Panchen Lama, for example, will take rebirth in the form of the future leader of Shambala’s forces, Rudracakrin, a narrative which may be contributive to the degree of controversy over the disappearance of the 11th Panchen Lama recognized by spiritual leaders in exile, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, and the successive instatement of Gyaincain Norbu as Panchen by PRC officials.

Yet there is a sense of immediacy in this system, a now-ness that permeates even discussions of past and future. This is present in Robert Thurman’s discussions of the Kālacakra “Time-Machine,” which may be called such “in a sense of a vision of reality wherein time itself is the machine, a dimension in which beings live and evolve toward their perfect fulfillment in supreme bliss of enlightenment.” Immediacy is emergent in the Shambala myth through the pressing responsibility, borne of compassion, towards the fruition of utopia. The individual’s role in fulfilling the utopian promise is preparatory spiritual development; teachers’ to spread the Dharma; and the buddhas and bodhisattvas to linger in perpetual assistance, promoting the conditions for rebirth in Shambala, “cultivating and directing humanity towards the achievement of a golden age.” This shared compassionate responsibility of fostering widespread spiritual progression may be the fruit of the imaginings of a “positive collective, terrestrial history” within the Kālacakra-tantra, a “progressive theory of history,” which contradicts the baseline Buddhist historical worldview (shared with the Vedists) of the world being in a dark age of decay (kaliyuga), and it presents a variant of the Mahayanist, cosmically-progressive theory of how every buddha develops his world into a buddhaverse (buddhaksetra). The Kālacakra proclaims the positive

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169 Ibid, xii.
170 Ibid, xii.
171 Ibid, xii.
development of the planet’s societies under the aegis of Sakyamuni Buddha’s teaching, from samsara to nirvana, alienated to enlightened.\textsuperscript{172}

Inherent in the Shambala myth and the view of the Kālacakra-tantra as “powerful medicine”\textsuperscript{173} is an emphasis on necessity of utilization of the present as a time of progressive cultivation as preparation for the future and with continuous assistance from the past. Critics that perceive the Shambala myth as anachronistic\textsuperscript{174} may fail to account for the present relevancy of this progressive theory of history as well as the exile imaginings of an (at least semi-) utopian future.\textsuperscript{175}

\textbf{Imagining and Enacting Exile}

... reason, courage, determination, and the inextinguishable desire for freedom can ultimately win...This realization fills us Tibetans with hope that someday we too will once again be free.\textsuperscript{176}

Regardless of the ways in which loss of sacred space and the high stakes of return have been imagined, discourses of the underlying positive aspects of exile have and continue to circulate. According to a popular Tibetan saying, རེན་ངན་པ་གོགས་སུ་བསྒྱུར་བར་བེད་པ།, tragedy should be utilized as a source of “great strength.”\textsuperscript{177} In his autobiography, H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama celebrates the “freedom” available to Tibetans in exile that would not be possible in contemporary Tibet,\textsuperscript{178} and he has frequently reminded Tibetans of the need and causes for hope. In 1973, he composed several important prayers for regular recitation, including “Ma Med

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid, xxi.
\textsuperscript{173} Tenzin Gyatso (HH the 14\textsuperscript{th} Dalai Lama), “Foreword,” in \textit{The Practice of the Kalachakra}, Glenn H Mullin (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1991), 12.
\textsuperscript{175} See: Campbell “Shangri-La,” 90.
\textsuperscript{176} Gyatso (HHDL), “Nobel,” 285.
\textsuperscript{177} Peltsok, Chok Tenzin Monlam. Personal Correspondence, July 8 2013.
Sonam” (“Fortune Not Undermined”), which suggests: “The victory of the spiritual and political freedom of Tibet/ Is sure to emerge, [so you] should not feel discouragement.” The construction of exile, however, is not limited to reiterations of hope in the face of desolation; it is imagined as an opportunity for progression and spiritual development. Acclaimed poet-activist Tenzin Tsundue has illustrated this perspective:

As refugees we have undergone difficult times but… we do not cry and sit there, even in the worst of times, we do not pain and suffer, we move on and collect ourselves together and live on. Exile for me is celebration. Exile Tibetans have learnt so much, so much of changes have happened, we are ready for a new Tibet.\(^{180}\)

This element of hope and progression tends to be voiced in expectation and certainty in a return to Tibet. In an email interview, Sonam replied to my question of her Tibetan influences by quoting a poem by the 6\(^{th}\) Dalai Lama: “every Tibetan [that I] know of should say, ‘White crane! Lend me your wings I will not fly far From Lithang, I shall return.’”\(^{181}\)

In this construction of time in exile is occasion for progression which may operate with the benefit of, in Thurman’s view, “time as compassion” arising from the Kālacakra-tantra.\(^{182}\)

According to Thurman,

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\text{…as Kālacakra, the Buddha stays with beings moment-to-moment, helping them optimize their choices, meditations, and insights. His presence with them functions as an optimizing evolutionary process… with a view to accelerating...}
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\(^{180}\) Tenzin Tsundue, “Remarks at the Fifth Kritya International Poetry Festival, Mysore.” Published online by Friends of Tibet, Global. [http://friendsoftibetglobal.blogspot.com/2010/02/tenzin-tsundue-at-international-poetry.html](http://friendsoftibetglobal.blogspot.com/2010/02/tenzin-tsundue-at-international-poetry.html).

\(^{181}\) Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.

\(^{182}\) Thurman “Introductory Remarks,” xxii.
the evolution of the individual and the society of all beings toward freedom and fulfillment.  

Yet in this construction of “time as compassion,” compassion cannot be restricted to Tibetans. When combined with an understanding of Buddhist universalism, as discussed by Steven Collins, this compassion may also manifest as missionary activity via an understanding of Buddhism as universal medicine. According to Collins, there is a consistency in the recognition of certain truths (e.g. Suffering) though which may be read a universal applicability of Dharma to the lives of individuals. Yet this is nonetheless a “restricted universalism,” obstructed primarily by time; while the Dharma may be of universal use, it is most applicable for different individuals at different moments of their samsaric existence. It is also only the core of the Dharma which is formulated with universality, for the doctrine of Expedient Means validates manifold and context-appropriate forms of Buddhism throughout time and space. Collins suggests a connection, via this conceptualization of universality, “between the role of Buddhism as soteriology…and its political significance,” stating that:

> there has been in Buddhist cultures an elective affinity between the possibility of conceiving the universe and its inhabitants in terms of a single, overall religious ideology and the idea that political organization could and should be large-scale, ordered, and focused ultimately on one person or lineage.

Thus, with the impending Golden Age of Buddhism in the Shambala myth, the construction of time as (soteriologically) preparatory or developmental, and the spread of Tibetan Buddhist leaders throughout the world, we come to an inevitable discussion of imaginations of exile in terms of the spread of Tibetan Buddhism.

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183 Ibid, xxii.
185 གཤེགས།, Thab, Tib; Upaya, Skt.
186 Ibid, 63.
187 Ibid, 64.
Interestingly, the contemporary spread of Buddhism via Tibetan Buddhist leaders in exile has been imagined via an eighth-century Buddhist prediction by Guru Rinpoche:

When the iron bird flies,
And horses run on wheels,
The Tibetan people will be scattered like ants across the world
And the Dharma will come to the land of the Red Man.

In spite of the former relative obscurity of this text, it has gained prominence and recognition in the contemporary missionary activities.\textsuperscript{188} Today, it is read as an indicator that in this particular moment in history,\textsuperscript{189} the Tibetan diaspora will spread the Buddhist teachings to America.\textsuperscript{190} Guru Rinpoche’s continuous role in Tibetan life, via prophecy, hidden teachings, and ontological status, as well as the contemporary Tibetan circumstances, have granted this prophecy a good deal of weight in the Tibetan imaginings of exile. Such prophecy, however, is not necessarily formulated as paramount to a western conceptualization of fate or destiny, as there is a certain understanding of responsibility in prophecy. The Dharma, thus, will not spread of its own volition; it will be carried by skilled individuals and educators. While this prophecy is far from the sole motivation for Tibetan Buddhist missionary activity, it does appear to play a significant role in how it is imagined both by the missionaries and converts.

It is worthwhile to consider the role of Tibetan missionary activity not only for the impact on the Tibetan imaginings of exile and its role in the spread of Buddhism, but also for its utility in the development and support of the Free Tibet movement. Tibetans in exile have continuously depended upon the support of non-Tibetan individuals and “Western” humanitarian groups, and with the spread of Buddhism came the development of a network of spiritually-motivated patrons.

\textsuperscript{188} Consider the presence of this prophecy on the websites of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra and the Kagyu Monlam websites. See: Steve Roth,“His Holiness the 16\textsuperscript{th} Karmapa at Hopi Mesa: A Remembrance of the 16\textsuperscript{th} Gyalway Karmapa.” Karma Triyana Dharmachakra. Last accessed October 23, 2013. http://www.kagyu.org/ktd/densal/archives/hpi.php

\textsuperscript{189} Indicated by the first two lines, which are read as referring to planes and cars.

\textsuperscript{190} The fourth line is popularly read as referring to Native Americans, thus America.
belonging to a trans-national sangha. Largely, these individuals are conceptualized as “patrons” in the traditional Tibetan sense, as sbyin-bdags, in a way “consistent with the Tibetan cultural framework of mchodyon, which involves the exchange of spiritual guidance for material and political support.” Thus,

Tibetan culture provides a mechanism whereby forces and personnel from the ‘outside’ can be utilized...to economically and ideologically support the perceived continuation of Tibetan cultural patterns.

Unlike a “Western” conceptualization of charity, within the Tibetan patron-teacher relationship the recipient need not assume helpless victim status. They may, in fact, be empowered by the support granted to them, as the patron system involves honor for the recipient in the successful sharing of “a vehicle by which the [patron] may accumulate spiritual merit.”

Student-patrons are thus incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist community without the need for significant change in the structural organization of the exile community.

In addition to the building of international patron and sangha networks, Tibetans have incorporated “Western” supporters into the larger Tibetan exile community through the recognition of reincarnated lamas in “Western” bodies. In one prominent example, Tibetan Buddhist missionary and co-founder of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT), Lama Thubten Yeshe, is believed to have taken rebirth in 1985 as the Spanish Ösel Hita Torrez, whose parents had been prominent students of Lama Yeshe. Donald

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191 Buddhist community; དགེ་འདུན Ge-dun, Tib; Sangha Skt
194 Klieger asserts that this patterning existed pre-1959, in previous forms of Tibetan Buddhist missionary activity. See: Paul Christiaan Klieger, Tibetan Nationalism: the Role of Patronage in the Accomplishment of National Identity (Berkeley, CA: Folklore Institute, 1992).
195 See: Ibid.
196 Birth name. Dharma name: Tenzin Ösel Rinpoche.
Lopez interprets these missionary activities as a form of “spiritual colonialism,” operating as such:

Rather than taking control of a nation, Tibetan Buddhists are building an empire of individuals who, inhabited from birth by the spirit of a Tibetan saint, become, in effect, Tibetans, regardless of their ethnicity.198

Yet even those who are not recognized as great lamas reincarnate199 are made members of the community via discourses of reincarnation, accumulation of merit, and karma. In over two years working and practicing participant observation in an American Midwestern Tibetan Buddhist sangha, I have witnessed this set of discourses being repeated extensively within the American practitioners’ discussions of conversion practices.200 Receptiveness and success in Buddhist practice, as well as the establishment of a relationship with a personal (almost always Tibetan) guru, is most frequently discussed in terms of past-life karmic connections with Tibetan teachers, Tibetan communities, and Tibetan history, or in terms of past-life incarnation as Tibetan.201 Through these discourses, ideas of connectivity to Tibet, Tibetans, and specific teachers are given weight and a mysticism that seems, ultimately, to enhance the individual’s perceived relationship with the Tibetan community. Many Tibetan refugees, in my experience, foster this perceived connectivity through receptivity and personal friendships.

