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## Presumptive Space and the Tibetan Struggle for Visibility in Lhasa

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## Presumptive Space and the Tibetan Struggle for Visibility in Lhasa

### Abstract

I use the term presumptive space to describe public space in which the state withholds full rights of expression, but conceals this fact for political ends. Power is served by the illusion of public space. What is presumptive will always be porous to some uncontrolled degree and may be exploited to communicate dissent. Such reconfigurations of the visible and sayable reveal, as Jacques Rancière writes, (Rancière & Panagia, 2000, p. 125), the buried secret of all social order: "There is no natural principle of domination by one person over another" (Rancière, 1999, p. 79). This is the tactical importance of even the most tightly guarded presumptive space.

### Disciplines

Communication

## Presumptive Space and the Tibetan Struggle for Visibility in Lhasa

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I use the term *presumptive* space to describe public space in which the state withholds full rights of expression, but conceals this fact for political ends. Power is served by the illusion of public space. What is presumptive will always be porous to some uncontrolled degree and may be exploited to communicate dissent. Such reconfigurations of the visible and sayable reveal, as Jacques Rancière writes, (Rancière & Panagia, 2000, p. 125), the buried secret of all social order: “There is no natural principle of domination by one person over another” (Rancière, 1999, p. 79). This is the tactical importance of even the most tightly guarded presumptive space.

*Material* public space is the place where authoritarian assurances that citizens are content may be challenged),<sup>1</sup> a point amply demonstrated as waves of public protest stood against official narratives during the Arab Spring. In addition to rendering perceptible those who are affected by an issues, material public space has the important capacity to affirm the humanity they share with their adversaries. It also overcomes the screen of literacy that limits the Habermasian public sphere. In the dialectic between presumptive and public space, consider Tibet, a colonial project of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since 1950. Deprived of the instruments of democracy, indigenous Tibetans have resourcefully developed ways to display publicly what presumptive space denies. Given the PRC’s mantra of harmony and stability, the stakes in this encounter are high. In this essay I examine three Lhasa *ethnosites* that differ in the degree to which the regime has been able to enforce its presumptive power. I also consider a recent, radical strategy for increasing that power and a dramatic mode of Tibetan resistance.

I do not come to the space of Lhasa with a neutral mind. Han colonialism is an ongoing injustice project for ethnic Tibetans. The story is also older than that. I begin with the creation myth of a holy city.



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<sup>1</sup> Democratic regimes are not immune to efforts to suppress the unsayable in public space (Vick, 2009). Nor is this a project of the neo-liberal state alone, which allows capital to promulgate presumptive space through private property rights.

The holiest icon of Tibetan Buddhism is the Jowo Rinpoche, an image of the Buddha as a young boy. It resides in the Jokhang Temple in the heart of old Lhasa. Its story begins with Srongsten Gampo (r. 627–649), who conquered the indigenous Bons living on the Tibetan plateau, imposed Buddhist hegemony, and expanded his empire to Central Asia. When his bride-to-be Princess Wencheng arrived in Lhasa bearing the Jowo as a wedding gift, her wagon became mired in the mud. Understanding this as a divine omen, Srongsten Gampo set about constructing a temple. However, each day's building was mysteriously undone. Divination revealed an ancient Bon-po demoness sleeping in the earth, stretched large and terrible across the whole of Tibet—a powerful threat to the new court religion of Buddhism. Srongsten Gampo commanded the building of 10 more temple enclaves to “pin down” the demoness's elbows, knees, wrists, ankles, and shoulders (Mills, 2007) and render her immobile. The Jowo-containing Jokhang lies over her heart, anchoring the sacred and ancient geography that marked Tibet up to the middle of the last century.

This mythopoetic legitimation of Buddhist domination of seventh-century Tibet conveys the charged connection between landscape and political power, and the reinvention of geography that accompanies political suppression. The tale of the demoness is a story of old powers *enclosed*—a central term for this analysis—in an architecture meant to absorb and defeat them. In 1950, a new wave of occupiers from the PRC arrived in Lhasa brandishing fresh civilizing gestures and incorporative landscape strategies. In 1965, the PRC enclosed a portion of the plateau as the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), dividing ethnic homelands and severing ancient trading ties.<sup>2</sup>

Though it is larger than Western Europe, the TAR has a smaller population and smaller share of GDP than any Chinese province (Wong, 2008, p. A6). Some of the world's poorest people live on its high terrain. As a land buffer to nuclear India and a source of significant mineral reserves and water (ten major Asian river systems originate here), it is indispensable to China's drive to become the world's greatest economy, an effort sporadically impeded by the TAR's restive indigenous population. Like a fitfully sleeping demoness, the Tibetan longing for autonomy and religious freedom periodically erupts in uprisings that mobilize Western sympathies, inducing political anxiety in the PRC (Roberts & Roberts, 2009).

