CRITICISM

Interview with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa is a widely acclaimed Tibetan writer and poet, and Assistant Professor of English at Villanova University. Her most recent poetry collection *Revolute* was published in 2021 by Albion Books. Her memoir *Coming Home to Tibet* was republished by Shambhala Press in 2016. She is currently at work on her next poetry collection *Substitute Heart* as well as an academic work on Tibetan exile history. On February 10, 2023, the editors of the *Journal of Tibetan Literature* sat down with Tsering Wangmo Dhompa via Zoom to discuss her approaches to writing in different genres, the power of language and poetry, the implications of place and displacement, and her experiences teaching in an English department at a time when the humanities appear under threat in the United States. This interview has been edited for style and clarity.

Journal of Tibetan Literature: Much of your writing addresses the idea of exile, mainly cultural and political exile, associated with feelings of uprootedness and disassociation. I would like to start by asking you about one unexpected way in which those ideas seem to manifest in your work. Going back to a published interview you had with Shelly Bhoil more than 10 years ago in 2010, you raised the following question, which I found such a great starting point for thinking about your work. This is what you said: "How does one use language which assumes or intends one meaning to speak of experiences in life which happens simultaneously and where meaning is in the process of living?"

What's so interesting there is that you call attention to a kind of gap between experiences that we have and the language of trying to write about them—that just seems so vibrant and important. I wonder if what you might be pointing to is a kind of linguistic exile. And I wonder if that kind of linguistic or literary exile is embedded in the very nature of language. Is language a kind of exile from experience?

Tsering Wangmo Dhompa: That's such a brilliant question, I feel like I have to sit and think about it for a long time. I guess one way to think about it is through the process of translation, right? Writing is a kind of translation, and writing about exile feels like organizing fragments into a sequence that is not yet visible. The experience of exile appears as a frozen space when I write about it because I feel like I'm in the same spot even as I am constantly on the move. But then, over time, my relationship to this feeling of being out of place shifts. So even my understanding of place undergoes change, and yet the object of longing persists. All the ways that I write about place

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remain in some ways focused around an initial moment of rupture. Maybe starting from the time of a Tibetan dislocation, say, 1959. Perhaps the feeling of exile won't feel like it has to be translated as a break in time and space when homecoming is no longer a lens to place.

I think translation would be one way of getting to the experience of exile which also includes a separation from what a word is understood to be and what it becomes or what is deferred, for example, home. For me, there is a linguistic exile in not feeling fully rooted in any one language but also in the experience of losing an intimate relation to Tibetan because it is a language I do not use every day.

JTL: I love the fact that you brought up the idea of translation. I wonder, how do you see your work as an act of translation, or as acts of translation? How is writing a form of translation?

TWD: I think, because I'm re-presenting a story. A lot of the vignettes even in poetry come from stories that I've grown up with and they're framed in a different order and tone when I organize them into a written form. In looking back at events, things get muddled up sometimes, right? Who speaks, what is said, the meaning of events undergo a shift in the act of remembering. Writing it down is a re-remembering and ordering that is another remove from the actual event.

JTL: We wanted to ask you about the way that you convey the distinctiveness of Tibetan language, particularly Nangchen dialect in English, and how you bring readers in English into a world with which you have what sounds like a comfortable, but also a complicated relationship. There's a passage in *Coming Home to Tibet* that begins with your entry into Tibet, but you also come back to it later. The example that struck me was the saying, "Is your body tired?" Here's a common greeting in Tibetan that you express in English in a literal and non-colloquial manner. I wanted to ask you about how you convey what you want to convey, and how you convey your experience in Tibet, your connection with Tibet, through language, in particular to English audiences.

TWD: I'm a slow thinker. I was an only child, and I spent a lot of time by myself, so I find it difficult to express my ideas in speech. Writing is the way that I can think through things.

In terms of conveying Tibetan expressions into English, I pay attention to the speech patterns of Tibetan, particularly *Khamkey* and Nangchen dialect. It's hard to capture or translate the embodied experience and sensation of place. Our language is also telling a story about our lives. Let's take the example of a question like "*ka a thi*?" which means "Is your body tired?" For me it's a question that's emerging out of a familiarity with a particular Tibetan nomadic existence. It made sense to me when I was in nomadic Nangchen and we greeted a guest who had taken a long journey on horseback to see us or returned after working with the animals all day. The sentence carries some vagueness outside the nomadic setting.