Another space for the incorporation of non-Tibetan individuals into the larger Tibetan Buddhist community is HH the Dalai Lama’s strategy of performing the Kālacakra initiation to large, disparate audiences. Unlike the majority of Buddhist initiation rituals, which function to

199 E.g. Tulkus
200 E.g.”coming to the Dharma” and taking Refuge
initiate a small group of personal students to a specific practice, the Kalachakra initiations have historically been bestowed upon the public in large gatherings.\textsuperscript{202} As Tibetans settled in exile and a transnational sangha flourished, so too did the size and locale of the initiations, attendance at some of which have been noted in excess of 250,000.\textsuperscript{203} As the teachings are paradoxically viewed as the “very pinnacle of Buddhist esotericism,”\textsuperscript{204} we must seek beyond the normal objective\textsuperscript{205} as the purpose for initiation. The unusually broad and large audiences of both traditional and contemporary Kālacakra initiations may be attributed to the secondary purposes of the initiation as blessing or “sowing the seeds” for rebirth in Shambala. In taking the initiation as a blessing, the practitioner or idle attendee may “establish a karmic relationship with the Kalachakra tantra,”\textsuperscript{206} on the smallest basis of faith. Even without understanding or intent to practice, one may receive the blessing of the initiation only by attending “with a positive attitude.”\textsuperscript{207} Mullin suggests that while “perhaps one in a hundred would even adopt a simple daily recitation practice,”\textsuperscript{208} the rest may wish to benefit from the ritual as “spiritual communion” with the initiating lama, opportunity “absorb a sprinkling of spiritual energy,” and to “generate the karmic seeds” for rebirth in Shambala, where spiritual progression will be hastened.\textsuperscript{209}

The Kālacakra initiations, I suggest, are formalized spaces for the building of the larger Tibetan transnational sangha, the broader Tibetan community, and the networks of international patrons. Beyond the community-building functions of such large scale public events, the Kālacakra initiation and its connections with the Shambala myth may manifest an imagining of

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\textsuperscript{202} “Initiations into the meditational practice of Kalachakra are the only Anuttara Yoga tantra initiations that are offered to the general public.” Geshe Lundub Sopa, Roger Jackson, and John Newman. The Wheel of Time: The Kalachakra in Context (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1985), 79. See also: Gyatso (HHDL), “Foreword,” 11.
\textsuperscript{203} Lopez’s Prisoners of Shangri-La.
\textsuperscript{204} Sopa, Wheel, 91.
\textsuperscript{205} Preparation for practice.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, xix.
\textsuperscript{207} Gyatso (HHDL), “Foreword,” 11.
\textsuperscript{208} See Mullin, Practice, 28.
\end{flushright}
shared community and purpose that might not otherwise exist. The association of the Kālacakra initiation-as-blessing with rebirth in Shambala “gives [the initiation] a special eschatological focus”\(^\text{210}\) as well as a shared moralistic goal. In the 1980s, association of the Kālacakra initiations with human rights politics grew, arising from HH the Dalai Lama’s peace efforts and the relabeling of the initiation as the “Kalachakra for World Peace.”\(^\text{211}\) This framing may be contributive to the popularity of the events, but may also be read as part of a strategy, on the part of HH the Dalai Lama, “that serves Buddhist universalism, the freedom of Tibet, and the utopian aspirations of Tibetophiles around the world.”\(^\text{212}\)

Any boundary between the religious facet of Tibetan patronage and the political is tenuous and often porous. American and European converts largely tend to mutually support both the religious activities of their teachers and the (sometimes implicit) political goals of a return to a “Free” Tibet.\(^\text{213}\) With the framing of the Kālacakra initiation as a movement for “World Peace,” as well as the implications of apocalypse and utopia, the concepts of “a ‘Free Tibet’ as a ‘Zone of Peace’ and the legendary land of Shambhala were increasingly associated in the imagination of its American initiates.”\(^\text{214}\) It appears that bolstering international political support and participation was achieved most efficiently through missionary activity,\(^\text{215}\) which operated as a means to open the minds of potential patrons to specific ways of imagining the political and spiritual circumstances surrounding Tibetan exile, as well as to create networks of communities with stakes in the eventual reclamation of Tibet. Thus when examining the Tibetan imaginings of exile, we must consider not only the ways in which new and traditional discourses are applied by

\(^{210}\) Sopa, *Wheel*, 91.
\(^{212}\) Lopez, *Prisoners*, 207.
\(^{213}\) See: Tuttle, “Uniting.”
\(^{214}\) Harrington, “Exorcising,” 17.
Tibetans to circumstance, but the ways in which the circumstance is imagined and engaged by the broader network of patrons and communities.

The discursive construction of imagined community of the future “Free” Tibet (to arise from the current Tibet-in-Exile community) complicates Benedict Anderson’s idea of nation as imagined community in the question of who is included in the (discursive rather than lived) “deep, horizontal comradeship.”216 Anderson describes the imagined community as necessarily limited and based in discourses of “fraternity,” but to what extent is this true for the imagined Tibet-in-Exile-to-Become-Free community? While arguments may be made via the examination of “real world” power networks and lived experiences, I argue that if we examine this Tibetan imagined community at the discursive/ideological level, as Anderson suggests, then a delineation of the boundaries of this shared (or potential) comradeship is not necessarily an integral part of the way the community is imagined. At the discursive level, this imagined community is unbounded by Tibetan Buddhist discourses of interconnectivity and innate “goodness”217 of all sentient beings, and by the Free Tibet political discourses that establish membership as extended to all willing to bear witness and, perhaps, act upon that which is seen. If we follow the Buddhist discourses about “ignorance,” we may theorize membership in the community as innate to all sentient beings; the problem is one of the perception of reality, not of exclusionary membership. Since we are all capable of gaining the clarity to perceive the world as it is (through the Dharma), which should necessitate action, then we all are innately members of the Free Tibet community. As Sonam says: “if only you could listen.”218

217 Consider: “Buddha nature” (Parallel to Tathagatagarbha, Skt in conversionary discourse).
218 Sonam, “March.”
The only thing preventing our realization of membership within the imagined Free Tibet community is the obscuration of our perceptions; perceiving awakens innate compassion that instigates action, thus we are all, innately, harboring the potential required to be part of this community. This conceptualization of community is evidenced in the various ways in which contemporary Tibetans form communal connections to non-Tibetans; through discourses of interconnectedness and karmic connections, missionary activities, integration of international patrons into the existent social system, and through the receptiveness and relationship-building practices which occur between Tibetans and non-Tibetans on the individual level. For this reason, as well as the others discussed here, the Tibetan imaginings of “Tibet” is not limited to discourses of nationalism, ethnicity, or groupedness in such a way that lends itself to Anderson’s analytical framework and “imagined community.” When combined with the framing of Tibetan circumstance in terms of an international “human rights” movement and a transnational sangha, it may be more useful to conceptualize the Tibetan diaspora in Appadurai’s “imagination as a social practice,” as agential practice in a landscape of overlap, disjuncture, and flow, extending beyond the local, Nationalistic, and reductive self/other binary.

*Imagining Rangzen*

Responsibility lies not only with the leaders of our countries or with those who have been appointed or elected to do a particular job. Peace, for example, starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace, we can be at peace with those around us. When our community is in a state of peace, it can share that peace with neighboring communities and so on…

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While there may be common metadiscursive threads about the stakes of Tibet’s future, there are (at least) two distinct understandings of how that future can be made manifest. In his “Five-Point Peace Plan,” as well as his public announcements, HH the Dalai Lama has consistently pushed for a peaceful, “Middle Way Approach” (MWA) to Tibetan autonomy. Built upon and utilizing the language of ahimsa, this strategy for reintegration and self-sufficiency relies, in many ways, upon the active participation of the PRC. In this formula, those responsible for the exile circumstances are suffering from the universal affliction of Ignorance, and are thus pitiably and worthy of empathy. HHDL nods to such in his “Prayer of the Word of Truth:”

Ah! Those cruel people defeat themselves as well as others
Driven to insane behavior by the devil of addictive passions;
Have mercy and restore their decent insight of right and wrong,
Use love and kindness to reunite them in glory of human friendship!  

Thus the mandates of undifferentiated compassion in some ways rule out the potential of militaristic or violent reclamation of Tibet. While the Five-Point Peace Plan cannot be called purely idealistic, for it contains a number of realistic strategies for reintegration, it does rely heavily on the belief in the universal inherent potential for goodness, compassion, and insight.

In the opening quote of this section, it becomes apparent that the Middle-Way Approach to peace involves the fostering and development of these inherent qualities, which, according to this formula, can breed the compassionate mindset necessary for PRC governmental acceptance and promotion of an independent Tibet.

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221 While there are many interpretations and utilizations of the term, it has been taken up in this popular utilization in a Gandhian sense, meaning a non-violent approach to political change.

222 ཐེ་ཤིང་པ། Ma ri’ pa, Tib; Avidya, Skt.


224 “Buddha nature,” which is frequently discussed in conversationary or everyday discourse as parallel to Tathagatagarbha (Skt). Tathagatagarbha, however, is not a perfect parallel, and has many interpretations within the Tibetan philosophical systems. See: Anne Burchardi, “Towards an Understanding of Tathagatagarbha Interpretation in Tibet with Special Reference to the Ratnagotravibhaga,” in Religion and Secular Culture in Tibet: Tibetan Studies II, Ed. Henk Blezer, (Brill: IIAS, 2000).
Perhaps unsurprisingly, this approach has received push-back from a New Generation of Tibetans.\textsuperscript{225} One prominent example of this is the criticism of HHDL’s Middle Way Approach (MWA) offered by Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile member Karma Choepel. In this much discussed controversy, Choepel gestured toward a much wider dissident body that was now calling for a more active and engaged approach toward the establishment of an autonomous, “Free” Tibet.\textsuperscript{226} Beyond official forums, the call for a more active approach to Tibetan political circumstances resonates widely in youth music, poetry, and everyday discourse. Popular Tibetan hip-hop group Green Dragon utilize lyrics such as, “The new generation has a resource called youth…The new generation has a temptation called freedom,” while another popular group claims to be “the messengers of the new era” and asks Tibetans to remember their common bond and “unite, unite.”\textsuperscript{227} Popular Tibetan blogger and poet Woeser (Öser), working within the PRC, writes:

My spine feels the oppression of a rock-like silhouette of the vast yet suffering Tibet. Between ‘glory’ and ‘helpless,’ I can only choose one of them, it’s an ‘either-or’ case!\textsuperscript{228}

As evidenced by these examples, some of the strongest proponents of active rejection of Chinese rule come from Tibetans within the PRC and the TAR itself. Ritu Sarin and Tenzin Sonam’s popular film \textit{The Sun Behind the Clouds} documents the tensions between Tibetan political strategies, noting the large-scale uprisings within the TAR that occurred in the 2008 “Tibetan

\textsuperscript{225} Not necessarily coinciding with a biological generation, as there has been push-back from individuals and organizations of multiple age groups. However, it appears that the majority of the proponents of active engagement in the movement for a “Free Tibet” are currently young adults (~ ages 17-35) and second- or third-generation refugees. For the sake of brevity here, I shall henceforth refer to this generation as the New Generation (although to my knowledge, no such formalized category is popularly defined). Popular critiques of the MWA are based not on the philosophical grounding of the approach, but on the perceptions of its relative ineffectiveness.