Tibetans have no enforceable rights of dissent. Any atmosphere of toleration disappeared in the Tibetan riots of 2008. These were a particular affront to the regime in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, when China's human rights record was a focus of international concern (Goldstein, Sherap, & Sibenschuh, 2004, pp. 156, 164–167). The wave of unrest that unraveled across the plateau has never fully subsided. It continues in a spectacular, distressing mode of public disruption that is uniquely suited to rip the mask off presumptive public space. That mode is self-immolation to protest the regime. Since February 2009, 118 Tibetan monks, nuns and laypersons have set themselves afire (Wong, 2013).

In 1950, Lhasa's area was less than three square kilometers. The Han have since established their own facts on the ground. Sixty years of building, demolition, and immigration have transformed an ancient holy city into a shrinking ethnic quarter surrounded by high-rises and Han storefronts spilling

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<sup>2</sup> I use *Tibetan* and *Tibet* to denote the indigenous inhabitants of a historical nation. *Han* designates the ethnic majority of the PRC.

westward into the Kyichu Valley. Most resident Tibetans live in the crumbling residue of this original stone, mud, and timber fabric, now less than 2% of the city and shrinking. Han dominion is visible in the city's population mix, in the dominance of Mandarin street and shop signs, and in English- and Mandarin-language maps of tourist sites and Chinese buildings that omit Tibetan commercial establishments. Until lately the most drastic change in the fabric of Lhasa was west of its Tibetan core: an expanding settlement of office buildings and high-rises where Tibetans largely work as menials. In May 2013, Tsering Woeser, a well-known Tibetan poet and blogger based in Beijing, posted on her blog an account of demolition in the heart of Lhasa to make way for a tourist city that will reconstruct the ancient Barkhor, the holiest pilgrim path in Lhasa (Woeser, 2013).

Tibetan development since Jiang Zemin has been partly a strategy to thwart Tibetan separatism by tethering Tibet to the mainland economically (International Commission of Jurists, 1997, p. 144). More than two million farmers and nomads whose modest plateau economies have been devastated by internal resource extraction and agricultural modernization have been forcibly relocated to pre-fabricated, permanent roadside settlements (Human Rights Watch, 2013, p. 4). A long-term policy of population transfer has also flooded the capital with Han workers lured by state incentives or displaced by agricultural modernization, dam projects, and natural disasters (International Campaign for Tibet, 2003, p. 31). Most stay three to five years and repatriate their earnings. While official population counts cannot be verified, the 2010 census claimed that Tibetans were 90.5% of the TAR's permanent population excluding temporary workers, their dependents, and military troops (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013, April 19, p. 9). In 2011, a Lhasa city official estimated that 260,000 of 450,000 individuals living in downtown Lhasa belonged to the "floating population" (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013, April 19, p. 9). This accords with other observational estimates that Hans make up one-half to two-thirds of all Lhasa residents (e.g., Roberts & Roberts, 2009, p. 20).

Internal migration by Tibetan indigenes to Lhasa is tightly restricted, and unemployment in the city is high among Tibetans. Most are employed in low-status jobs and are less able than Han migrants to find work on construction projects run by bosses partial to Mandarin speakers trained in Chinese building techniques. The state also bars religious practitioners from access to higher education, available only on the mainland, and government jobs (Adams, 1996; Schwartz, 1994, p. 206).

A symbol is a strategy for encompassing a situation, says Kenneth Burke (1973). This surely includes architecture. "Encompassing a situation" well describes enclosure, a strategy for creating presumptive public space. In this case, I take enclosure to mean a wrapping of material space that makes ideologically energized use of walls, barriers, and surveillance to harness and strangle Tibetan spaces from without. It encroaches, viselike, on a weak center.<sup>3</sup> Architectural "solidification" constructs an official impermeability to Tibetan cultural, spiritual, and political aspirations (Jones, 2000, pp. xxviii, 41).