When I hear elders say words like *biribura*, or *sirsirra*, I know exactly what they mean, even though I can't find a corresponding word in English. The folks who use these words are of a particular generation from Tibet and I hear an attitude in *biribura* that is not captured in fullness in "blah blah." My class just finished reading Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. In the book's introduction Rao mentions it was not easy to bring the tempo of life and speech, that is, the spirit and feeling of India into the English language. How do you carry over the pace, routine, and concerns of nomadic life? Just translating it verbatim is fine, but then, you know, how do you convey the mode in which that language exists, the gestures within which a question such as "*kha a thi?*" exists. I'm not sure if I was able to carry the feeling across in my memoir. When I read *Kanthapura*, it's much easier for me to see it and hear the tempo of life that Rao wanted to represent. I can hear it in the meandering sentences, the cascading sounds in his language and in the syntax. A pace of life lives within the long sentences, they convey the interminable quality of certain oral storytelling. So I imagine an immersion, an understanding of the community, and paying really close attention must help in the process of entering into the spirit of another language. I'm not sure I accomplished it, but that was the goal.

JTL: No, I think you did. And you know, you come back to that later, and you walk the English reader through "*ku op ji?*" and also "*ka a thi*?" And that was really useful for me and I also thought that this is just a great way to kind of focus in on the depth of just single words and phrases. You have this great line that I wanted to bring up. You're kind of summarizing or you're commenting on the depth of some of those phrases that you talk about. You say, "English is the language I use instinctively to express myself, but it is the Nangchen language that brings me a visceral joy." I love that. "I am unable, however, to use it to argue or to be ecstatic." So it's all sorts of relationships with both of the languages.

TWD: It is related to memory, what the body remembers, and what that language is associated with. English is associated with school—it remains a practical language. But Tibetan, and especially the Nangchen dialect, is associated with a past, a very long history of belonging. It's also a place of longing which comes with many layers of meaning. It's associated with family—again a family I cannot meet and live with, but I can communicate with them in the Nangchen dialect. There's a lot of emotion associated with the language: love, belonging, longing, and loss. In that way, it's a language that has all of these historical and psychological meanings in addition to just being a means to reach and communicate with loved ones.

When I hear elders say "*Tsering*" in exile or when my cousins from Tibet say that over the phone, it moves me deeply. It feels like generations of people are blessing me, not just that one person saying it. I communicate with elders in Tibet on *WeChat*, and with elders in Nepal and India on

WhatsApp, and I love hearing them talk in the Nangchen dialect about their daily lives. Having the dialect in my life is one way of preserving a sense of belonging.

JTL: So you've talked a lot about translation already, maybe as one way of bridging the gap between experience and writing, and also a way of kind of capturing the spirit that you've talked about. So is translation for you a conscientious act of writing? Is it something you have to think about and work and craft? Or is it something that just sort of comes to you, that you channel in some way? Do you see yourself as a translator?

TWD: No, no. I think I'd be a terrible translator. I think of writing as translation, but I am not consciously thinking of the act itself. While writing I am bridging gaps or stitching memory or an event or an emotion. When I'm using a metaphor, I'm transporting or carrying over meaning. So in that way, that's translation, yes, but it's not a calculated act, particularly with poetry. Poetry is an easier form for me to enter. It feels like a first language for me. I don't feel like I have to follow any particular standard or fulfill specific expectations. I just trust that I can find a way through the material. I have to work harder in prose. I think much harder when I am writing prose.

JTL: That's interesting. You bring up the distinction between writing poetry and prose. And one of the things I find so amazing and compelling about your work is that you've not only been prolific, but you write across this extraordinary variety of genres and approaches. Your work includes poetry and prose, fiction and nonfiction. You do academic writing, and you also do more public facing discourse. So I wonder if you could say a little bit about how you approach those different modes of expression. Does the genre affect your process and practice of writing?

TWD: Definitely. I feel more comfortable in poetry because I've been writing since I was twelve. Poetry's familiar, I understand the shape a poem wants to be: its line breaks, its stanzas, the many rooms it might or might not seek. I feel fairly at ease in nonfiction too, although I struggle with form, pacing, and in determining the organizing principle of a work. Academic writing, I must say, is really hard for me. It takes me very, very long to organize my thoughts and arguments. I don't have the same confidence in the language, and it's harder for me to stand outside the work and identify the problems. I don't feel grounded in the language and I also don't feel comfortable assuming I know what I am writing about. For the last few years I've been thinking about the Tibetan nation, history, and ideas of unity in the Tibetan exile community. My diffidence could also be related to the subject I am writing about.