\textsuperscript{228} Dechen, “An Eye.”
Unrest.” The riots arising from the annual “Tibetan Uprising Day,” as well as the hundreds of Tibetan self-immolations performed in protest of occupation, confirm an already existent engagement with a more vigorous activism than that proposed in the MWA. Despite the relative lack of instigation of such methods in exile, the underlying sentiment and drive resonates throughout Tibetan communities worldwide. Refugee poets such as Sonam, for example, display respectful, even reverent, rejection of HHDL’s strategies for peace and commitment to engaged activism.

Poetry may have the power to, at least partially, satisfy both sides. As non-violent action, it may satisfy the MWA’s discourses of ahimsa, yet may also (and, today, often does) contain content supporting and motivating active rebellion. The activist or political function of poetry goes beyond motivation and support, however, in a consideration of the political role of visibility. Establishing international visibility of Tibetan circumstances and voices has long been a political strategy of Tibetans in exile. Popular Tibetan activist-poet Woeser has described her responsibilities as activist in such a way:

I finally see clear the direction of my writing thereafter, which is to be a witness, to see, to discover, to reveal, and to spread the secret — the shocking, touching yet impersonal secret. Let me also tell stories. Let me use the most commonly seen language — a language that can yet renew definitions, purify and even make new discoveries — to tell stories: the story of Tibet.

Tibetan poet-activists have fulfilled this role in a number of ways; while strategies vary, however, trends emerge, as indicated by a brief survey of popular Tibetan poets. For Woeser, activism is achieved through the documentation of events with the TAR and publication of reports and

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230 For further consideration, see Close Readings I and II.

231 Pemba, “An Eye.”
poems in “Chinese Language.” Tenzin Tsudue documented his illegal travel into the TAR and successive three-month imprisonment in several formats, including poetry. Lhasa Tsering has described his own work as “more propaganda than poetry,” and Kunsang Dolma opens the political field to a discussion of gender, patriarchy, and women’s rights in exile and the PRC/TAR. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa promotes visibility through publication of works exploring her mother’s stories and her own experiences. And others, like the “radical” U.S.-based Jamyang Norbu, critique “Western” romanticizations of Tibet and their penetration of the Tibetan imagination. What is shared by each, however, is visibility-as-activism, a strategy that permeates contemporary Tibetan poetry.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{232}}\text{According to her. Font: Simplified Han.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{233}}\text{Mark Abramson, “Mountains, Monks, and Mandalas: ‘Kundun’ and ‘Seven Years in Tibet,’” }\textit{Cineaste}\text{ 23.3 (Summer 1998): 8-12.}\]
Part II: Close Readings

With the preceding consideration of contexts and analytical considerations, I hope to begin to establish a framework with relevance to the broader field of contemporary Tibetan poetry, autobiographic and otherwise. As we shall see in the successive close readings, attempt at interpretation without such a framework may fall short of not only recognizing patterns, discourses, and norms, but noting agential maneuvering relative to, occupation within, and subtle manipulation of them. The spaces of agency in Sonam’s work must be understood in reference to these wider frames of influence, for they do not exist independently. A wider survey of contemporary Tibetan poetics suggests that these frames have much broader analytical potentiality than in an examination of Sonam’s work alone, yet it will be in the act of delving deeply into this single poet’s online body of work that spaces of agency emerge.

Close Reading 1: Sufferings

“Red and yellow burning aloud, The Sufferings immeasurable”

These wretched beings are ceaselessly tortured by the suffering of misery, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering of creation. I have seen all beings, my mothers, wretched, engulfed in the ocean of the life cycle. If I do not save them, who will?

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234 Sonam, “March.”
235 In: Thurman, *Essential*, 137.
...if my poem[s] help even a single person in this entire world to think about humanity, then my job is done.\textsuperscript{236}

A primary theme of Sonam’s posts and poetry is the depiction of human suffering, particularly the suffering of Tibetans in exile and the PRC/TAR. When asked what goals she had for her audience’s experience with her poetry, Sonam informed me that “as a Tibetan, it is my utmost responsibility to [make] rest of the world [aware of] the situation in Tibet,”\textsuperscript{237} and that, in her poetry, she wanted to spread awareness “that Tibetans in Tibet are suffering, and because we all are same as human beings, we should relate to each other's sufferings more than happiness.”\textsuperscript{238}

The intended function of her poetry as a practice of building visibility is far from unique to Tibetan circumstances, yet she frames the “sufferings” depicted in a particular way and according to her Tibetan Buddhist background. In the poem “March,” we see a direct reference to the “Sufferings,” a Buddhist conceptualization of the unsatisfactoriness of samsaric existence\textsuperscript{239} in which all forms of human suffering may be understood in terms of three main categories:\textsuperscript{240} the “suffering of misery,” the direct, primarily physical experience of pain; the “suffering of change,” a suffering produced by loss or deprivation to objects (material, abstract, sentient) of attachment; and the ultimate suffering, the “all-pervasive suffering of creation,” which is caused by the nature of sentient existence within the system of cyclical (samsaric) life. In describing the living and exile circumstances of Tibetans, Sonam engages the first two sufferings throughout her work,\textsuperscript{241} frequently shifting between depictions of physical pain and loss or deprivation. As we shall see

\textsuperscript{236} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
\textsuperscript{237} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
\textsuperscript{238} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
\textsuperscript{239} སྡུག་བསྔལ།, duk ngal, Tib, Dukkha, pali.
\textsuperscript{240} Suffering has been categorized in multiple ways in the Buddhist canon and successive teachings. In a parallel (and compatible) model, eight forms of suffering are outlined.
\textsuperscript{241} The third form may also be found in her poems, but remains largely implicit.
later, she not only presents these forms of suffering, but complicates them via the use of Tibetan and Buddhist discourses.

Sonam often directly offers images of Tibetan “suffering of misery” in blunt, and often difficult, ways. In “Uninvited,” guests without invitation “kicked” and “slapped” the refugees as they fled, “Genocide, murder, and rape… speeding the run.”242 The first-person prisoner from “Unknown Crime,” faces torture, including a broken wrist, being forced to eat “s***” [sic], while her captors laugh and “enjoyed the misery.” Sonam’s willingness to directly offer her audience images of physical suffering is evident in her inclusion of images of self-immolation that accompany news stories. In one post, we see TAR protester Jamphel Yeshe aflame, his face contorted in pain, his mouth open in what is presumably a scream, as he runs through a crowd of protesters and Tibetan flags, trailing smoke in his wake. Images such as this have become relatively common within news and social media presented today by many members of the diaspora, as well as other supporters of the Free Tibet Movement.243 They appear to mark a fairly recent shift in the campaigns of the New Generation, one in which suffering and human rights violations are brought to public attention through shocking and disarming imagery or reports.

Sonam’s presentation of physical suffering is not without accompanying reaction, such as that found in the second stanza of “March:”

I am fearless
You can gun down at me
My body, you could destroy
Touch my soul, you dare

This thought is echoed in the final lines of her “Unknown Crime:” “You can do anything with my body; Touch my soul, you dare.” Here, Sonam appears to be continuing with her reiteration of the “suffering of misery,” a form of (bodily) suffering that is fundamentally base and able to be

242 Sonam, “Lost Pair.”
243 These types of difficult images, in my experience, are fairly common within the social media of New Generation Tibetan refugees.
endured and transcended toward a greater goal. She offers the audience an image of Tibetan suffering that includes an aspect of acceptance of pain that aids in the Movement and perseverance toward the telos of a “Free Tibet.” This appears to be a primary theme of a larger discourse among members of the Tibetan Freedom Movement, one echoed in the Tibetan diaspora authorities entitling of self-immolators as “Martyr.”

Sonam, following the Buddhist discourse from which this form of the conceptualization of suffering stems, offers her readers the opportunity to confront the harsh realities of Tibetan suffering and thus to develop responses to them. In a notably Buddhist shift, she asks her audiences to develop compassion by overcoming ignorance and aversion, to face that which they would prefer not to confront directly, thus dispelling ignorance. This is the theme of “March,” in which she asks the second person to serve as a witness:

Fire cries
If only you could listen…
Six million Tibetans burning

Rather than employ a “bee to flower” pedagogical tactic, which encourages the audience to instigate their own education of the circumstance and Movement, Sonam asks her reader to come with her, acting like the servant to Shakyamuni Buddha, Chandaka, who guided his young master through a tour of innate and inevitable human suffering. Chandaka’s guidance, as well as the bleak suffering seen during their trips, would become the foundation and ultimate cause of the Buddha’s quest for enlightenment: the need to end the suffering of those around him. If, as the story teaches, witness to suffering will beget compassion and, perhaps, action upon that compassion, then Sonam’s call to her audience to bear witness may also be understood to be a

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244 Preceding the victim’s name; e.g. Martyr Jamphel Yeshi.
245 The most common strategy of contemporary Tibetan missionaries
call to action. As Asanga says in Geshe Wangyal’s *Door of Liberation*: “If I do not save them, who will?”

Eating inside, the invisible pain

The second form of suffering, the “Suffering of Change,” is addressed in Sonam’s poetry in a different manner; it is further humanized by the recurrence of the poetry’s most common character, an old woman. In some of the poems, the woman is instead Sonam’s mother, and the consistent commonalities between the old woman and mother suggest that the two are in fact representations of the same person or demographic. This possibility is supported by the personal nature of the old woman’s experience, as well as the specificity of the accounts, both of which suggest some basis in a lived connection with this woman. The old woman experiences the suffering of loss in quiet, private ways:

In fear of losing identity root  
Everything left behind, inside hollow  
You shrink day by day, grief planted gray hair  
Eating inside, the invisible pain

With the old woman, however, Sonam moves beyond the presentation of suffering and into a discussion of hope and victim status. It is a topic that will later take on an element of the optimistic and projection into the future, but for the old woman, hope is a futile projection in the past, a source of suffering. The woman’s hope is an inactive one, one of prayer and quiet contemplation. She prays every day,

246 Thurman, *Essential*, 137.  
247 Sonam, “Lost Pair.”  
248 Presumably, the parental generation of the New Generation.  
249 Sonam, “Lost Pair.”
In the hope of returning back to Tibet
Suitcase packed
Every time at the end of the day.\textsuperscript{250}

Similarly, in a direct discussion of her mother, Sonam outlines their similarities before locating the difference between them as in the space of that quiet hope:

she prays more, i mean, like every day, but in the hope of returning back Home? her real home whom she left behind 40 years ago. she buried all her memories behind the Himalayas and sometimes, she curse the wind that blows from the mountain\textsuperscript{251}

\textbf{“I am fearless”}\textsuperscript{252}

Sonam describes this quiet hope as both a form and a source of suffering, but does not leave her audience without optimistic alternative. Her own hope is an active one, one of struggle and battle. Her outcry: “Seeds of Rangzen (Freedom) sown; Forward we will march.”\textsuperscript{253} She presents the New Generation as a unified, “burning,” force, prepared to fight and suffer for their homeland. Here, Sonam’s work reveals a marked discursive difference between New and previous generations, between HHDL’s Middle-Way Approach and the successive push-back of the New Generation. Sonam asks her fellow Tibetans and audience not to merely serve as or observe the face of suffering, but to take an active stance against the occupation of Tibet. This discourse is reflected in the news article reposted by Sonam, in which Dhondup Lhadar, Vice President of the Tibetan Youth Congress, is quoted:

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{250} Sonam, “Uninvited.”
\bibitem{251} Sonam, “Uninvited.”
\bibitem{252} Sonam, “March.”
\bibitem{253} Sonam, “March.”
\end{thebibliography}
Pawo Jamphel Yeshi’s self-immolation marks a milestone in our freedom struggle where Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet stand ever united in our fights against the Chinese occupying forces.\textsuperscript{254}

While there is insufficient evidence to suggest that this is an outcry for war, the language employed by Sonam, her peers, and news sources such as phayul.com, present a discursive turn in the Tibetan Freedom Movement toward a strong, united, and highly active front. This is remarkably different than the strategies of previous generations, whose goals did not far exceed those of visibility, hope, and peaceful negotiation. We may consider this turn a site of refusal of the “absolute victim status,” such as noted by Nellie Y. McKay in her examination of African American autobiographical narrative.\textsuperscript{255} Arising circumstantially, turning away from the absolute victim status allows for the empowerment that we see in Sonam’s messages of hope.

