

Chapter 2

Lessons Unlearned: Identity and Resistance in Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's Poetry

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The production of literature in English by Tibetan authors vividly instantiates the complex negotiation of identity that has been taking place in the Tibetan diaspora since its inception.¹ Although the phenomenon of Tibetans writing in English precedes 1959, it has dramatically increased in the twentieth-first century, as the first-generation born in exile started expressing themselves in English, through poetry and fiction. The birth of Tibetan-English literature is likely to be Gendun Choepel's four English poems, written from his personal exile in India. After 1959, there are a few important authors who chose English as a means of expression, such as the prolific poet and Buddhist teacher Chögyam Trungpa and the novelist and doctor Tsewang Pemba. However, it is not until the late 1990s and early 2000s that we witness a surge of literary production in English, predominantly in the form of poetry. It is at this point that writers like Buchung Sonam, Tenzin Tsundue, or Tsering Wangmo Dhompa start publishing. Often, Tibetans born in exile, despite being fluent in spoken Tibetan, are educated in English, which in turn makes English the language in which they feel most comfortable writing.

The choice of English is not so much a strategic one, as some of the analyses of earlier Tibetan-English writings have suggested but more a necessity, which reflects the hybrid cultural identity of Tibetans born outside Tibet.² Among this younger generation of writers, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa has gained recognition beyond the Tibetan exiled

community and the circles of Tibet supporters. Her poetry have featured in anthologies of Asian American and North American Buddhist literature and discussed in terms of its complex and experimental quality, independently of the poet's origin, gender, or ideology.³ Dhompa is one of the few exiled Tibetans who has received extensive training in creative writing in North American academic institutions, and her poetry clearly reflects an acute awareness of contemporary poetic trends. Furthermore, Dhompa's poems address, always in oblique and subtle ways, the dissonances, misunderstanding, and paradoxes of growing up Tibetan outside Tibet. Uncertainty and incomprehension are two interrelated and important themes in Dhompa's work, and they seem closely connected to the hybrid and diasporic character of her personas.

This chapter explores the silences, interstices, and ambiguities in some of Dhompa's poems as an expression of both hybridity and resistance. As a Tibetan woman born in exile, Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is at the crossroads of many expectations and grand narratives. On one hand, she deals with the stereotypes entertained by non-Tibetans, largely westerners, that enshrine Tibetan identity as an ancient, spiritual, and unchanging object. On the other hand, Dhompa also engages with the assumptions of the older generation of exiled Tibetans who expect their children to conform to cultural and gender norms imported from pre-1959 Tibet. As a modern, educated, second-generation Tibetan woman, Dhompa's hybridity poses a challenge to the preservation paradigm that construes Tibetan identity as static as well as to the conservative gender roles of traditional Tibetan culture. Her resistance is often articulated through the unique leaps of logic and language that characterize her writing.⁴ It is through lessons not learned or unlearned, unspoken words, misunderstandings, gaps, and uncertainties that a sense of resistant in-betweenness emerges in Dhompa's works. Unlike her contemporary, Tenzin Tsundue, whose protest poetry openly addresses the issues of Tibetan

exile,⁵ Dhompa's style is deeply personal, reflective, and oblique, confounding her reader's expectations for explicit meaning.

Given the scope of this chapter, I will only touch upon Dhompa's poetic works and not focus on her travelogue or essays. Dhompa's poetic production spans three volumes, all published by Apogee Press in the US, over the course of eight years: *Rules of the House* (2003), *In the Absent Everyday* (2005) and *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake* (2011).⁶ Although, I will make peripheral references to the three volumes, the poems selected for a more in-depth analysis are from Dhompa's first collection, *Rules of the House*, which arguably reflects on hybridity and resistance in a more vivid way than her other books do.

Despite the seemingly personal tone of many of Dhompa's poems, I refuse to regard them as autobiographical and consistently refer to her various poetic voices as personas. This is not only in line with the tradition of literary criticism that stems from Roland Barthes, which regards the text as independent from its author's biographical details, it also allows us to focus on the social and political dimensions of a text, avoiding the potentially distracting temptation of trying to decipher the author through her production. Since the aim of this volume is to discuss the various ways in which Tibetans are redefining their culture, the focus of my analysis remains on the ideological, cultural, and social significance of Dhompa's poetry. In particular, my discussion is centered on the way gender, Buddhism, and Tibetan-ness are approached and redefined in a few of her representative poems. These three topics appear frequently in Dhompa's poems, though not necessarily in an overt fashion. However, they can be said to constitute the three main edges of Dhompa's unique resistant hybridity. To the issue of gender and how it is negotiated through family relations in the Tibetan diaspora, I turn now.

Lesson I: A Good Woman

One of Dhompa's loudest statements about gender takes, paradoxically, the form of silence. In "Second Lesson" the two bottom thirds of the page are left empty after the words "This is an example of a good woman:."7 The poem presents the lesson taught by a mother figure to her daughter; as well as a poetic persona who implicitly resists the narrative passed on by the elder. The series of lessons—many of the book's poems carry the title "Lesson" preceded by a numeral, e.g., "First Lesson," "Forth Lesson"—that feature throughout *Rules of the House* have frequent references to gender and, except for the third and fourth lessons, they tend to gravitate around the advice given by elder women to their daughters or nieces. The gender roles assumed by these elder women are in stark dissonance with their daughters' understanding. The generational gap is intensified by exile, where the younger generation is probably born and where it had the chance to access ideas and role models that were non-existent in their mothers' world.8

Consequently, the "Second Lesson" that this female persona receives from her mother is quietly resisted. The persona never voices any overt opposition to what she is being taught; in fact, she never speaks in the first person singular, using only the first-person plural. Her account of the lesson is a matter of fact, almost impersonal report. However, if we examine carefully how the lesson has been mediated, we can identify a few instances of ironic resistance. "Second Lesson" also presents a far more ambiguous portrayal of "M," clearly a mother figure, who is often affirmed as a positive and tender refuge for her children. M's ambivalent character is, however, never made explicit, since resistance is directed at the narrative that she reproduces and passes on to her daughter rather than on "M" as an individual. "M" is not regarded as the agent of this narrative but as a mere transmitter, and, therefore, is spared being an object of contestation. In this way, the female transmission of knowledge is not challenged, while the content of such transmission is brought into question.