I've been writing poems about the nation too, and there's a freedom in how I play with form and subject that I don't have when I am working in prose on the same subject. I appreciate being able to play and experiment while writing poetry; gaps and some uncertainty are fruitful in a poem.

I'm concerned that gaps are met with suspicion in academic writing and so the task of writing becomes laborious. A poem can have many entry points, and many exit points. A poem can be documentary, intertextual, and rigorous in its politics and its aesthetics. That's what I find exciting in the works by Ocean Vuong, Solmaz Sharif, and Terrance Hayes, for example.

JTL: So maybe we can linger on nation a little bit and move to the piece in 2021 in *The Nation*, which is a prose piece that I read through twice. And the second time I thought, oh wait, is this poetry or prose? It was like a form of prose poetry. I thought it was going to be an exegetical piece on Perceval Landon's writing, which it was in some ways. But it was also much more than that, because it was so playful and vivid. As you are moving between poetry and prose, and you're starting to work on the idea of nation for a book, are you engaging colonial writers? How are you engaging them, if you are, and their ways of characterizing and caricaturing Tibet? Because that piece is sort of gentle and it's luscious, but it's also vicious under the surface, in the way that you pull out these things in Landon's words that we probably haven't seen before.

TWD: Luscious is the perfect description. I first went to a handful of books published between 1905–1924 (*Tibet: Past and Present* by Charles Bell, *The Unveiling of Lhasa* by Edmund Candler, and *Lhasa: An Account of the Country and People of Central Tibet* by Perceval Landon) looking for the names of birds, of botanical specimens, and information on maps. Tibetan autobiographies published in exile are rich in providing a general narrative of place but sparse in the specific geographical details I was searching for. Landon and Chandler observe the natural world with keen interest, their descriptions are lush and concrete. The landscape they paint for their English readers is alluring and exquisite. They don't reserve the same enthusiasm for Tibetan people; Tibetans are dismissed in one or two sentences. That tells us a great deal about how they viewed Tibetans. I borrow their words and refract their Orientalist gaze so that we're able to enjoy the bounty of the Tibetan natural world and at the same time expose them using their own words. Yes, it was satisfying and enjoyable working on these poems. The manuscript is called *Substitute Heart*. There are three sections: the first part loosely engages with Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, and the ways in which the elders who raised me were transmitting and translating bits and pieces of the teachings into everyday life. The second section "Observations from the Conqueror's Diary" is responding to the works by 1904 British expedition writers. The third section "Substitute Heart" revolves around longing and misrecognitions in exile.

JTL: You talked about Tibetan autobiographies, and clearly *Words of My Perfect Teacher* has influenced you. We wanted to ask about your engagement with classical Tibetan literature, either via translation or other methods, perhaps with oral Tibetan literature. Are there writings of the Tibetan past that you find meaningful?

TWD: You know, to be honest, I'm not at all well-versed in classical Tibetan literature. Most of the elders I spent time with were monks or non-literate elders, so as a child I was more familiar with lamas' teachings and folk stories. My mother was always trying to bribe me to read certain works that were translated because I was reading so many Western novels. She would say, I'll give you 50 rupees if you read *Milarepa*. Or she would say, I'll give you 50 rupees if you read Tibetan for an hour! For her, language was extremely important, and she felt that her biggest mistake was sending me to an English school. Till the end she said that she should have just kept me in a Tibetan school, or sent me to a nunnery. Tibetan language was fundamental for her, it was really valuable and important. She had read a lot of the canonical texts, and she would read me Buddhist texts and translate them to me on Sunday afternoons. I don't even remember what texts they were, because I was a terrible student at home. I was a very good student in school, but not at home. I paid attention to the elders and their stories, and I listened very closely to their memories. But I felt quite disconnected from all the religious texts and canonical texts.

JTL: And yet your current project is engaging with a deeply classical, very traditional form of Tibetan Buddhist writing. *Words of My Perfect Teacher* is a very literary text. It's extremely expressive and Dza Patrul is a great storyteller, but it's also a very traditional kind of Buddhist text.

TWD: Yes, I'm drawn to the storytelling, and all the analogies and all the metaphors in it. I read it every once in a while. I'll read it a little bit, because that was something that I had promised someone I would do. And I have Gampopa's texts and other texts, all the texts that I have promised to read. These are promises that I've not really kept, because I don't have the time, and I also don't have someone to read it with.