In her use of this language, Sonam not only presents such hope and front, but also offers her readers a path for response, warning them away from quiet sadness and toward participation in the Movement. Her inclusion of the Tibetan National Anthem indicates that the language of struggle and battle utilized by the Movement is on which has long been used to describe the Buddhist struggle toward spiritual liberation, as seen in the anthem’s final verse:

\begin{quote}
In the battle against dark negative forces
may the auspicious sunshine of the teachings and beings of
Tibet and the brilliance of a myriad radiant prosperities
be ever triumphant.\textsuperscript{256}
\end{quote}

Here again we see that Sonam, perhaps as part of a larger discursive shift, utilizes and manipulates the discourses of her predecessors as a means to support her cause and reach her audience.

\textsuperscript{255} Mckay, “The Narrative Self,” 100.
\textsuperscript{256} Sonam, “Tibetan National Anthem.”
The use of Tibetan discourses may be especially effective when reaching out to fellow Tibetans, but her posts are not without meaning in her address to her larger audience. One method though which this is achieved is in her consistent return to term or concept of “Human Rights.” In some places, she merely evokes the concept with discussions of genocide, destruction, murder, rape, wrongful imprisonment, and torture. In “Lost Pair” and “Unemployed,” she directly uses the term. Her most concise poem, “Unemployed,” simply states: “My name is Human Right. I am currently unemployed.” Her use of the term “unemployed” might be especially meaningful to some of her American audiences, for whom the term has contemporary connotations of fear, disparity, and a need for rectification. Thus on several grounds, Sonam is reaching out to her audience for their active support of the Movement, and using powerful discourses to do so.

“If only you could listen”

Sonam’s direct engagement of the audience, often through use of second person pronouns, is frequently entangled with what appears to be a direct engagement of the antagonist, presumably PRC occupying forces or government. In some of the poems, in fact, it is difficult to tell whether she is addressing audience or antagonist, such as in her plea: “If only you could listen.” In others, the tone is accusatory: “You took the food; And Left the plates behind,” or “you made me stand naked in the cold ruthless night.” Many times in Sonam’s poetry, the antagonist takes the form of the wind or breath, presumably stemming from the

259 The nature of these shifts as metacommunicative moments will be discussed later.
260 Sonam, “March.”
261 Sonam, “Unknown Crime.”
Tibetan word བླུང་ (lung), which also means anger,\textsuperscript{263} and comes in the poems in the form of a cold, inhuman, and relentless force. As with many of Sonam’s other themes, however, this is not one-dimensional accusation, but a something playing into larger Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and discourses. As we see in “Unknown crime,”

\begin{quote}
All these years in prison, I
Have memorized your face, and gestures.
I saw you as my inmate. I, behind bars, you
Behind invisible bars of ignorance.
\end{quote}

Ignorance, the primary of the three sources of suffering in canonical the Buddhist model, may be said to be the core problem to be solved by Buddhist practice. In Mahayana Buddhism, to which Tibetan Buddhism belongs, the problem is not only to transcend one’s own ignorance, but to develop the compassion and means to help others to overcome their own struggles with ignorance. An imperfect translation, “ignorance” in the Buddhist model implies a larger failure to see reality as it truly is, to recognize that which is ultimately important, including the cessation of suffering for all sentient beings. The antagonist here, in a truly Buddhist fashion, becomes the pitiable, a captive, someone to be helped. This intricate conceptualization of the antagonist, be it the PRC’s occupying force or otherwise, is repeated throughout contemporary Tibetan discourses and further complicates the call to action. In framing the antagonist in such conceptual terms, Sonam is creating an ultimate antagonist that is composed of Ignorance and wrong action, not any specific human beings or groups. Rather than attempt to evoke one-sided compassion from her readers, she asks them to develop larger compassion and to realize that the only true enemy is Ignorance.

Thus it appears that one of Sonam’s primary means to connect to her audience and develop support for her cause is through asking them to develop a generalized compassion

\textsuperscript{263} Anger is a common Tibetan interpretation of the PRC motivations for the invasion/occupation
through the dissolution of Ignorance. While display of human suffering may be an effective tool for this, Sonam’s display of her own compassion offers a subtly powerful exemplar for her readers. In Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy, compassion is a skill that must be exercised and developed, and each ensuing act of compassion leaves the actor with greater potential for more. Thus it becomes possible to once again interpret Sonam’s rhetoric in terms of larger Buddhist discourses and pedagogical tools; if we are to interpret her poetry as public acts of “sowing the seeds of compassion,” then it becomes possible to view her larger body of work as an effort toward the greater goal of developing audience stakes in the Tibetan Freedom Movement (and all forms of suffering). In this way, Sonam’s work continues to echo the peace-driven activities of HH the Dalai Lama’s MWA.

रङ्ग्रेष (Rangzen)

When dissected into its component syllables, रङ्ग्रेष, the word Sonam and much of the New Generation uses to describe Tibet’s future freedom, is especially appropriate to the themes of Sonam’s work. रङ्ग (rang), meaning selfhood, and रेश (zen, or tsayn), indicating might, strength, or force, combine to signify “freedom.” As with Sonam’s work, the word रङ्ग्रेष offers us a symbolic crossroads into selfhood, agency, and freedom. Rejecting her mother’s (and by symbolic association, the older generation’s) comparatively inactive approach to hope for freedom, she calls upon her audience to join her in an engaged unity. The selfhood she presents in these poems is intricately tied to this active push toward freedom, as seen when she tells her audience, “I am fearless.”264 The self she offers is the face of not only the decades of Tibetan suffering, with which she associates herself via first person accounts of pain, but also the face of the Movement itself. Sonam directly engages Tibetan heritage and Buddhism, using Tibetan

264 Sonam, “March.”
language, common Tibetan discourses, the National Anthem, and statements of solidarity to connect herself to her “Tibetanness” and to the larger Tibetan community. She not only offers Tibetan Buddhist thought in her poems, but appears to directly employ and manipulate it in meaningful ways, both creating a self that is Buddhist and connecting self and cause to the audience through specific Buddhist discourses and pedagogical tools. It is this selfhood that allows the audience to potentially make the move from witness to action, from suffering to compassion. Here again, public performance of selfhood provides a key to the subtle agency used toward garnering support for the Movement.
Close Reading II: Negotiating the Unformulated

In her *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*, Janet Gyatso contemplates Tibetan autobiography as a field of study, closely examining the autobiographical work of Eighth-Century tertön Jigme Lingpa, while at the same time offering a wider analytical framework through which we may consider traditional Tibetan autobiographical form, format, content, tropes, themes, and purposes. I argue that by contextualizing Sonam’s poetry in Tibetan traditions of autobiography, as discussed in Gyatso’s *Apparitions*, we may better elucidate how the poet engages with shared ideological, doctrinal, metaphysical, ontological, teleological, historical, and metadiscursive realities and trends presently relevant to the Tibetan refugee population. In such a contextualization, patterns of dialogical normativity, common tropes and themes, and Tibetan/Buddhist metadiscourses can be highlighted as operating in both traditional and emergent capacities. Through a close examination of Sonam’s work, I aim to not only outline emergent, traditional, and revised ideological facets commonly shared politically active New Generation Tibetan refugees, but also to argue that the agency functioning behind the negotiation and utilization of these meaning-making frameworks may be understood to operate toward politico-teleological goals. By comparing Sonam’s contemporary utilization and manipulation of traditional forms, tropes, themes, pedagogical strategies, and autobiographical shifts to established forms of Tibetan autobiographical work, we may also find a parallel set of purposes and methods.
Complex Normativity

In comparatively examining Sonam’s work alongside “established” traditional forms of expression, we cannot fall into the rabbit hole of determinism. While I suggest, to a certain degree, some formulaic and ideological influence, the focus is ultimately on the author’s agency in deciding how these forms are employed and negotiated. As Gyatso suggests:

[Autobiography] is especially valuable for what it divulges of an individual’s negotiation, via the medium of a text, of the discrepancies between normative ideology, social expectation, and personal desire.266

Luckily, built into the traditions of Tibetan autobiography is “a distinctively Buddhist skepticism about the norms,” a skepticism which is in itself built into these very norms being inhabited and negotiated by authors.267 This skepticism manifests, in part, from an emphasis on individual autonomy in the soteriological process, a belief in the ultimate inadequacy of language and conventional views of reality, and the expressed need to break through blind faith toward an experiential realization of truth and reality.268 Built into Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy and practice are tools for the cultivation of “a heightened ability to think critically, to doubt everything in a systematic way, in order to break through prejudice and to experience reality nakedly as it is.”269

The ambiguity of the ways in which an individual may negotiate the normative is also noted by Faure in his considerations of Vinaya law and Buddhist monastic life; these rules, according to Faure, exist not merely for forbiddance or prevention, but are made pedagogical and soteriological by the act of transgression.270 Through transgression, one may gain experiential knowledge of the ultimate “dissatisfactoriness” of samsaric existence, thus returning to the

265 According to Sonam: “Buddhism has a very big influence on my and on my poems because it is a part of me, and as a poet, i try to stay true to my beliefs” Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
266 Gyetso, Apparitions, xi.
267 Ibid, 113.
268 Consider: Thurman, Essential, 12.
269 Ibid, 43.
pursuit of Enlightenment with renewed motivation and greater wisdom. For Faure, interdiction produces both desire and transgression and thus may be used to create the “transgressive potential of practice,” something which must be maintained in order for there to be a possibility of accessing the sacred via transgression. In short, Faure’s work is meaningful for us, here, in that it sets up the potentiality of soteriological progression via transgression, thus reiterating complexity and ambiguity in the normativities we shall discuss.

Yet this formula is not one of institutionalized complete rejection of the norms, for, as Gyatso observes in Jigme Lingpa’s work, the author remains “fully beholden to tradition, hierarchy, and recurring role models, never trying to reject altogether the truth or value of his heritage, as has become the mark of the modern autobiographer.”