M's lesson is triggered by a picture illustrating an unknown piece of news: "The newspaper showed a boy drinking from the sky. Water rested in his clavicle. // M said he was not the kind her daughter would marry."⁹ Tashi, who could well be the daughter M refers to, but also a younger sister to the persona, inquires further about M's statement: "Tashi wanted to know if rain had harmful elements in it. M said decent girls stayed clear of rains. // When it is hot undress in the dark. Go to the roof. If the monsoon clouds appear, wish farmers well." (ll. 2-3) M's first statement seems enigmatic to innocent Tashi, or perhaps Tashi fakes innocence to get M to talk more on the subject. Tashi's curiosity, or feigned innocence, triggers more lessons from M, which in turn are interrupted by Tashi's inquisitiveness: "Mothers teach their daughters how to pick the best tomatoes. Shy to the touch. Surface of cement. Tashi asks if husbands are picked the same way."¹⁰

The connection between picking tomatoes and picking husbands is an interesting one if we consider how by making it Tashi triggers M's advice: "Sunspot on cheeks. Wash with rose water. Pluck under your arm."¹¹ Whereas it's clear that Tashi speaks of *picking husbands* as one would pick tomatoes, M's reply implies that husbands are not to be picked, and on the contrary women are to be chosen by their potential husbands. The three instructions for attractive self-presentation might be seen as the requirement for picking a husband, perhaps while making him think that he is the one picking. This reveals a gap between the way mother and daughter conceive agency. For Tashi, agency lies with women; for M, agency lies with men, although this masculine agency can certainly be influenced by women's successful self-presentation, in itself a form of covert agency.

If we took M's advice in isolation, it could be regarded as a tacit confirmation of Tashi's proposition of female agency—a way of saying that women indeed pick husbands but do so by letting husbands believe that agency lies with them. In this sense, M could be quietly subverting patriarchy while seemingly playing by its rules. However, the remarks about

gender that follow confirm that Tashi's and M's stances are mutually contradictory.

Disambiguation is brought about by a male figure, possibly a brother, whose reckless behavior is celebrated by his elders: "S held his penis and ran around the tree saying he was blessing it. The elder roared with laughter and said he would grow up to be a 'wild' one."¹²

The following line provides some sort of poignant explanation to the elder's reaction: "S was blessed. Free from the cycle of female births."¹³ Whereas young girls are taught to behave *decently*, young boys are somewhat encouraged to be *wild*.

The reference to the narrative of female rebirths, which is frequently employed to justify male superiority in Tibetan contexts, shows how gender inequalities, implicitly criticized by the persona, are legitimized by traditional frames of knowledge. In fact, M's lessons are tacitly grounded in the same idea that females need to be more virtuous than males, since a female birth is inferior to a male birth. Women need to work harder, to be reborn as males and gain greater freedom. The circularity of the narrative of rebirth resembles the circular patterns associated with the actions of young male and female characters in the poem. Whereas S playfully circumambulates the tree, penis in hand, freely expressing his *wildness*, "M taught us to peel an apple without disturbing it, saying time and again how important it was to concentrate on the knife."¹⁴

The radical difference between both circles seems evident and so is the silently resistant attitude of the persona, who along with Tashi is taught to carefully circumambulate the apple while peeling it. In many ways the persona is an absence, a hole in a narrative that certainly applies to her. She is not to marry a certain kind of man, keep away from the rain, and present herself appropriately to be chosen by a husband. Furthermore, the persona and, by extension, Tashi are constructed as absent negations in relation to S, who, unlike them, is "Free from the cycle of female births." The final confirmation of this construction of women as a silent and negative absence is to be found in the last, unfinished line—"This is an

example of a good woman:”¹⁵—which is followed by two empty thirds of a page. This blank space is indeed the example of a supposedly good woman, who is meant to be apparently empty and silent.

This very plastic way of representing silence on the page is, paradoxically, the most explicit and visual form of resistance to M’s discourse. However, it is also the tangible embodiment of the lesson that M offers to her daughters. This ambivalent empty space annihilates the female subject (in M’s discourse) but also enables her to articulate resistance (through the persona’s mediating voice). The persona’s resistance to M’s narrative relies on the complicity of her readers, who are not expected to share M’s values. Perhaps only the bold empty space at the end fully gives away the persona’s ironic mediation of her mother’s discourse. Otherwise, if we were to assume M’s values, we could possibly read the poem as a simple and neutral, perhaps even nostalgic, report of her lessons. Also, if we construe Tashi’s inquisitiveness as naïve and misguided by her young age, and not as a potentially subversive reading of the marriage narrative, we could certainly see “Second Lesson” as an unchallenging reproduction of conservative gender values.