JTL: Let's talk about your mother. Not only was she the only family that you had for a long time growing up, before you realized that you still had family alive in Tibet, but she was also a single mother and a leader and public figure in Tibetan exile society. You have said about your mother, "Perhaps all of my writings will be a stupa of words to her." How generative is the figure of the mother for you in terms of your specific genres?

TWD: I think the figure of the mother is important to me, because I think it's maybe something that allows me to access many emotions. Maybe it is the place where I am able to be vulnerable and honest. So I think it's almost like she's the key to an entry into the themes that I'm interested in, and a lot of the themes that I'm interested in are also shaped by her. So much of my life, till I was twenty-four, I centered everything around her. And so my ideas about Tibet, my ideas about service, my ideas about nation, and a lot of my affiliation with Tibet are shaped by her life and her experience. I observed her so closely because we were always in one room, and there was no way

out of her sight. Nor was she out of my sight. In some ways I think I will always think as though she is still with me. So even the book that I'm currently writing, I'm writing it because it's linked to her. When I started working at the American Himalayan Foundation in San Francisco, a Tibetan diplomat had come to town and was visiting my boss. My boss said to me (the next day) that she was very surprised by the individual's response when she said I had just been hired. He said to her, you know, her mother was anti-government. I thought, wow, that's a pretty amazing thing to say. I don't think he knew me personally, and this statement was made twenty years after my mother's death.

So then I started thinking about what it means to call someone anti-government, especially when she was a member of Parliament, and working for the government. The Tibetan government is a government that is also standing as an anti-colonial movement. How do we figure out within this community who is for and against our own community? I cannot have my autonomy to a certain extent, because in the Tibetan community and particularly in the Nangchen Khampa community, I'm viewed as her daughter. But anyway, that's one example of how even my current project is linked to her.

But of course, just because I use the word mother, I'm not always talking about my mother. Mother is also a trope for me to sort of enter into many different conversations. When I say "my mother," it's a way to get access to and enter a voice that I think feels more intimate and allows me to write in a particular mode.

JTL: You've mentioned your current project several times. Can you tell us more about it?

TWD: I spent six years in a PhD program, and I still never learned to write my elevator pitch for my project. I am looking at the 1960s and the 1970s. What were the views of Tibetans who had come from so many different parts of Tibet into exile and were, maybe for the first time, meeting Tibetans from different areas of Tibet? People from Kham felt they were looked at as people from the hinterlands, outside of the imagination for many Central Tibetans. In memoirs, travel accounts, and fiction, Khampas are often described as bandits, barbarians, or people to be feared. So at first I was curious about that, and then I began looking at the ways in which we speak about unity in exile and the idea of unity as something that's always under threat. Under threat by our own diversities and identities. And so I was curious about that too. How are we thinking about unity? I was also thinking, why was my mother described as being anti-government? Who was she seen to be in affiliation with that made her anti-government? What is the history that I grew up hearing from the elders versus the history that was in circulation, you know, within the textbooks in exile? The Khampas I was with, who were mostly chieftains from different areas, were never present in the narratives in exile. So I put all of the different conversations and questions together and realized I had to read up on nation and Tibetan history. The *Tibetan History Reader* was one

of the first books I looked to and it was really important to me. It was important to read the works of Tsering Shakya, Samten Karmay, Yudru Tsomu, etc. too.

I am writing about the relation between two groups: the group of thirteen who built their own settlements in exile, and who are mostly chieftains and lamas from Eastern Tibet, and the United Party who were leading the campaign for unity and were seen as being keen on social reform. The thirteen came to be seen as a dissident group, and they've often been described in books by Tibetans and by scholars as dissidents. Why are they dissidents? They often live in footnotes. So this book is from their perspective: it tells their story, why they formed, what were the conditions they formed under, etc. Why were they suspicious of or threatened by the ideology or the movement of unity that was organized by the Tibetan United party, which was a powerful entity in the 1960s and 1970s? I'm interested in unity and how it was presented as both a moral and political responsibility of the new Tibetan nation in exile and also as the duty of a Tibetan Buddhist. I'm also interested in analyzing democracy and unity as frameworks for the government for thinking about the boundaries of belonging, or citizenship in exile, political obligation, and values. Who is valued, and what are the values of a society at any given time, and particularly in a society that's also engaging in an anti-colonial struggle? So yeah, I am trying to do a lot that I am not sure I'm doing well.

JTL: What kind of response have you gotten from within the exile community, especially in Dharamsala, or in India about this particular work?