Thus Givet notes a “normative gloss,” patterns of thematized normativities, and an understanding of his life framed with normative attitudes. The ambiguous stance Jigme Lingpa takes in relation to normativity v. autonomy is just one of many ambiguities, paradoxes, and tensions which emerge in Tibetan autobiographical discourse. The task of the Tibetan autobiographer becomes one of operating in relation to those norms while at the same time highlighting their functional nature and ultimate “unformulatedness.” The unformulated nature of ultimate reality, via the Great Perfection ontology, is manifested as un/decidability in writing; “a provisional and unstable unity [that] would precisely mirror the normative Buddhist views of the anatman,” and “makes

271 Ibid, 42-43.
272 Although, I suggest, this is not necessarily true for the modern Tibetan autobiographer. See Givet, Apparitions, 270.
273 See Ibid, 111, 163, and 183.
274 Ibid, 183. E.g. “renunciation of worldly existence; compassion for deluded sentient beings and a desire to devote himself to teaching them; belief in the principle of reincarnation and the possibility of remembering past lives; conviction that emotional obscurations and karma must be purified through rigorous meditative and ritual practice; and an obsession with the fact that life span and time of death are uncertain.”
275 Vajra ground/Great Perfection ontology
276 Ibid, 268.
possible, for an empty self, an intensely personal autobiography.” The ambiguity, paradox, and tensions within Tibetan autobiographical writing may thus be considered mnemonic and pedagogic:

What autobiographical writing offers as a Buddhist practice is heterogeneity and reach of its subject matter. Rather than from the austere, controlled domain of doctrine, autobiography extrapolates a lesson like unformulatedness from the (inevitable) tensions already being negotiated in living. The Buddhist practitioner is supposed to recognize every episode of life… as grounded in the unformulated.

Thus, we may theorize the use and transgression of ideologically and formulaically normative patterns as essentially pedagogic and agential, since they operate to remind the reader of the ultimately functional and inadequate nature of conventional language and be indicative of “unformulatedness.”

Yet, the act of portraying self and circumstance as (ultimately) un/decidability, while at the same time performing roles, utilizing language, and sharing messages that are meaningful in conventional understanding of reality, may be something of a tricky task. This tends to be achieved through certain rhetorical/thematic patterns, such as through a “thematization of opposition itself, a thematization that draws attention to the unformulated ground that underlies, and makes possible, the coexistence of any particular opposed pair.” Below, I shall consider some of these thematized oppositions which parallel in both Jigme Lingpa’s autobiographical work, as described by Gyatso, and in Sonam’s contemporary Tibetan exile poetry. I suggest that to consider Sonam’s poetry in terms of complex Buddhist philosophy is not necessarily a heavy-handed task, as Sonam has numerous reiterated the strong role of Buddhism in her work and

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277 Ibid, 208.
278 Ibid, 268.
279 Ibid, 211. See also: Ibid, 212.
280 Below, I shall consider two examples of thematized opposition, authority v. humility and individual v. community. There are, however, many of these which continue to circulate today.
describes her audience as, foremost, herself.\textsuperscript{281} As she informed me, ”i just write as i think [sic],”\textsuperscript{282} and “i think as a Tibetan [sic].”\textsuperscript{283}

\textbf{Thematized Oppositions}

In terms of self (re)presentation, the dialectic between exemplarity and humility is one of the foremost thematized oppositions in Tibetan autobiography. While especially relevant to the framing of self in the autobiographies of Buddhist leaders and spiritual masters, reiterations in Sonam’s work suggest that there is a continued utilization of this thematized opposition in at least some contemporary Tibetan autobiographical poetry. The tension may be borne from a Tibetan penchant for individual autonomy, self, assertion, and distinction,\textsuperscript{284} as well as the need to support the validity of one’s experiences and messages via the establishment of authority and authenticity, when posed in relation to Tibetan rules of humility that must be applied when speaking of the self. Thus the autobiographer must both assert her own authority in order to affirm the validity of her message, and practice a form of rhetorical humility that destabilizes the aggrandized self.

The authority building via self-glorification tends to occur, rhetorically, in a number of patterned ways: through claim to the authority of a lineage to which one belongs; through the claim to/description of individual spiritual realizations (as recognizable forms of accomplishment in Tibetan Buddhist traditions); in direct claims to authority (or self-aggrandizement); and in

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{281} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013: “i solely wrote it for myself, i liked it, it helps healing the wound of being in Exile. Art doesn't discriminate, so…anybody can read it if they wish.” Note that Sonam tends to employ the first person pronoun as an uncapitalized “i,” and element of her style that may be worth of consideration.
\textsuperscript{282} Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
\textsuperscript{283} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{284} See: Gyatso, \textit{Apparitions}, 116 and 118.
thematized contradistinction, usually through the dismissal of rival claims and interpretations of circumstance. Sonam’s claim to authority via lineage emerges, I suggest, in depictions and discussions of her own Tibetanness. Throughout her poetry are discussions of self-definition in relation to Tibetanness, “my people,” “home(land),” and claimed connectivity via familial lines. In some forums, she presents her name as བོད་པ and posts self-portraits in which the terms “བོད་པ” or “TIBETAN” are projected onto different parts of her body. In the Tibetan system, “to present a thing’s genealogy is tantamount to an assertion of its legitimacy,” and Sonam rarely presents self in isolation of genealogy. The majority of her poems with explicit autobiographical content also contain prominent figures from her family, most frequently her mother. Not only are these figures depicted in relation to Sonam’s self portrayals, they are depicted as good Tibetans and Buddhists. In “True Warrior,” she offers a rare portrait of her father, who is discussed as “a brave Khampa man” who “fought against the Chinese Army” and “has a scar on his back, the sign of a true warrior.” Again, in almost every poem in which Sonam’s mother appears, she is shown as participating in some form of Buddhist practice or act of cultural preservation, such as praying (“more than required”), prostrating, taking small pilgrimages, reciting mantra, and teaching heritage stories and songs. If “to know one’s origins demonstrates access to those sublime sources,” as Gyatso suggests, Sonam demonstrates her access by frequently discussing her origins and celebrating them within culturally appropriate systems of value.

Claims to spiritual realization, I suggest, may be found in her effective utilization of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, as seen in her utilization of the “Sufferings” discussed in the previous

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286 phö-pa, Tibetan person
287 See Appendix A for images.
288 Gyatso, Apparitions, 117.
289 From the region of Kham.
289 Sonam, “True Warrior.”
290 Sonam, “Home.”
292 Gyatso, Apparitions, 117
section. Authority through self-aggrandizement, for Sonam, seems to be tied to aggrandizement of the New Generation of political activists and her identification with these engaged communities of individuals. She presents them as a “strong,” “fearless,” and relentless force, powerful and effective. However, we may consider the possibility of deviance here, as Sonam’s claims to authority appear to come mainly from aggrandizement of the “selves” rather than the “self,” from her community, generation, and heritage rather than from her own perceived successes.

At the same time, we must remember the “powerful constraints in Tibetan linguistic convention on how one should talk about oneself” arising from the need to utilize humility as the antidote to reification of the self. Self-deprecation, then, may be understood to be more than conventional; it is soteriological (and, in the case of a public autobiography, pedagogic). This humility often manifests in rhetoric as studied diffidence, glorification of the guru, overt or subtle displays of doubt, direct attacks on self-as-authority, and seemingly honest portrayals of both foibles. Gyatso contextualizes these as such:

If personal shortcomings were something the Chinese autobiographer was shamed into concealing, they were the starting point for the Tibetan Buddhist path, and the basis for distinctive self-criticism and self-awareness that a Tibetan Buddhist autobiographer such as Jigme Lingpa would display.

Sonam continuously practices self-critique in her poetry. She openly discusses the relative inadequacy of her Buddhist practice, tells her readers “they say, i am a silly girl,” and “I wish I can make everyone happy but I am good for nothing,” and often portrays, with an apparent honesty, the feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy she feels, as well as her fears (e.g.

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293 As self-reification is a primarily cause of “dissatisfactoriness” and a barrier to Enlightenment
294 See: Gyatso, Apparitions, 106.
295 Ibid, 119.
297 Sonam, “Wondering”
298 Sonam, “Voice.”
“i am afraid of losing my country and i don't want to be another face in the crowd”299). She marks herself as a small and child-like figure in relation to the her mother and father: “my father (Aba) was a hero in a real sense,”300 and her mother “is a hero because she survived.”301 A strong and self-reliant member of the fearless New Generation in one moment and a vulnerable child in the next, Sonam-as-portrayed is often contradictory and disorienting. Gyatso recognizes the utilization of extremes in Tibetan autobiography, noting:

The technique of highlighting the extremes of one’s self-conception so that they render each other empty requires that those extremes not be erased or collapsed. On the contrary, it turns out that the more extremes the Buddhist autobiographer works in, the better.302

By considering glorification of the guru as a practice of humility, the claiming of lineage becomes both an act of authority establishment and a show of humility. It may serve to glorify the self in the role of group membership, but may also redistribute some of the burden of authority upon sources with more established reputations for competence. Such glorification may be seen in the reverence with which Sonam discusses HH the Dalai Lama, and also, indirectly, in her poem “The Old Hermit Smells Like Yak Butter:”

If I am lucky, my mother would take me to see the old hermit
Who lives across the mountains in a cave, filled with butter lamps,
And silence.
He smells like yak butter,
“The stronger he smells, the holier he is.” My mother said,
He wears a torn robe; his beard touches his stomach,
His hair is longer than my mother’s…
The old hermit doesn’t say a word,
He touches my forehead with his.
I didn’t mind the smell, and if I am lucky,

299 Sonam, “When?”
300 Sonam, “True Warrior.”
301 Sonam, “Secret”
302 Gyatso, Apparitions, 269.
He will remember my name. He will remember my name.

Here, what appear to be low-status markers in fact indicate high spiritual achievement, and operate to glorify the “Old Hermit.” Sonam’s practice of humility in this poem may be seen in her relative inferiority. At the same time, her status, while inferior to the “Old Hermit,” is elevated by the encounter, in the brief touching of foreheads which serves as a gesture of symbolic kinship and blessing in Tibetan culture. Thus, the degree of rhetorical dissonance in Sonam’s self-portrayals may be read as a show of competence in walking a middle path between the self-reifying ends of the self-glorification/self-depreciation spectrum.

Another thematized opposition exists between the focus on the individual v. the community. While I have already discussed, at some length, the dependant nature of the self, importance of contextuality, and Tibetan exile imaginings of transnational interdependence, it is worthwhile to pause for a moment to consider the way these concepts are formulated and expressed in Sonam’s poetry. Her most frequently employed strategy for the complication of the “I”/“Us” dualism is the relative flexibility with which she makes use of pronouns. Even within the same poem, “I” can refer to either Sonam or protagonists of stories not her own. Interestingly, in several poems the lower case “i” is indicative of the personal, while the capitalized “I” refers to others whose perspective she is occupying, including individuals, idealistic concepts, and the Tibetan community at-large. Similarly, “you” indicates not only the audience of the poems, but the poem’s antagonist (presumably the PRC or occupying forces), her mother, Buddhas, and

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304 The example of the old hermit may evoke Tibetan Buddhist practices of mnemonic eccentricity. For more, see: Gyatso, Apparitions, 269.
305 See: Gyatso, Apparitions, 268.
306 Sonam, “Human Right.”
307 See: Sonam, “March,” and “Unknown Crime.”
308 See: Sonam, “Without.”
the larger non-Tibetan community. In terms of content, Sonam regularly and with a high degree of rapidity shifts from the deeply personal to the overtly communal, moving, for example, between personal experience poetry to grand overarching Tibetan circumstance.

She further complicates the conceptualization of “I”/“Us”/“You” by proposing responsibility for and stakes in the future Freedom of Tibet on the part of multiple parties, including unattached audiences. The most direct calls for commitment may be found on Sonam’s social media (Twitter and Facebook) postings, in which she explicitly calls for non-Tibetan engagement in the Free Tibet Movement. On March 28, 2012, she wrote: “we are grateful for your generous act of sheltering us and we hope you count us as your family and you don’t want your family members to suffer. do you ?[sic]” Again on February 17, 2013, she writes: “people are dying, and this is not only our issue but, of all human kind,” and once more, in response to another Tibetan self-immolation: “Remember, he was also someone's son, brother, husband, friend, and most importantly a ‘Human’ just like you and me.” Here, we have a more explicit version of the community- and relationship-building strategies discussed earlier, strategies through which Sonam works to build a larger network of support for the Movement by opening the boundaries delineating the Tibetan exile community from their potential non-Tibetan supporters. When contextualized within her other approaches to breaking down the “I”/“Us”/“You” barriers, these activities may be seen as mnemonic or employment of the concepts of nonduality and interdependence.