These two alternative and asymmetrical readings represent two parallel lines within the poem. On the one hand, from M’s perspective, being a woman is regarded as a negative absence, which is to be dealt with by following the path of decency, self-erasure, and non-assertiveness, leading to the ultimate silence and passivity that a woman is meant to embody. On the other hand, for the persona being defined as an absence is, paradoxically, an opportunity to challenge the previous generation’s ideas and be heard. By exposing how she, the female persona, is taught to become inaudible and disappear, she turns emptiness into a space of protest and resistance. The blank space at the end of the poem operates as a highly ambivalent signifier, a contested space: in M’s narrative it is the ultimate expression of female subservience and in the persona’s mediation a silent cry of resistance. Apart from this

ambivalent empty space, the only assertion of female agency comes from Tashi, who by, playfully or innocently, entwining picking tomatoes and picking husbands assumes that women choose men. M's response could be read ambiguously, as stated above, but construing M as a tacitly subversive figure in "Second Lesson" seems contrived. However, the fact that she is not seen as the agent of the oppressive narrative she hands down to her daughters potentially casts her as a victim of the system she is perpetuating. Whatever M's position, her lesson is clearly one that is not learned but quietly resisted.

"Second Lesson" presents a palimpsestic and complex example of the kind of resistant hybridity that younger female Tibetans embody when negotiating their inherited culture vis-à-vis their elders. The generation born in exile has had exposure to new ideas about gender, coming either from post-independence India or the West, and which conflict with those of the generation that escaped Tibet in the second half of the twentieth century. This conflict is intergenerational as much as it is internal for the younger generation. On one hand, the culture and ways of their parents represent a crucial link with the homeland they have never seen or lived in, yet they long to return to one day. On the other hand, the conservative attitudes of their parents, perhaps further rigidified by the trauma of exile and the anxiety over cultural survival, can also become a burden for the "born refugees"¹⁶ who have grown up as hybrid and hyphenated subjects. This tension is clearly explored in "Second Lesson," particularly in terms of gender dynamics. However, the reference to being "free from the cycle of female births" also brings Buddhism, as an epistemological foundation for patriarchy, into the picture. Considering the important role of Buddhism in Tibetan culture, and in the various stereotypes about Tibetan-ness produced after 1959, it is essential to explore how religion is negotiated by second-generation poets like Tsering Wangmo Dhomba. I shall now discuss the ambivalent role of Buddhism in some of her poems.

Lesson II: Tara's Tears

Tibetan Buddhism has played a crucial role in defining modern, post-1959 Tibetan identity, implicitly marginalizing Bönpo, Muslim, or Christian Tibetans, and demanding a certain doctrinal and ritual homogeneity from its four main schools: Gelug, Kagyu, Sakya, and Nyingma.¹⁷ The fact that Buddhism has been enshrined as a key signifier forces the second-generation Tibetans to engage with it, both as an unavoidable part of their heritage and as the glass through which outsiders look at them. Many among the born refugees could be called *cultural Buddhists*, in the sense that they subscribe to Buddhist ideas and participate in some of the Buddhist rituals that are part of Tibetan daily/communal life. However, they do not display the level of devotion and intensive practice expected by western supporters or exhibited by the previous generation. This places on younger Tibetans the burden of having to explain themselves and their particularly hybrid Buddhist faith.¹⁸ The Buddhism that surfaces in Dhompa's poems does not resonate with the *science of the mind*, which is philosophical Dharma presented by Buddhist monks in conversation with western scientists, but the ritualistic, *unscientific*, devotion of older, lay Tibetans. For Dhompa's hybrid personas, these rituals often appear to be incomprehensible and epistemologically other. A good example of this quiet resistance through lack of understanding, or refusal to believe, can be found in the poem "Hibernation."¹⁹

"Hibernation" is full of leaps and seemingly obscure correlations of events, which escape the persona's understanding, yet seem somewhat significant to those who surround her. These mysterious correlations link not only religion and politics but also Tibetan daily lives on both sides of the Himalayas. The poem begins describing droughts in Kham: "Grass was refusing growth in eastern Tibet. The rainmaster struck his damaru, lay his cheek against the river and called for rain."²⁰ We ignore whether the "rainmaster" is in Kham or exile, but in

either case the first correlation is established: his threefold ritual is meant to bring the drought to an end. Also, the distant drought has a direct effect on the persona's daily life, since M finds the event significant and applies its alleged message to her situation: "M said life too was a matter of preparation and adjustment. We lit butter lamps at the stupa and watched a trickle of light gather on the Buddha's eyebrows. Butter smog as air."²¹ These exiles, presumably Khampas or descendants of Khampas, gather to perform meritorious actions that will bring about the desired outcome: rain. However, the rituals seem to produce various ambiguous results, such as the "trickle of light [...] on the Buddha's eyebrows" or "Tara's tears" described in the following line.²² The signs could be read as the natural condensation of "Butter smog" or as the miraculous effect of the exiles' rituals. If they were to be considered the second, these would be an interestingly dislocated answer to the exiles' prayers, since they do not produce rain in Kham but "tears" on Buddhist statues in exiles.

Displaced responses and uncertain accomplishments pervade the poem, making it impossible for the persona to make any sense of the ritual's rationale. It is uncertain whether the events in the east (i.e. Kham) are related to the exiles' rituals and therefore whether the latter can affect the former. It is also uncertain whether the apparent signs of accomplishment are signs at all, if they are related to a ritual or are the mere consequence of "Butter smog." All these uncertainties are reproduced in the following line/stanza, when the paper used to wipe "Tara's tears" becomes a central and playful object of veneration: "The Tara statue had tears in her eyes. The caretaker produced the piece of scrap paper we used to wipe it off."²³ Again, the mediation of the puzzled persona introduces a quiet sense of resistance—resistance to believe, fully, in a view of the world that is at once familiar and foreign.