TWD: A lot of people who object to the thirteen and see them as dissidents ask, why do you want to write about something that's so troublesome? Or they'll say, how can the perspective of the thirteen be a valid perspective? Or, why are you causing problems? Which, you know, to me are interesting questions. Why would you see a story about our own people as problematic? The thirteen certainly don't see themselves as problems, but they have been formulated as one. So, anyway I haven't had many encouraging words. But I believe this story is important because it helps us understand the struggles and the accommodations that ordinary Tibetans have made in exile. I think it is crucial to be introspective, self-reflective—which might entail being self-critical (of our own community). There will be people who will do this work much better than I can, but we have to start the conversation. This is history that people don't want to talk about, because we are proud of being united.

JTL: Have you seen your writing up to this point as contributing to an Anglophone civic discourse in Tibetan society or a pluralist discourse, one that allows for multiplicities and critique? Or is it something newer that you're doing here?

TWD: Yeah, this feels newer because my previous writing is personal in that it's my perspective, right? I feel a lot more responsibility in this project because I am presenting and representing a story that I'm not part of, although I knew most of the interlocutors while I was growing up. And it is a little tricky, you know, because it does entail bringing into the picture the government of that time, which was a government under the Dalai Lama. There's an understanding in our community that any critique of that government is also seen as a critique of His Holiness. So these are concerns I have about this book, but at the same time I also feel compelled to write. All the Tibetans in this book, whether I'm critiquing them, questioning them or telling their version of events– all of them were doing what they were doing for the same reason, for Tibet and the hope of Tibetan independence. The book is written with that same spirit. I also have tremendous hope and love for Tibet. I hope the book will open up conversations that need to happen. Even if it doesn't happen in the present, hopefully sometime later. Maybe right now, I'll just get shoes thrown at me.

JTL: This is a very different kind of question. You're so prolific, and you've written so many different kinds of work. Can you talk a little bit about your practice of writing, do you have a place and a time that you write? Do you have rituals for writing? How do you actually do the work of writing that you do?

TWD: During summer break, I'm pretty disciplined. I will read and write all day, and I'm very happy doing that. I don't know too many people where I am presently, so I'm quite happy to be at home working. During the school year, I don't get much writing done. I still find teaching to be a little hard. I'm not somebody who likes to be in front of people doing the talking, I am much happier if I can just write or be in the audience listening. So during the school year, I'll aim to find an hour a day to write but it changes from semester to semester. So every semester I have to negotiate and think, okay, what's my load, and how can I write? This semester, I have given myself an hour a day. I wake up early and spend an hour on the book. Sometimes I'll spend an hour just reading poetry. And then on the weekends, if I have any spare time after preparing for class, I'll spend that time writing. I'm not rigid about my schedule. I have a lot of people coming over, Tibetan friends passing through, so I abandon my book and spend time with them.

JTL: Since you've talked about the relationship between writing and teaching, I want to ask you about your role as an educator. You are in a really unique position as an eminent Tibetan author and poet who also is an academic, a university professor in the United States, maybe the only one who has both of those positions. And you've been at Villanova for over five years now. Could you talk a little bit about how you view the role of literature for contemporary American students, especially in a climate in American academia that seems to increasingly devalue a broad and liberal education and is really trying to push people into specific career tracks?

TWD: First, teaching is something that is fairly new to me, because I had a whole other profession working in the nonprofit sector, and then I went back to do a Phd in my 40s. So I'm still learning to be a teacher. I'm lucky that I get to teach works and topics that I'm keen about like Anglophone literature from India, works by undocumented Americans and underrepresented communities. One of the conversations I like to have with my students is to think about the time we are in right now, and ask what literature means, who gets to write it, whose stories are more visible? I think that's a good starting point. Who are we writing for? What are the conditions out of which the texts arise? What histories do we need to read to understand where the ideas are emerging from? In reading texts by writers from India we think about language. The decision to write in English is political. We talk about what language and storytelling can do for people, what storytelling makes possible—these are the kinds of questions that literature allows us to engage in. Literature allows for thinking about place, a way of thinking about community and social relations, and a way of thinking about history from different perspectives. We're asking the students to think about how they live, how they see life, and perhaps how the texts are allowing them to engage, evaluate, or rethink, or see from different positions. I think a lot of these texts are allowing them to think about the moment through different lenses and perspectives. And what a wonderful thing to be in a classroom to talk about books, not just about the ways that they have meaning, but just for the delight of language itself. To be able to enter a text and see their community through a different perspective, or ask different questions that they perhaps hadn't asked before. I think that's valuable.

JTL: So you said you were twelve when you started writing poetry, is that right? What kind of poetry were you writing then? And what had you been reading up to that point that inspired you to write?