On guard against punctures that could weaken and deflate them, Han enclosures aim to homogenize and fuse with Tibetan space, concealing the past to deflect detection and critique. By

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault (1977/1979) was here first, defining carceral enclosure as a "protected place of disciplinary monotony" (p. 141).

targeting the material taproot of Tibetan culture, enclosure renders even ethnosites that survived the Cultural Revolution spiritually lifeless and civically impotent (Appadurai, 1990; Jones, 2000, pp. xxviii, 41). These absorptive schemes compress any surviving complexity or coherence into a decorative veneer suited to tourist brochures, television specials (e.g., CCTV.com, 2011), and other mediated versions of presumptive public space. Stephen Flusty's analysis (1994, pp. 16–17) of paranoid urban spaces perfectly describes enclosure tactics. Camouflage and concealment create *stealthy* spaces that are difficult to locate. *Slippery* spaces lack paths of direct approach, *crusty* spaces pose physical barriers to access, *prickly* spaces are uncomfortable to occupy, and *jittery* spaces cannot be utilized unobserved. I propose yet another tactic: one space *ingests* another to cannibalize its identity. This is what is occurring in the Barkhor.

These mechanisms are up against *porosity*, exploitable gaps that limit how walled-off presumptive space can be. Threading a resistant cosmological meaning through permeable pockets of presumptive public space, Tibetans create alternative spatialities in rituals of constancy and community that reanimate sacred space within a political order unable to fully enclose it. Resilient porosity poses a public space dilemma for the PRC, which relies on displays of Tibetan sanctity to scoop up tourist dollars.

Encounters between enclosers and enclosed in Lhasa reflect particular circumstances. More generally, they show how certain modes of publicness advance by weakening and destroying others, and how the local remains a fragile production, indeterminate and unruly (Appadurai, 1990, p. 186).<sup>4</sup>

From the least to the most successfully enclosed, I will consider three Lhasa ethnosites:

- 1) **The holiest:** The Barkhor pilgrimage path around the Jokhang Temple is the spiritual and social hub of a Tibetan quarter ringed with surveillance and relentlessly squeezed by an encircling Han-built city. Owing to the persistence of Tibetans themselves, this was long the most resolutely public space in Lhasa. Now a series of government-business ventures with shopping malls, underground parking, gaudy decorations, signage, and relocated residents threatens to obliterate the lived history that made the corridor powerful for Tibetans.
- 2) **The most visible:** The Potala Palace, the highest in the world, is the emblem of Tibet itself. For centuries it was the residence of the Dalai Lama. Its last inhabitant, the Fourteenth, fled to Dharamshala in 1959, leaving the palace ripe for enclosure as a trophy of Chinese Democratic Reform.<sup>5</sup> A Chinese-built plaza annexed at its base unrolls an immense plain that both rivals the majestic structure and partners with it, making the whole a fused icon of Han sovereignty.

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<sup>4</sup> The always already there Lefebvrian notion of *lived* space as co-created common life (1991, p. 38) can be seen as a historically precipitated enclosure, a grooved and worn alluvium of *conceived* space made habitable over time by traditions of narrative and practice. The legend of the demoness has smoothed the sharp edges of a Buddhist hegemony into a nourishing myth. This process of historical gentling does not yet extend to contemporary Tibetans conscious of being overrun by the PRC as Tibetans once overran the Bon.

<sup>5</sup> After 1959, the official label for the PLA pacification of Tibet by the Peoples' Liberation Army.

- 3) **The newest:** Until recently the Lhasa railway station was the largest Chinese-built edifice in Tibet, the terminus of the Tibet-Qinghai railway, and a world-class public works project. Attentive to its local rival, the Potala, the station displaces Lhasa as the center of a landscape that dominated a demoness. Traversing miles of high-altitude permafrost, its tundra-spanning high-speed train mobilely encloses the plateau experience for travelers and tourists.