The "scrap paper" had some writing inscribed on it, and as it absorbed the deity's tears it becomes a palimpsest: "Words ran into each other where water touched ink like meandering veins in a frayed wrist."²⁴ This now blessed piece of paper can be read as a metaphor of the

whole poem, an incomprehensible palimpsest made of obscure correlations, where “Words ran into each other.” Nevertheless, if there was any expectation to derive a cryptic and meaningful message from the words mixed up with holy tears, it is explicitly debunked when the persona reads the piece of paper: “The monk blessed himself with it as I read: // 100 kilos of sugar / 100 packets of Taj Tea. / Total = 2,000 rupees.”²⁵ The scrap paper can be used as a holy object to bless oneself, as the monk presumably does by bringing it to his forehead, but the paper’s literal, inscribed meaning bears no apparent significance to the rituals performed, bringing into question their effectiveness and the epistemological framework associated with them.

This playful introduction of absurdity at the very center of the poem, where one would expect some key to understand the complex net of correlations, confirms uncertainty and incomprehensibility as trademarks of “Hibernation.” In this way, the hybrid persona resists an inherited view of the world that makes no sense to her. Tara’s tears are followed by more prayers and rain, although, once again, these rains fall on the wrong place (i.e. exile): “For days people stood in line to give offerings to the statue. Prayers fell as the spine of streets were wet for weeks. M kept us close to her, burned incense all day and said something was in the air. Water continued to thrash the gullies.”²⁶ Once more, both the people who “stood in line [...] for days” and M seem to find significance in how the events are unfolding, but as far as the persona is concerned “Very little made sense.”²⁷

As the poem draws to a close it stumbles upon a dramatic ending, which nevertheless remains incomprehensible: “The elders said the chief oracle of the Tibetan government in exile had predicted we were closer to negotiations but he could hear the cries of women slicing the air before him. When he dropped to the floor, he had a hint of a smile.”²⁸ The oracle’s prediction of upcoming negotiations might be the end of a metaphorical drought, one referring to the lack of exchange between the Tibetan Government in exile and the Chinese

administration. However, true to his nature, the oracle also drops enigmatic messages: “he could hear the cries of women slicing the air before him,” which are open to virtually any interpretation, and that, like his “hint of a smile,” are highly ambivalent. Thus, the traditional source of consultation does not seem to offer any tools for interpreting the puzzling sequence of events witnessed by the persona.

To make things more obscure, what could be interpreted as a piece of good news (if we assume that negotiations might enable exiles to return to their ancestral homeland) is seen by M as a bad omen: “M said no place was safe and offered the first burst of marigold to the deities.”²⁹ The poignant ambivalence of conflicting interpretations leads the persona to state the evident (“Very little made sense”) followed by some sort of resolution to the original problem: “News came of a day’s rain in the east.”³⁰ However, even if the original problem that triggered the baffling sequence of events is now sorted, such ending is by now irrelevant, since the focus was shifted towards how the invisible thread linking various events proves incomprehensible. The rituals might have worked by bringing rain to Kham, but the riddling and fluid palimpsest that the drought generated remains unsolved. The last line, like the last scene of an open-ended film, tells us very little: “After life. After life. So elders comb their prayer beads.”³¹

The reference to the “After life” and the elders “combing” their rosaries might suggest that there are no chances of returning to Tibet in this life and thus all their hopes are reoriented towards the afterlife. Such a reading is probably as valid as any other, and we might assume that the last line is as disjointed and ambivalent as the rest of events of “Hibernation.” However, for the elders, including M, the acts and words of the monk, the caretaker, the rainmaster, and the oracle along with the mysterious sequence of events is not incomprehensible, even if they might disagree on how to interpret them. For the persona, however, there is no narrative that manages to articulate the confusing sequence of events and

their alleged connections. The persona derives no meaning from them and feels somehow alienated from a world in which everyone is seeing something she is not.

The only certainty is, in a sense, the words extracted from the “scrap paper”, mentioning ingredients which are not traditionally Tibetan, such as sugar and “Taj Tea.” The playful intrusion of the prosaic voice of the persona talking about “foreign”³² ingredients in the world of her elders, where old narratives and readings are at work, confirm their mutual disconnection. In this way, the many meaningful links implicit in the events of “Hibernation” stand in opposition to the persona’s inability to make sense of them, like two unbridgeable worlds. The epistemological gap opened by the persona’s mediation reveals her hybrid resistance, which is expressed through ignorance, both as an unwilling lack of knowledge and as a deliberate refusal to bridge the gap with belief. The rosary of disjointed, enigmatic signifiers is left uninterpreted in the poem, inviting the reader to share in the persona’s uncertainty.

“Hibernation” not only highlights the epistemic dissonances between two generations but implicitly interrogates the connection between exile and Tibet, religion and politics, and cause and effect. Furthermore, by showing a rain-making ritual, rather than a meditation on compassion or the nature of mind, Dhompa resists the grand narrative about the Buddhist construction of Tibetan identity. Focusing on the lay, magical practices of the exiled Khampas, she resists the scientific, monastic picture of high Buddhism fostered both by the exiled administration and its western supporters. Also, by mediating the rain ritual through the perplexed eyes of a hybrid diaspora Tibetan, she problematizes her position as an uncomplicated insider. She is epistemologically hybrid too, taking part in a ritual while questioning its effectiveness, being emotionally involved in a sequence of events she cannot fully make sense of. The tension between being an insider and outsider to her own culture is a

constant in Dhompa's poetry, as I explore in depth in the last section by focusing on two poems that explore Tibetan-ness in dialogue with other cultures.