309 Presumably American; See Sonam, “Pleasure of Giving.”
310 I open the field, here, to discussion of Sonam’s social media presence because I have found it to be intricately connected to her blog. These sites share much of the same audience and are part of Sonam’s broader online presence and activity.
312 Sonam Tsomo, Facebook Profile. Posted February 17, 2013.
313 Sonam Tsomo, Facebook Profile. Posted March 26, 2012.
Illusion and Self-Secrecy

The ways in which rhetoric may be utilized as mnemonic of ultimate truths such as nonduality and unformulatedness are manifold and extend beyond the thematization of opposition. As conventional language, and depictions therein of self and reality, is only understood to have functional appropriateness (as dependant, impermanent, but ultimately meaningless forms), the expressions of such in Tibetan Buddhist autobiography must employ this functionality while at the same time noting the underlying illusory nature of appearances. Rhetorically, this may happen in moments that emphasize such underlying illusoriness; discussions of masks, lies, the inadequacy of language; complex, relational portrayals of selfhood; genre-bending, and rapid or frequent movement between established genres; shifts into the fantastical, dreams, or illusions; disorientation of perspective, as in jumps in perspective and time; flexibility, relativity, or contradiction in the interpretation of circumstance; in play, through free and spontaneous rhetoric; or in thematization of impermanence and pending death. As we have already seen, Sonam’s poetry utilizes many of these strategies freely and without qualification. In many ways, elusiveness is the content of Sonam’s work and underlies many of Sonam’s depictions of self and circumstance. On one hand, we may read this ambiguity as a manifestation of the betweenness of exile and the ways in which self and home are constructed relative to the elusive imagined Tibet. Yet on another, we must consider the possibility that these elements are continuations or reincarnations of mnemonic and pedagogic structures in traditional Tibetan Buddhist autobiography.

314 See: Gyatso, Apparitions, 212, 214, 234, and 207.
315 See: Ibid, 238.
316 See: Ibid, 199, 186.
Another element Tibetan “secret” autobiography that may have relevant parallels in Sonam’s poetry is the “self-secret” nature, or layered esotericism, which appears to manifest in both forms. The “self-secret texts” are constructed in such a way that they may be approached by readers/students operating at multiple levels of knowledge and skill.\(^{319}\) Within each moment of layered meaning, multiple interpretations are possible such that someone with no knowledge of Buddhism can approach the text and arrive at one conclusion, while students of Buddhism at various other levels will be able to identify various other messages within the same text. Poetry, in many ways, is a format which lends itself to such ambiguity or layering of potential interpretations. In an interview, Sonam explicitly noted “hidden meanings” within Tibetan language and poetic technique, and briefly discussed the difficulty of writing in English when so much is “lost in translation.”\(^{320}\) Despite this, I suggest that Sonam has frequently succeeded in providing audiences with areas of layered meaning and pauses on ambiguity that lend themselves to leveled interpretation.

These layered messages may be marked rhetorically, by a specific word/phrase/formula, or may be contained within it, such as with Sonam’s employment of the loaded terms “wind” and “Sufferings,” discussed earlier. Another example is the opening line to her poem “March,” in which she simply says “Fire cries.” For a Tibetan, or one with knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, the term “fire” may evoke a series of powerful symbols. Fire (མི) is one of the five cosmological elements, and as such symbolizes one of the five Dhyani Buddhas: འོད་དཔག་མེད་.\(^{321}\) Practically, the Buddha Amitabha serves as a tool for remedy of desire or greed; the complex symbolic relationship between destruction and greed is one frequently reiterated in Sonam’s work, specifically in reference to the PRC occupying forces. In addition, the imagery of a crying

\(^{319}\) In other terminology, consider “multiply coded” messages.
\(^{320}\) Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
\(^{321}\) Ö Pa’mé, Tib. Amitābha, skt.
Amitabha, potentially evoked with this line, can be seen as having multiple layers of symbolic meaning. First, as “a civilization… touched by Buddhas,” the ontological levels within Tibetan ideology are not only permeable, but overlapping, allowing for the Buddhas direct (yet subtle, to most observers) engagement with the events of humanity. The idea of a Buddha’s interest or investment with the history and politics of Tibet is far from new, and is interwoven with the teleological future envisioned for a “Free Tibet.” Second, Amitabha may be seen to weep when individuals fall victim to the “Poison” of Desire, one of the three “Poisons” that prevent an individual from escaping the unsatisfactoriness/suffering of samsaric existence.

Further, fire is drawn around the edges of mandalas as a representation of the transformation necessary in the soteriological process and in the early phases of mandala visualization practice. When combined with the potential remembrance of Amitabha in the word “Fire,” the opening line offers doubly layered traditional markers of the entrance of the individual into a moment of Tibetan Buddhist practice: the entrance into a mandala visualization and the calling of the Buddhas to join the space. In one reading, then, Sonam may be gesturing her audience to join her in a practical activity aimed towards fostering the values of development of wisdom and compassion. Here, within two simple words, multiple levels and depths of interpretation are possible. These readings may be accessible through laborious consideration and a sufficient knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism, but, I suggest, do not always necessitate such labor. For some audiences, these interconnected concepts may be evoked through the mnemonic within the term “Fire,” without significantly conscious engagement in the interpretive process.

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323 Cosmological maps used in Buddhist praxis
324 In future analyses, Burke’s conceptualization of synecdochic clusters may be of use.
Agency

At this point, it seems evident that Sonam’s work employs Buddhist philosophy in ways that may operate, as in traditional Tibetan Buddhist autobiography, as mnemonic or pedagogic of Buddhist truths. On one hand, we may suggest that the inclusion of these elements may operate as such regardless of the author’s intent; to do so, however, would be to disregard the parallels between Sonam’s self-described purpose in writing and the goals that Gyatso highlights as the purpose and completion of Jigme Lingpa’s self-secret autobiographies. In the Tibetan autobiographical tradition, meaningful experiences and writing are “not thought to remain purely private, internal affairs,”325 but are “fundamentally communicative in nature.”326 In order for a tertön to complete the treasure cycle, just as in order for an individual to act in accordance with the Bodhisattva ideal,327 these writings of meaningful experience must be shared and put to pedagogic use. The goal of transmission,328 the ultimate purpose and completion of Tibetan Buddhist autobiographical writing, has interesting parallels in Sonam’s goal of visibility and education. Even early in her writing career, a period in which Sonam describes her purpose in writing as ultimately selfish, as “healing the wound of being in Exile,”329 she published her work online. While she is vague in her discussions of why she chose to do so, she points toward the need to share the work with receptive “friends.” Such ambiguity in discussion of purpose may be indicative of the difficulty of vocalizing the naturalized, as idea the completion of writing as sharing may be to her at this early stage.

Whether initially naturalized or not, this pedagogic or communal function of writing would eventually become an apparently self-conscious aspect of her work, the purpose of which

325 Gyatso, Apparitions, 207.
326 Ibid, 187.
328 རྫུང (Lung, Tib.)
329 Sonam Tsomo, Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.
she now describes as the promotion of visibility of contemporary Tibetan circumstance. It may be possible to mark the transition into self-consciousness in her writing career, as there is appears to be a definite shift in style and form. In August, 2010, she posted a free-verse poem entitled “Voice,” which operates as a metacommuniative reflection on her work. She says:

Don’t write depressing poems from now on…okay?  
I will try not to but I can’t guarantee you  
I write what I feel and may be I am depressed [sic]  
That’s why I write such poems...  
I wish I can make everyone happy but I am good for nothing.  

Over the next few years, the primary focus of her poems shifts from the deeply personal and internal to wider truths and more frequent depictions of Tibetan circumstance. She, apparently, begins attending more to audience experience and response, and with this increase in self-consciousness and awareness of audience comes an increase in the pedagogical messages and promotion of visibility which now motivates her work. The influence bordering on co-authorship of the audience, here, is parallel to what Gyatso has observed in the autobiographical works of Jigme Lingpa. As it is always in the process of being shared, “the essential meaning of Treasure can be characterized as a continuum” and “is never fixed but is always transforming” and “is never fully private.” It is a “heteroglossic product” of multiple voices and audiences, ratified, interpreted, and acted upon by audiences. Not only impersonal content, but self-depictions are co-creations:

Just as the needs of students determine in what words a Treasure is expressed, the Tibetan public’s demand for heroes, combined with masters’ needs for adoring disciples, brings the master-as-autobiographer to create a self-portrait that is attractive to his or her readers. In such contexts, doctrines like emptiness and unformulatedness, which disallow both an utterly autonomous self and utterly absent self (each of which in any case would be unrepresentable in language),

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330 Sonam, “Voice.”
331 See: Gyatso, Apparitions, 176-8.
332 Ibid, 265.
end up serving to facilitate autobiographical self-expression, especially in its secret, undecidable form. Thus, like the self-secret doctrinal messages discussed earlier, depictions of self, in response to audience needs and co-authorship, may come to be built upon self-secrecy, layered and fluid, open to multiple interpretations. Sonam’s flexible and manifold portrayals of self-as-protagonist are not only reiterative and mnemonic of the ultimate truth of non-duality, but present diverse audiences a variety of protagonists to whom they may relate and with whom they may develop vicarious or mediated intimacy. In Sonam’s later work, we see the emergence of portrayals of self as self-protagonist-as representative (of circumstance and the political movement), a move which shifts this intimacy from the purely communal to the strategically political. This strategy may be exceptionally valuable in the expansion of networks of connectivity with potential non-Tibetan patrons, whose recognition of Tibetan circumstance (via moves towards visibility) and feelings of connectivity (via reiteration of connectivity, as in we have seen in discussions of “family” and shared humanness), may transform into actualized support for the Tibetan Freedom Movement.

333 Ibid, 267.
Part III: Conclusions

Concluding Remarks

Sonam’s strategies may promote realization of this innate solidarity through the utilization of Buddhist pedagogical methods designed to correct perception and beget compassion, but she also utilizes other strategies for reinforcing connection between the Movement and her audience. First, she presents her selfhood and Tibetanness in a series of overlapping, relatable and understandable self-protagonists while firmly anchoring these selves to specific goals. Her self-protagonists are presented in situations that may easily have defined her as pitiable, but when combined with messages of hope, action, and lived experience, become admirable and sympathetic. Further, by presenting her selfhood as orbiting around a fairly monothematic axis, she often effectively humanizes the Movement. Moving beyond Perreault’s assertion that “…as women write themselves they write the movement,” here Sonam writes the Movement as the self. Further, she utilizes discourses and conceptualizations of selfhood and intersubjectivity to develop the audience’s connection to the Movement through “intimacy” with the self-protagonist.

The seemingly monothematic axis of the narrated self within her work establishes a self-protagonist that is so closely associated with a specific set of ideas that it can hardly be

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335 Around issues and circumstances of Exile.
mistaken for anything other than the humanization of a cause. The personalization and humanization of ideas connected to the Movement through the presentation of a primary self-protagonist is an exceptional narrative strategy, offering readers not only a solid point with which to connect to the Movement, but a compelling reason to take personal stakes in it. The open ways in which she invites, and sometimes begs or demands, audience engagement may be made even more persuasive by the teleological and somewhat utopian discourses surrounding the idea of rangzen. In short, Sonam’s work employs a wide variety of pedagogical tools and discourses of this imagined community in order to effectively allow for audience connection and engagement in the Movement.