TWD: I say I was writing poetry but they were childish rhymes. I didn't have anybody at home who was reading English literature. The only literature that I was exposed to, the only poems that I was exposed to, was in school. And that too was limited to European male writers who were no longer alive. William Wordsworth and John Keats from the Romantic period were writers that really stuck with me, even though I had no image for a daffodil, lyre, or linnet. The meaning of those images was haunting. I was drawn to the idea of using the vocabulary and the speech of the common people. I was drawn to the idea that poetry was something that was about ordinary things and ordinary people, because Tibetan poetics seemed so distant, you know, and about lofty ideals and important lamas and deities. Poetry seemed like a different realm. I was writing a lot of imitation poetry, because I knew very few poems, and they were all for my mother. Even at that age I was trying to negotiate distance—I was in school, and she was far away. So in those poems I'm trying to figure out distance, belonging, and love. I wrote a lot of poems for her. I think it was

much later, maybe when I came to the US, that I was introduced to more poets and realized that poets are also living people.

During my first summer in the US, I got a scholarship to go to the summer writing program at Naropa University. A family friend who is like a brother to me was teaching there and he was able to get the scholarship for me to attend the three-week program. I was very shy and proper, and I was stunned by all the kinds of writings that were going on at Naropa! I mean Allen Ginsberg was there, and I thought, oh, my god, is this poetry? I was so confused. It was really wonderful to realize poetry can be so many things. It's not just rhyme and not just meter. You can use all of those things but that's not all of it. I took a workshop with Norman Fischer, a poet who was also a Zen master and he spoke to us about the significance of breath, sound patterns, and thinking about a line in poetry in terms of breath. That was really helpful to me. Using breath as a way to work with line breaks, rhythm, and form made it possible to write the way I wanted to write—more intimately—or to move closer to the objects or subjects I was writing about.

My early education in writing was very limited because I didn't have access and also because nobody was writing around me, so I never had a reading companion. I did not have anyone with whom I could share my ideas. Because I had to build my process by myself, writing is very much a solitary act and I still don't really have a writing community.

JTL: We've come to our final question. How does landscape relate to other themes you write about? I want to read a fragment from a poem from *Revolute* that struck me. You actually use the word landscape in the poem, and other words for place, space, and land with all kinds of rich imagery.

From Revolute:

> "... Transnational flexibility
> does not blur the location of suffering; someone, like me,
> is never coming home. What grouping of texts,
> which images will speak for someone who is not me,
> but like me, has no place to escape
> from the place of belonging that is no more."

I had to read that a bunch of times to work my way through it. I think I still am working my way through it, but it's just this beautiful wrapping up of a profound sense of importance of place, and being in a place, but also the exile identity that's forever separated from that place too. So I don't know if that particular passage brings any thoughts about landscape, or if you have other things to say about landscape and your work.

TWD: Place is really crucial to me in my writing, and by place I also mean dislocation, citizenship, and different aspects of place and belonging that are so crucial to communities who are displaced. I was born in India, and raised in India and Nepal at a moment in time when the loss was so fresh for Tibetans who had to flee their home. I was born in '69, and most of the Tibetans had come in '59. The loss of place was all around us.

I often return to the works of the Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti who writes so beautifully about the loss of place. He asks, what is so special about land, except that we have lost it? The loss of Tibet was palpable and carried by all of the Tibetans I grew up with. The elders, especially all of the Nangchen Khampa elders, who came from nomadic communities, had a very strong association and relationship to land. For Tibetans, even as we move around, the aspect of homecoming is always going to be part of our conversations, even as the idea of homecoming gets dimmer and dimmer and may change. But the initial desire to return still lingers. And so in that way, place is something that I think about very often. I mean displacement is not something that happens once, and is resolved or disappears when we live in some other place. Instead even this re-settling can become part of the experience of a displacement that happens over and over in many new and different ways.

Last summer a young Tibetan man asked a question during the Q&A after a reading organized by Blackneck Books in Dharamsala. This man in the audience shared that he found it easier to write about his feelings in English. He wasn't able to express his emotions about personal subjects when writing in Tibetan because he felt bound by cultural and literary conventions and social taboos about what was meaningful content when it came to Tibetan literature. He was troubled because he was afraid that if he continued to write in English he would lose his "Tibetanness." What was he to do, he asked? If you think about language as a place of belonging, then writing in English is to feel a split inside you. I think he was feeling this displacement and this split within him. I think about this too but to a lesser degree, as someone writing in English.