Lesson III: To Understand How We Are

A common theme in Tibetan English literature is to explore Tibetan-ness in relation to Tibet's powerful others. These are China and the West—the former regarding Tibetans as western barbarians and the latter as peace-loving, pastoral orientals. Another important element in Tibetan identity-making is the tension between the official definition of Tibetan-ness propounded by the exile administration, which aims to counter the Chinese narrative while engaging, and often nodding, to the western expectations, and the sometimes critical, diverging views of exiled intellectuals and writers. The official exile narrative sits awkwardly with the hybrid culture of second or third-generation Tibetans, but most Tibetan English writers offer their critical, differently nuanced, support to the exile leadership. Some novels and poems mention Tibet's internal others, namely Khampas, Amdowas, Bönpos, or Tibetan Muslims. However, it is less common to find references to Tibet's subaltern others—people from Tibet's borderlands who are neither fully Tibetan nor Indian, Chinese, or Turkic. Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, often writing from the margins, presents one such picture of Tibet's others in her poem “Intersection.”³³ This piece, seemingly about the Mishmi birds, it can also be read as an exploration of the Mishmi hills community, which obliquely reflects on gender dynamics within the Tibetan exiled community and, by extension, offers us a mirror image of Tibetan-ness through a subaltern other.

In this case, the Tibetan subject is not negotiating the gaze of a powerful other, but it is the other who happens to be under the powerful Tibetan gaze. The Mishmi, a hill community from the mountains that separate Tibet and India are approached by the almost

anthropological gaze of a presumably Tibetan persona. Nevertheless, the Mishmi are not constructed as a complete other. Although the way they are sometimes depicted in the poem is certainly exotic, their problems are not so different from those of Tibetans. As it happens with much anthropology/ethnography, the study of others reveals much about the observer. The poem “Intersect” could be read, and it was perhaps written deliberately, as a way of talking about the observing subject through its observed others. This crisscrossed, and inherently ambiguous, reflection is somehow implicit in the title “Intersection.” The Mishmi might be regarded as a place of intersection between Tibet and India, between the old and the new worlds. They could also be romanticized by exilic Tibetans as a repository of proto-Tibetan tradition that has remained untouched by the tumultuous events of modern history. The Mishmi share a common ethnic and linguistic root with Tibetans, but they are not Buddhist and have stayed in the periphery of Tibetan history. In any case, the Mishmi in-betweenness resembles the imaginary space of Tibetan exile.

“Intersect” begins with the taking of a photo, a metaphor for the whole poem, which might be regarded as an ethnographic picture of the Mishmi, but also for the act of representing another’s reality. A photo entails deferral, an othering of those who appear in it. Analogously, the deferred depiction of the Mishmi becomes a mirror for the Tibetan subject. Deferral and displacement are also very present in the first line, not just metaphorically: “The wives were home when the photo was in progress. They selected the shirt, cleaned the brocade trimmed boots, then called for tea as the men coughed dust over the plains.”³⁴ “The wives” are literally off-scene, they lie beyond the representative effort of the picture, but they have been brought to the center of the metaphorical photo that is the poem. In fact, the poem seems to address the space marginalized both by the photo and the Mishmi’s gender narratives. “Intersect” is by and large about the Mishmi women, who seem to be placed in an equally marginal position as that of Tibetan women. Not unlike Tibetan women in “First

Lesson,”³⁵ “Case 1,”³⁶ or “A Geography of Belonging,”³⁷ Mishmi women are an absence and are often described for what they are not, a negation of what men represent. This becomes clear when the way men and women walk is described: “Rustle of deep purple silk. Signature of self. Men too must have their walk. // Women had their walk. A particular hesitancy was detected in some of them which led to stray stitches in hemlines and a stated idea of womanhood.”³⁸

Whereas men have a unique way of walking that identifies them and signals a “signature of self,” women seem to have had it and lost it at some point in their history. Their absent and undefined walk is thus a mere memory of “hesitancy” that stands as a negation of masculine self-reliance. Furthermore, they seem to have been confined by “stray stitches in hemlines and a stated idea of womanhood,” unable to express themselves beyond such literal and metaphorical “stitches.” The contrast between male and female self-presentation is further explored, even though “The Mishmi Hills Monar sings a willy-nilly tune” and “There is no way to tell who sings more sweetly.”³⁹ Their different clothes clearly signal the gender divide: “The male has florescent bronze-green, or blue plumage” whereas “The female is ordinary as is expected in the mountains. Draped in brown like widows separating rice from stone. But this is now.”⁴⁰

Again, whereas men seem to present themselves in a confident and visually attractive way, women are *ordinary*, almost blending with the landscape, dressed in indistinctive colors and devoted to careful and quiet activities. The similarities the Tibetan, presumably female, observer finds in or projects onto the Mishmi can be seen to make a point about the position of women across cultures or, to be more precise, across trans-Himalayan cultures. However, the Mishmi could also be regarded as the Tibetan’s deferred self-image, one that can be denounced more freely because it allegedly belongs to an-other. Through the Mishmi, the Tibetan female subject reflects and denounces her own condition.