The question of author’s consciousness of the use of these discourses and narrative tools, I suggest, is less important than the idea that she had a specific goal that she hoped to present and make meaningful. The themes and presentation s here, as well as Sonam’s discussions via interview, clearly indicate the presence of a goal of support building, establishing the narrative performances as subtle agential acts executed through the use of a circumstantial, functional presented self. The presentations also indicate one important facet of an effective, agential self-presentation: the establishment of connectivity to the audience via the humanizing, or incorporation within the self-protagonist’s character, of abstract concepts, circumstance, or goals. Thus we may be warranted in a conceptualization of individual agency via performative self-presentation. The spaces of agency, I suggest, are elucidated by a firm foundation in the contexts of her authorship; the spheres of activity, manners in which the self may be conceptualized, and popular imaginings of circumstance are all contributive to a perspective through which these spaces of agency may be seen. Without such foundation, it is difficult to imagine a successful approach through which these poems can be read as anything but words, rhythms, and occasional rhymes.
In the preceding interpretations, I have consulted several feminist theoretical models and methodologies of autobiography and selfhood. Among the benefits of an application of critical feminist theory is the contemporary paradigm shift of developing these theoretical models to the exploration of how discursive construction, representation, and social structure may have parallel effects upon all people who are not the norm or referent.\(^{336}\) This also allows for the simultaneous analysis of multiple subjectivities and how they are discursively or counter-discursively constructed and (re)presented; these discussions of agency and discursive construction are especially useful in considering Sonam’s work. For example, Leigh Gilmore’s “autobiographics” allows for a deeper examination of the conjuncture of agency, “identity,” and discourse:

An exploration of a text’s autobiographics allows us to recognize that the \(I\) is multiply coded in a range of discourses: it is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of “identity,” multiple figurations of agency.\(^{337}\)

By applying a study of discursive or metanarrative coding and agency operating among such codes on the part of Sonam-as-self-protagonist, we can begin to see a wide variety of uses of discourses and self-protagonist (re)presentation within the work as agentine.

Feminist narrative methodology similarly grants us valuable interpretive tools with which we can better understand Sonam’s agency, for “…it is not the story itself that is of utmost importance, it is \textit{the way that story is told}.“\(^{338}\) Through an examination of specific structural and storytelling strategies,\(^{339}\) Sonam’s agency as narrator becomes further apparent. Her choices relative to the discourses she evokes may be a primary site of agency, but by omitting her structural and linguistic choices, we only have an incomplete picture.


\(^{339}\) See: Warhol, “Feminist Approach.”
The final of the main feminist methodological/theoretical contributions to this paper comes from the work of Sidonie Smith. Smith, by explicitly connecting the “autobiographical manifesto” to Kaplan’s “out-law genres,” allows us to consider “eclectically ‘errant’ and culturally disruptive” writing practices, including structure of narrative and construction/presentation of selfhood, as technologies of writing potentially serving as sites of resistance.\footnote{See: Sidonie Smith, “Autobiographical Manifesto,” in Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 433. See Also: Caren Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography,” in Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, Eds. Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 215.} Moving beyond normative tropes of autobiography and presentations of author-protagonist as universal subject, the autobiographical manifesto allows the author to present herself outside of culturally conscripted and repeated identities, as well as object status, through the pursuit of alternative forms of self-representation and experience narrative.\footnote{Through the manifesto, the autobiographical subject confronts the ghost of identity assigned to her by the old sovereign subject, what Paul Smith terms the ideological ‘I,’ a fixed position representing culturally intelligible and authorized performances of identity.” Smith, Manifesto, 435.} The result, frequently, is the presentation of author as a fragmented self moving through and being altered by a non-linear series of events. The concepts of “out-law genres” and “autobiographical manifestos” allow us to develop our interpretation of Sonam’s blog in several ways: first, by establishing that such a work can be analyzed as autobiographical despite the conventions of genre; second, by allowing us the opportunity to consider how such a format of autobiography may be agential or give rise to experiential meanings;\footnote{See: Donald Braid, "Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning," The Journal of American Folklore 109.431 (Winter 1996), 5-30.} and third, by allowing us to consider the political function of such a piece of autobiography. Autobiographical manifestos are “intent on bringing culturally marginalized experiences out from under the shadow of an undifferentiated otherness”\footnote{Ibid, 435-6.} as political or social practice; Sonam’s project of the visibility/humanization of Tibetan suffering, when interpreted under such a framework, is clearly a political move. Furthermore, the manifesto
“asserts unqualifiedly, even exuberantly, both the politicization of the private and the personalization of the public, effectively troubling the binary complacencies of the ancien regime of selfhood with its easy dichotomization of public and private.”

Again, this model offers deeper interpretations of Sonam’s work through the examination of the ways in which she politicizes the private (e.g. stories of her mother, personal reflections) and personalizes the public (e.g. by embodying the ideological core of the Movement).

Agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist the norms but also in the multiple ways one inhabits norms.

The subtlety of the agentive moves here within may rise from processes similar to those described by Saba Mahmood in her examination of the Egyptian women’s piety movement. For the most part, Sonam does not progress towards her goals by defying dominant discourses, trends, or authority; in fact, she more often utilizes these existent discourses, social roles, and creative forms from within, maneuvering rather than rebelling. Within Sonam’s poetry are multiple forms of agency determined by her determination of self-protagonist within existent normative discourses and Buddhist philosophies. Here, the presented self is not only an author-protagonist with which the reader may develop empathetic connections, but it is also a political and spiritual teleological project in which the audience is encouraged to take part. It is in the acts of self-negotiation and presentation that Sonam, as an example of a generation of Tibetan refugees, is able to maneuver and inhabit the spaces that optimize the possibility of achieving her goals, finding ways to make meaningful presentations of the problem, optimistic interpretations of telos, and appealing invitations to her audiences. It is in her subtle presentation of selfhood within these contexts that we find an agential protagonist, one who reaches out to her audience through her very selfhood, a selfhood which remains incomplete and transitory until the dream of རང་བཙན་ is

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achieved. Until then, we are left only with the message of hope found in the common adage: བོད་རྒྱལ་ལོ (Bö gyal lo, Victory/Prosperity to Tibet!).

346 (Bö gyal lo, Victory/Prosperity to Tibet!).
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Peltso, Chok Tenzin Monlam. Personal Correspondence, July 8 2013.


Note: All poems mentioned in the preceding footnotes may be found on this site, unless otherwise noted.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1cTUJDhc2Yw

Tsomo, Sonam. Email Interview with Author, October 8, 2013.


These are from the (facebook.com) album, “i exist.” Her beautiful use of projected word upon her body offers us a valuable chance to further examine her online (re)presentation of selfhood and connections to both Tibetan and English language. Figure 1) “Tibetan” (person) projected in common Tibetan script upon her back; Figure 2) “TIBETAN” projected across her hands, which cover her mouth; Figure 3) “EXTINCT” Projected on her palms, in front of her body; Figure 4) “TIBETAN” written on a strong forearm; and Figure 5) the verbs “to extinguish/kill” and “to conquer” in common Tibetan script upon her forehead, one eye covered by four fingers, the other closed.
Appendix B: Select Posts and Poems

**Hear What?** March 29, 2012
I hear people talking about
weather, food, Cloth, Friday night party.
But they didn’t hear the cries
and about the self-immolations in the
times of internet and fast growing technology.

**Home** Oct 26, 2012
I wake up, pray, eat, go to school, eat again, and sleep. wake up again, pray, eat, eat some more, and sleep.
sometimes, i try hard to sleep in sleepless night.
i do this every day, in the hope
of what?

my mother does the same thing except, she doesn't go to school, pray more than required. eat in silence.
she prays more, i mean, like every day, but in the hope of returning back Home? her real home whom she left
behind 40 years ago. she buried all her memories behind the Himalayas, and
sometimes, she curse the wind that blows from the mountain.
she never call this place home.

**Jamphel Yeshi passes away** March 29, 2012
March 26 in an apparent protest against the continued Chinese occupation of Tibet in front of hundreds of Tibetans who had
converged from all over India at Jantar mantar to protest Chinese President Hu Jintao’s visit breathed his last this morning. The doctors
announced Jamphel Yeshi, clinically dead at 7:30 am(local time) today. Dhondup Lhadar, Vice-President, TYC said: "Martyr Jamphel
Yeshi’s sacrifice will be written in golden letters in the annals of our freedom struggle. He will live on to inspire and encourage the future
generations of Tibetans. The brilliant radiance of his fire will dispel the darkness of China's illegal occupation of Tibet and regenerate the
spirit of Tibetan independence. "Martyr Thupten Ngodup was the first known Tibetan to have self-immolated in our freedom struggle during an indefinite hunger strike organised by TYC in
New Delhi in 1998. In Tibet, since Martyr Tapey's self-immolation in 2009, 30 Tibetans have set their bodies on fire
demanding the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and freedom for Tibet. Pawo Jamphel Yeshi's self-immolation marks a milestone in our freedom struggle where Tibetans inside and outside of Tibet stand ever united in our fights against the Chinese occupying forces." Jamphel Yeshi had suffered 98 per cent burn injuries to his body. Doctors had
given him zero per cent of survival chance but Martyr Jamphel Yeshi’s heart fought against his body to survive the
grueling pain. Jamphel Yeshi escaped to India in 2006 and studied at the Tibetan Transit School in Dharamshala for nearly three and a half years. A native of Kham Tawu, eastern Tibet, he had been living in Delhi for nearly two years now. The Tibetan Youth Congress will carry the body of Pawo Jamphel Yeshi to the Tibetan exile headquarters of Dharamshala and hold a grand funeral deserving of a martyr. He is survived by his mother and four siblings, all in Tibet. There have been 31 self immolations since 2009 and 23 have lost their lives.

**Lost pair** Oct 26, 2012

From the Himalayas you flee barefoot
Day and night you weep quietly in sorrow
In fear of losing identity root
Everything left behind, inside hollow
You shrink day by day, grief planted gray hair
Eating inside, the invisible pain
When in silence you talk with the lost pair
Tin roof complain day and night in the rain
Up from the mountain, flowing through was blood
Destroying everything, blinded the sun
Genocide, murder, and rape follows flood
Corrupting human rights, speeding the run
This falsehood won’t last long to run kingdom
Poisoning the world in the name of freedom

**March** October 20, 2011

Fire cries
If only you could listen
Red and yellow burning aloud
The Sufferings immeasurable

I am fearless
You can gun down at me
My body, you could destroy
Touch my soul, you dare

Six million Tibetans burning
The embers won’t die down
Seeds of Rangzen (Freedom) sown
Forward we will march.

**Pleasure of giving** March 27, 2011

With a pair of Ugg boot
You can feed ten people in my hometown
With every cup of star bucks coffee
You can pay for someone’s meal for a day

With the north face jacket
You can help someone’s pay fees for their school
With the Vera Bradley bag
You could help someone’s pay for their medical fees

I feel guilty, I had them all
But I don’t need them all
I feel guilty wearing them
Because this pleasure last only for a day

But the pleasure of giving
To the people in need is the true happiness
That I was searching in these brands
And I am glad that I finally found the “pleasure of giving”

_Potala : A beautiful prison_ March 19, 2011

Potala behind bars
Shackled with invisible
Chains
Voice has been
Shunned
For more than
Fifty years now.