Moreover, the similarities between Mishmi and Tibetan women also extend to the area of memory and ancestry; their displaced position is not only limited to this life but also to the afterlife: “We don’t ask how their women died. The men were in prison or in the fields. They were on their feet. They are recalled by other men. // Let the dead stay in their world, the women say. They are remembered for their sons.”⁴¹ Like the Tibetan women of “A Geography of Belonging 3,” who cannot find their names in their family tree, the Mishmi’s dead women have also been obliterated, their stories untold. The men are entitled to dignified death narratives, dying “on their feet” whether “in prison or in the fields,” but women refuse to tell their stories and choose to be remembered through “their sons,” giving up the possibility of being remembered or represented in their own terms.

Nonetheless, a brewing storm or lack of rain, seems to bring not only women and men together but also bridge the gap between the observing persona and the observed Mishmi. Not unlike the Khampas in “Hibernation,” the Mishmi also believe in controlling the weather through rituals, and hence they “gather at the river bank and raise their voices as hammer to rock. Prick the sky, they pray.”⁴² However, like the persona observing the rain making rituals in “Hibernation,” the Mishmi (and their observer) seem to have no certainty that the rituals they perform will be effective: “But what do most of us know of the man who brings rain to the earth.”⁴³ It is ambiguous who this “us” refers, it could be the Mishmi speaking for the first time in the poem, or it can be a first-person plural that includes both the persona and the Mishmi. The uncertainty over “the man who brings rain to the earth” seems to cut across gender and ethnic/cultural divides, revealing that this tribal other might be closer to the Tibetan self than the latter would like to admit. Significantly, what brings the observed and the observer together is not a shared belief in controlling climate through ritual but a shared uncertainty about whether these rituals work.

The Mishmi, like other *tribal* hill people, have been traditionally regarded by Tibetans as wild men and women on the borders, both physical and discursive, of Tibetan civilization. They are not Buddhist, they do not speak a Tibetan dialect and their customs are perceived as savage.⁴⁴ By entwining the Mishmi and the Tibetans both through gender dynamics and rain-making rituals, the poetic persona seems to be decentering Tibetan self-perception and deconstructing any sense of Tibetan superiority towards the Mishmi. In this scheme the Mishmi become a mirror that allows the Tibetan persona to look at herself, to reflect about Tibetan-ness through a subaltern other, which turns out to be more familiar than foreign. The troubling resemblance between Tibetans and Mishmi finds its opposite image in “To Understand How We Are,” a poem about mimicry as a playful path to self-definition.⁴⁵

In this case, Tibetans are resisting an-other’s gaze, presumably that of a western observer: “In the magazines, our town became a city under dust; its inhabitants hardy, peaceful and leather-like (this is how we read about ourselves).”⁴⁶ By learning about themselves through the eyes of another, young Tibetans find themselves in an awkward in-between position, procuring self-understanding as outsiders. However, in order “to understand how [they] are,” these Tibetans pretend to be someone else in order to look at themselves as others, not unlike the Tibetan persona observing the Mishmi. This exercise in mimicry begins with M’s resistance to accepting the narrative created “In the magazines” about her people: “M said she wasn’t going to be evaluated by someone who stayed amongst us for a week and thought he knew her. She picked a word from the magazine and tried to fit it on her.”⁴⁷

The Tibetan subjects have come to be the scrutinized ones in this context, but their resistance, whether playful or angry, is overtly expressed. Whereas M questions the authority of the one who represents her and the accuracy of their representation, her children respond to this gaze in a far more humorous way: “Sometimes we pretended we were tourists in our own part of the city. We carried a camera, looked into the little shops and had all the things

M would not have in the house. We haggled over prices. We tried silver nose rings.”⁴⁸ This exercise of mimicry is not only a way of indulging in, for what M’s children is an exotic lifestyle but also a way of contesting the othering gaze of the outsider. Their mockery returns the gaze by misrepresenting the misrepresenter.⁴⁹

This resistant counter representation relies as much on appearance as on language: “Said –*absurd piece of jewellery –how quaint – stunning craftsmanship.*”⁵⁰ Apart from the amusement M’s children seem to derive from playing tourist, they also gain distance from their daily self-perception: “The experience made us feel far from hills and rivers. We had one street that took us out or led us back again into narrow lanes.”⁵¹ Thus, the act of mimicking another opens a space where identity can be questioned and reinvented. From the critical distance that this theatrical display creates, the mimics can re-think who they are, or, as the poem’s title puts it, understand how they are. This emphasis on *how* instead of *who* might be read as a way of pointing out that identity is performative, something these young girls come to understand by playing to be who or how they are not.

That focus on performativity is hinted at in the last line: “It was easy to recognize the ones who belonged and those who were just passing by even though dust gathered us equally.”⁵² This recognition seems heightened by the fact that the recognizers are playing to be passers-by; by deliberately trying to be who they are not, they become far more aware of what sets apart insider and outsider. This is indeed to understand how they are, rather than to understand who they are. Such a view is certainly in line with Buddhist notions of identity as insubstantial, impermanent, and fundamentally uncertain. Also, the Tibetan Buddhist method for realizing the undecidable and fluid nature of identity is very similar to what the persona does in this poem—playing with various masks to experience the emptiness of the self. However, the poem’s playful mimicry also showcases how hybridity and fluidity are enabled by the in-between space that is exile. “To Understand How We Are” reveals at once the

precariousness and fragility of Tibetan self-perception and the great freedom that such fragility entails. On one hand, being an in-between subject carries the burden of having to explain one's complex and vulnerable belonging and fight misrepresentation, but on the other hand, it contains the potential of adopting and playfully negotiating multiple identities. Realizing and embracing the ambivalent nature of hybridity becomes an act of resistance.

As the persona learns a lesson about performative and fluid identities, she also refuses to learn another lesson by not internalizing the gaze of an exoticizing and objectifying outsider. Further, she turns the outsider's gaze around and embodies the exoticness she perceives in the exoticizing subject. The persona can accomplish this reversal because her hybridity enables her to participate in the culture of her observer; she has access to the language and culture that exoticizes her and can even playfully adopt the identity of the misrepresenter. Although performativity is the dimension of identity most explicitly highlighted in both "Intersection" and "To Understand How We Are," there is also an important, more implicit, sense of relationality. To understand who or how they are, the Tibetan personas need to look at themselves through others, whether western tourists passing through Tibetan settlements like Dharamshala or tribal neighbors like the Mishmi. It is through these encounters that the Tibetan subject finds herself, not as a monolithic and radical other to her interlocutors but as a fluid and hybrid persona, already the product of multiple encounters with others. The act of finding and losing oneself becomes a simultaneous process of learning and unlearning, aspiring and resisting, or believing and doubting. It is in these interstitial spaces that the hybridities, paradoxes and struggles of the Tibetan diaspora are voiced and explored in Dhompa's work.

Conclusions

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's poetry is characterized by many silences, uncertainties, and leaps of logic and language. Her unique style conveys the fraught and in-between spaces inhabited by second-generation Tibetans in exile. This is a generation that is neither here nor there, neither fully Tibetan nor completely assimilated to their new diasporic homes in India, the United States, or Europe. Hyphenated Tibetans like Dhompa challenge many of the grand, monolithic narratives about Tibet, whether held by China, the West, or the exiled administration. Many of the personas in Dhompa's poems experience a tension between aspiring to connect with their heritage and feeling alienated from it, a simultaneous belonging and non-belonging. This is the source of much uncertainty and lack of definition, which functions as an act of resistance to imposed narratives, assumptions, and stereotypes.

A significant theme in Dhompa's work is the gendered experience of being a Tibetan exile. For a woman, in-betweenness also implies having to negotiate gender roles and expectations between two different and changing cultures. The conservative attitudes of many exiled elders are rejected as oppressive, while the link to the same elders is treasured as a window to the old world the born refugees never saw. Also, since the most common elder in Dhompa's poems is a mother figure, her teachings entail the further ambivalence of simultaneously affirming a female transmission of knowledge and resisting the, often patriarchal, lessons passed down. A similar attitude pervades the way Buddhism is presented in many of the poems. At times Buddhism provides the narrative foundation for patriarchy, but it is also an important element of the persona's heritage. Often Buddhist rituals and practices appear as obscure and incomprehensible, implicitly questioning their epistemological underpinnings, but never overtly rejecting the religion or its authority figures.

In fact, Dhompa's focus on impermanence and undecidability can be interpreted as a way of applying Buddhist philosophical principles to poetry. Although some of the rituals that

pervade the elders' daily lives and structure their worldview might appear alien to the personas; these personas articulate thought and words in ways that are arguably in line with Buddhist core narratives. Perhaps the Tibetan Buddhist notion of *bardo* or transitional space is the one that resonates most deeply with Dhompa's work. Though strongly associated with the death process, the traditional list of six *bardo* includes also liminal states such as dreams or meditative experiences; and also, life itself understood as the contingent in-between space between birth and death. The liminality of these spaces provides the soteriological potential of realizing the impermanence and non-substantiality of all phenomena.

However, in the context of Tibetan exile, the idea of *bardo* further acquires a political, historical connotation. Tibetan exile in itself might be seen as a *bardo*, spanning between 1959 and an uncertain, future return to the motherland. This transitional time/space is anything but a sterile waiting room; it is a vibrant opening where the past can be re-assessed and the future re-imagined. It is also a contact zone where Tibetans encounter other cultures, and through them reflect, challenge, and shape their self-perception. The in-between space and time that is exile is unavoidably hybrid and has the constant potential of becoming a locus of resistance. In this diasporic *bardo* narratives can be opposed, lessons unlearned, and certainties collapsed. Dhompa's personas act like a dakini figure that, in Gyatso's words, "militates against closure," challenging traditional and modern assumptions.⁵³ As her paragraph-like poem "Review" clearly puts it "who can say where one finds resolution."⁵⁴

Notes

¹ Tsering Wangmo Dhompa herself comments on this phenomenon: "As the first-generation born into exile we are just beginning to articulate our experience of being Tibetan outside

Tibet. For this, we've chosen to write in English. We are entrusting a language different from our mother tongue to speak of the loss or the absence of a country. These are complex negotiations." See "Nostalgia in Contemporary Tibet." Accessed March 23,

2013 <http://tibetwrites.in/index.html%3FNostalgia-in-Contemporary-Tibetan.html>

² Laurie McMillin. *English in Tibet, Tibet in English: Self-Presentation in Tibet and the Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

³ Dhompa's work has featured in Andrew Schelling, ed., *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry* (Boston: Wisdom, 2005), 41-51; and Tina Chang, et al, eds., *Contemporary Voices of the Eastern World: An Anthology of Poems* (London: Norton and Co., 2007). Her poetry has been acclaimed by poet-critics like Ron Silliman (see <https://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>) or Anne Waldman (see "Praise for *Rules of the House*" on *Rules of the House*'s back cover).