Many lonely days
and nights
passed with the blowing
wind.

Communist rise like a fire
Destroys everything
With the single breathe
We died infinite.

You took the soul
And
Left the body
Behind

You took the food
And Left the plates behind
You took the well
And
Left the thirst behind.

_SECRET_ September 20, 2009 _[https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=1cTUJDhc2Yw]_

I grew up in this small room in exile
Eight people, four bed
Our home in exile is not actually a home
But more of a guest house

As we are not in our land
Not an inch to call mine
The walls are not strong enough to protect me
And the tin roof complains when it rains

Often I ask my mother about Tibet
And she would tell me the untold stories lies behind the Himalayas
Sometimes she weeps but I fail to understand why?

My mother, I watched my mother as she prostrate

98
Her missing teeth and wrinkled face.
Her eyes are closed when she prays
As if she is expecting too much.
She cries when she laughs.
[And that’s a way of hiding her pain]

She has been through the pain of losing her country
Losing her loved ones
And the pain of never seeing them again.

Once she had a home in Tibet,
The forbidden land she left behind.
I know she is in great pain,
But I wonder how easily
She swallowed the grief.

I know my mother’s secret of hiding her pain:
The deep sigh and the pauses when she talks…

[She survives from the attack of the red army
But alas, she is dying every second in exile
Remembering her home there]

I know all her secrets
Of her Crying in the rain.
She is getting smaller every year
Her hair turns greyer every season,

Coming from the Himalayas
Walking on her bare feet
I know my mother’s secret
Of wearing those torn shoes.
[and still being satisfied.
I miss her every second
And now, though I am here, I feel exactly the same
Like once she did]

But I won’t complain
She is a hero because she survived.

[I feel isolated in the crowd
I am alone and wandering in the dark.
I feel like an alien.
I don’t belong here
But why I’m here?
I’m tired of being a stateless citizen.
I’m tired of sharing my loneliness under the starless night
I sat there for hours and hours
Yet finding no answer.
I’m lost in the dark.
I can’t see anything.
I heard there’s a thing called America

99
Which seems like a magic door
Has been closed for me
I’m neither here nor there
I disappear
Not physically
But I know I’m lost.
I have been searching for my identity.
People always mistaking me for Chinese, Nepalese
But no one says “Tibetan”
Because for them Tibet never exists
And it hurts you more when people don’t know you as a Tibetan
But more as a refugee.
But, you know what?
I’m still proud to be a Tibetan
And a follower of his holiness the dalai lama.
There is a hole in my heart
as I have been hiding my pain for all these years
No one to share
No home to ?
I just don’t want to be another face in the crowd.
I want people to know me as Sonam Tsomo, Tibetan.
And I want recognition
I’m not asking for more
But to return to my own land.
It is strange that I have to beg to return to my own land.
Oh, I’m in deep pain.
No wonder I feel like an alien.
I’m trying to figure out where I belong
And often, I used to write down in words
But I wonder if only my hand could express what’s in my heart.
I was born as a refugee
But I don’t want to die as a refugee.
How I wish to be a bird, just for a moment
And could fly to Tibet and touch it’s soil.
I’m dreaming Tibet every single day.
No wonder wherever I go I don’t belong anywhere.
And I feel
I feel
And I feel
Like an alien.

TABOO  September 16, 2009.
“There’s no greater pain than the loss of one’s own country”
It’s my saddest part that I have never been to Tibet; I was born in northern part of India and my parents were forced to flee Tibet, my father was a very brave person but alas! When I was in 7th grade, my father passed away like a blowing wind without leaving any further address. In India, we live in a very small house and we are eight children and I know how hard it was for my mother to look after us but I guess she is a strong women as she have faced many obstacles on her way from Tibet to India….but I used to imagine myself in Tibet with green grass, high mountains and yaks….and I was happy in that world of mine but as I grew up I faced the real world and the real Tibet, makes my heart break into pieces…
I have lived a life of refugee and we have to renew our passport every year in Indian registration office with a smile….I know how hard it is for us to go through that situation and I have my father’s family in Tibet whom we have never seen and I remember many years back that we were told that our father’s sister’s son died…but it's sad for us, at least for me to react on that situation, of course there is a feeling of sadness but it hurts more knowing that we had not met each other….and what is left for us to do is except some prayers….and the worst part is that you’ve never met your relatives.

Honestly speaking, even though I was born in India and we have no country I’m still proud to be a Tibetan, proud to be a follower of H.H.THE DALAI LAMA and LONG LIVE HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA.

Now, the situation in Tibet is getting worst every second, In Tibet the Tibetans are not allowed to speak our language and most of the teenage girls are working as prostitutes….they are forced to do this to survive and to feed their families….how could we blame them? In Tibet they are living a life of threat under Chinese regime….and I want to make it clear that when I say Chinese I don't mean the Chinese people, it is the government and we are not against Chinese people.

Now, what I am afraid of is Tibet becoming a taboo…and gradually Tibet will remain as just a name….I am afraid of losing myself and the rich culture of Tibet.


If I am lucky, my mother would take me to see the old hermit
Who lives across the mountains in a cave, filled with butter lamps,
And silence.

He smells like yak butter,
“The stronger he smells, the holier he is.” My mother said,
He wears a torn robe; his beard touches his stomach,
His hair is longer than my mother’s.

His eyes barely open, legs crossed, hands folded,
Rosary around his neck, and reciting prayers as
If waiting for a reply.

The wind has eaten all the mantras on the prayer flags
Hung over his cave. The leafless tress mourns over it.

The old hermit doesn’t say a word,
He touches my forehead with his.
I didn’t mind the smell, and if I am lucky,
He will remember my name.

Tibetan National Anthem March 19, 2011

Let the radiant light shine of Buddha’s wish-fulfilling gem teachings,
the treasure mine of all hopes for happiness and benefit
in both worldly life and liberation.

O Protectors who hold the jewel of the teachings and all beings,
nourishing them greatly,
may the sum of your virtuous deeds grow full.

Firmly enduring in a diamond-hard state, guard all directions with
Compassion and love.

Above our heads may divinely appointed rule abide
dowered with a hundred benefits and let the power increase
of four fold auspiciousness,
May a new golden age of happiness and bliss spread
throughout the three provinces of Tibet
and the glory expand of religious-secular rule.

By the spread of Buddha’s teachings in the ten directions,
may everyone throughout the world
enjoy the glories of happiness and peace.

In the battle against dark negative forces
may the auspicious sunshine of the teachings and beings of
Tibet and the brilliance of a myriad radiant prosperities
be ever triumphant.

TRUE WARRIOR October 4, 2009
my father was a lion among man,
he was a brave Khampa man,
ought against Chinese army,
but, he was failed to fight against his illness
and he left silently, without leaving any further messages.....

when i came home,
i asked my mother(Ama) about my father
she cried, but i didn't understand
i asked my sister, why is everyone crying,
i was a silly, small girl....

i think, i was denying to accept the truth,
still now, i feel him close to me,
and i know, he will be always there for me.

i am a proud daughter of my proud father,
yes, he has a scar on his back, the sign of a true warrior....
my father(Aba) was a hero in a real sense.

Unemployed Oct 28, 2012
My name is Human Right. I am currently unemployed.

Uninvited, Oct 27, 2012
Guests came
Without invitation
Stayed whole spring and summer
And kicked us in the cruel winter

The cold wind slapped us
With every step we trudged to exile
Many lonely nights in despair
Finally took us to exile
The old woman prays everyday
In the hope of returning back to Tibet
Suitcase packed
Every time at the end of the day

**Unknown Crime**  Nov 20, 2012
I pitied you from the moment you put me in Prison for a
Crime never committed
I fought for my birth rights and you labeled me as
A criminal. I was just sixteen then and today I turned 24,
All these years in prison, I
Have memorized your face, and gestures.
I saw you as my inmate, I, behind bars, you
Behind invisible bars of ignorance.
One calm winter evening, when I stole a potato from the farm,
You smelled me and broke my wrist; you made me stand naked in the cold ruthless night,
In the morning, when I was still breathing, you tied my hands and forced me to eat
s***, while you with your other ignorant friends in uniforms, attacked me with
The heartless laughs, and enjoyed the misery.
I don’t care what goes in my body because my mind is not
Corrupted as yours. You can do anything with my body,
Touch my soul, you dare.

**Untold Stories**  July 13, 2010
Behind the Himalayas
sweet memories lies
which then turned into sour pain
and now only tears of blood flows

Behind the Himalayas
my ama(mother) sung sweet songs
which then turned into cries of pain
and now no more sweet songs to be sung

Behind the Himalayas
was once land of joy and peace
which then turned into a land of despair
and a land filled with blood of innocent people

**WAITING FOR THE MAGIC**  October 4, 2009
people say, there's not a thing called "magic"
they say, i am a silly girl
but i strongly believe that "buddha"can't be so cruel
and i am waiting for him to open the "magic door"
i see every single tibetan, dying every second in "exile"
always praying hard for a miracle to happen

my only wish is to return back to Tibet
and touched the soil
and soul of my ancestors
i only wish

**WAITING LIST**  September 16, 2009
I hate to open my eyes in exile home
I hate to got to bed in exile home
the walls are not strong enough to protect me
and the tin roof complains when it rains
I am tired of being a stateless citizen
I want to live a life with no fear
but how can i console my soul
the fear of losing my identity
losing my country, my people
I am tired of sharing my loneliness
in the starless night and honestly
I'm tired of living a life like this
with no country....no recognition
peace
sonam tsomo

**WHEN?**  October 6, 2009
when will i return?
to my homeland...the land of snow
that I've never seen
alas! Tibet's been hidden
and so do it's beautiful and rich culture
but, when will Tibet free?
don't say, not in this lifetime
but, i am afraid of losing my country
and i don't want to be another face in the crowd.

**Without**  July 19, 2010
without seeing, i knew you exists
without touching, i felt the magic
without knowing, i fell in love with you

without talking, i heard you
without meeting, i depart from you
without realizing, i was betrayed...

without looking, i had seen the ugly truth
without speaking, i sensed you
without confusion, i lost the way to you

**WONDERING**  October 4, 2009
you can never tell, what is going to happen? for instance, take my case....i have never thought that i would be here, far away from my loved ones....but, i end up coming here, i am still kind of home sick....i was never away this far?
but, i guess, this is the taste of life.....
honestly, now i came to realize, how painful it is for being in "exile"
i hope everything will turn out well......and as all know that "truth can't be hidden for too long"
Sonam Tsomo  
March 28, 2012
Please, release the Tibetans who are in police custody in Delhi. India is the land of Gandhiji and we hope that this will always remain the Gandhi's land. please, help us spread the awareness. we are grateful for your generous act of sheltering us and we hope you count us as your family and you don't want your family members to suffer. do you? you guys can follow me on twitter at @SonamRangzen. — at Miami University.

April 8, 2012
The pain of losing one's country is not something that everyone can understand. Human Rights in Tibet has been raped over and over again. Please, stand for Human rights and for Tibet. BHOD GYALO

February 17 near Oxford, OH
Tashi Delek (Hello in Tibetan), i am a Tibetan student studying at Miami University, ohio. For those of you who don't know much about Tibet, i urge you to please follow the news, and help our cause. The condition in Tibet is out of control, this is the 102 self immolations in Tibet. people are dying, and this is not only our issue but, of all human kind. Please support Human Rights, and support Tibet. we are also human, and we deserve every right to be free, and to express ourselves. Please, voice yourself against the inhuman treatment happening in Tibet. Save Tibet, and may peace prevail on earth.