⁴ The deconstructive use of language in Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's poetry has been explored at length by Shelly Bhoil, "Rules of Language in *Rules of the House*: A Study of Tsering Wangmo Dhompa's Tibetan English Poetry", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 3.2 (2011): 251-58.

⁵ For a representative collection of Tsundue's protest poems see *Kora: Stories and Poems*. Dharamshala: Tibet Writes, 2002

⁶ Aside from her poetry production, Dhompa has also published one travelogue published in India and the US under different titles: *A Home in Tibet* (Delhi: Penguin India, 2013); and Tsering Wangmo Dhompa, *Coming Home to Tibet: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Belonging* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 2016).

⁷ *Rules of the House*: 20-1.

⁸ For an instance of how exile can be used as an opportunity for female empowerment see Tsering Norzom Thonsur, "Women: Emancipation in Exile" in *Exile as Challenge: The*

Tibetan Diaspora, ed Dagmar Bernstorff. (New Delhi: Baba Barkha Nath Printers, 2004), 322-41.

⁹ See *Rules of the House*, 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² In fact, the idea that a holy man, or a holy madman in this case, can bless things with his piss is humorously developed in Drukpa Kunley's story, a 15th century Tibetan "wild yogi."

For an account of the many feats this "wild one" accomplishes by means of his

"thunderbolt," a metaphorical way of referring to his penis, see Keith Dowman, *The Divine Madman: The Sublime Life and Songs of Drukpa Kunley* (London: Rider & Co., 1982), 95-8.

¹³ *Rules of the House*, 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ The term was first used by Tenzin Tsundue in his essay "Sontsa: Tibetan Youth Power," in *Semshook: Essays on the Tibetan Freedom Struggle* (Dharamshala: TibetWrites, 2007), 38.

¹⁷ The discourse of Tibetan identity in exile has been studied at length by various scholars. A few significant examples are Dibyesh Anand, *Geopolitical Exotica. Tibet in the Western Imagination* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); Jane Ardley, *The Tibetan Independence Movement. Political, Religious and Gandhian Perspectives* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Thierry Dodin and Heinz Räther, eds., *Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies* (Boston: Wisdom, 2001); George Dreyfus, "Tibetan Religious Nationalism: Western Fantasy Or Empowering Vision?" in *Tibet, Self and The Tibetan Diaspora: Voices of Difference*, edited by Christian Klieger (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 37-56.

¹⁸ This is a recurring theme in Tsundue's and Dhompa's essays. For instance, Tsundue complains about how "many of my non-Tibetan friends get quite disappointed when I say

that I don't do prayers, prostrations and other rituals. They want me -not only me, all Tibetans -to be staunchly Buddhist; wearing a rosary around our neck, saying prayers all the time and meditating in the mornings and evenings. I don't do all these and yet I boldly claim that I am a Buddhist" (Tsendue, *Semshook* , 68) Whereas, for Tsendue, the expectation to perform his Buddhist faith comes from outsiders, in Dhompa's non-poetic work we find a similar anxiety, however negotiated against the expectations of older Tibetans. In a poignant confession in *Coming Home to Tibet*, she measures her devotion against that of the previous generation: "Tashi offers, as I know other elders do, to the monasteries and lamas what she will not spend on her own pleasures. I have faith enough only to partake in small offerings. I see lamas as humans and, therefore, fallible, My faith makes fearful gestures. It has shallow roots" (43).

¹⁹ *Rules of the House*, 22-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² As "A Matter Not of Order: Six" constructs them (see *In the Absent Everyday*, 6).

³³ *Rules of the House*, 54-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁵ *Rules of the House*, 14.

³⁶ *My Rice Tastes Like the Lake*, 26.

³⁷ *In the Absent Everyday*, 72-81.

³⁸ *Rules of the House*, 54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Rules of the House*, 55.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ The dynamics of this cultural perception, very similar to how Europeans regarded non-Europeans in the Age of the Discoveries, respond to previously discussed narratives about who was considered Tibetan in the old pre-exilic world. The Mishmi would certainly not be considered Tibetan since their diet, language or religion differed from that of the self-proclaimed Tibetans, even though some of them might have lived in territories theoretically under Lhasa's administration (or any other Tibetan form of government). For the connection with Eurocentric perceptions it is worth reading some of the escape narratives of Tibetan lamas (e.g. Chögyam Trungpa, "Born in Tibet," in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*. Vol I. (Boston: Shambhala, [1966] 2004), 1-287; Tsewang Dongyal, *Light of Fearless Indestructible Wisdom. The Life and Legacy of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 2008)) written directly or translated into English. In their journeys of escape, they traverse these Tibetan borderlands and describe their inhabitants, whom in most cases they encounter for their first time in their lives, as savages, much in the fashion of European discourses about non-European others . It seems that the male Tibetan user of

English finds in the exoticizing discourses of the borrowed language, accessed through narratives about colonial India, a way of distancing himself from his civilization's own others.

⁴⁵ *Rules of the House*, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Such dynamics resemble Bhabha's definition of mimicry "as the affect of hybridity –at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring. [...] Then, as discrimination turns into the assertion of the hybrid, the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery"; see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 172. Thus, in this case the mask of the (mis)representer, the "insignia of authority" that allows him or her to (mis)represent, is appropriated by the misrepresented for the purpose of mockery and contestation.

⁵⁰ *Rules of the House*, 69. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary. A Translation and Study of Jigme Lingpa's Dancing Moon in the Water and Dakki's Grand Secret-Talk* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 242.

⁵⁴ *In the Absent Everyday*, 126

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