### The Jokhang and Kora: The Lure of the Local



**Figure 1. Devotees prostrating themselves at the entrance to the Jokhang Temple.**

Source: [http://www.shafir.info/plain/tibet~lhasa~jokhang\\_temple~jokhang\\_temple\\_2.htm](http://www.shafir.info/plain/tibet~lhasa~jokhang_temple~jokhang_temple_2.htm)

Traditional Lhasa is laid out as a blueprint of Mt. Meru, the cosmological mountain of Tibetan Buddhism, materialized as three concentric pilgrimage paths centered on the Jowo Rinpoche. Every Tibetan Buddhist is charged to pilgrimage to the Jowo during his or her lifetime (Figure 1). On these paths devotees perform *kora*, the ritual circumambulation that grounds a Tibetan spatial imaginary within Han-controlled public space. *Kora* daily renews the city as a cosmogonic mandala.<sup>6</sup> The outermost path, the

<sup>6</sup> Devotees gain sacred merit by circumambulating stupas, temples, lakes, piles of mani stones, and other artifacts vibrating with spiritual energy (*chinlab*). With each meritorious peregrination, devotees move closer to a good rebirth.

Lingkor, now intercut with new construction and highways, follows the traditional boundaries of the city. Prostrators performing *chaktal* at morning rush hour skirt built obstacles and ford intersections, pausing at small shrines with offerings and *mani* stones.<sup>7</sup> Normally the preserve of the elderly with time on their hands for devotion and exercise, on holidays the Lingkor boasts processions of young people striding briskly along.

The innermost Nangkor traces the inside perimeter of the *dukhan*, the god-lined, banner-hung assembly hall of the Jokhang. The air is thick with smoke, chanting, and the smell of rancid yak butter offerings poured from thermoses to fuel temple lamps. In this dark, close space of fresco-painted icons and holy scenes, white silk prayer scarves, barley beer, fruit, small gifts, and paper currency drape each shrine and reliquary, peek from every opening, adorn every surface. Monks and lamas bless the heads of the faithful and clasp their hands.

It is the middle path, the Barkhor, where spiritual life is most publicly on display and most threatening to the Chinese (Figure 2). Here are my field notes about the Barkhor in 2007, before the recent construction:

At sunrise, growing streams of circumambulators spill from small streets and alleys feeding into the corridor from the Tibetan quarter. Passing market stalls not yet open, devotees roll rosary beads and spin prayer wheels near the outer wall of the Jokhang. Many toss roasted barley and juniper into incense burners to beseech the gods. Groups of devotees arrange themselves in rows at the temple entrance. Folding their bodies sharply in half, they slap the ground and execute full-body prostrations. Wooden blocks attached to their hands slide sibilantly across the flagstones. Some will occupy the same spot all day.

Soon the Barkhor will be crowded with briskly moving monks, visiting pilgrims, and locals sociably chanting and murmuring. Wide-eyed tourists walk with the crowds. A few pilgrims lead animals—dogs and sheep that, once blessed, may not be butchered for food. Many walkers wear sheepskin *chubas* for warmth and wide-brimmed felt hats against the sun. Married women in striped aprons mingle with tall, nomadic Khampamen in high-heeled boots with weather-burned faces and gold teeth, hair braided in red yarn

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<sup>7</sup> Prostration is a strenuous devotional practice of advancing along a chosen religious path. Standing prostrators clasp their hands above their heads, pulling them straight down to forehead and heart in turn. In a single swift motion they bend down to slap their hands on the ground for support, thrusting their legs out to their full length behind. The movement ends by stretching the fingers, as they rest on the ground, to the sky. Pulling their legs to a sitting position at a point no further than the place their outstretched hands have come to rest, they begin the sequence again. Canvas aprons and leather kneepads are often worn to protect the body, and wooden blocks are sometimes strapped to the palms.

and wrapped around their heads.<sup>8</sup> Coral and turquoise jewelry are on display, and silver daggers tucked in waist wraps and belts. Silver bracelets with coral, turquoise, and bone adorn Khampa women. (Marvin, 2007)

The passing parade is skewed middle-aged and older, part generational attentiveness to devotional obligation, part political necessity. To protect jobs and university places, students and Tibetan cadres may disguise circumambulation as ordinary walking (Keutsang, 2001, p. 187).

Lacking formal political power, Tibetans embrace kora as a mode of public expression. They use the only instruments they have, their ritual resourcefulness and their bodies, to draw a landscape of cosmic concern into palpable existence and signify to others that they do so. The alternative spiritual order they inhabit unsettles the Han.<sup>9</sup> These constant, simple journeys tirelessly construct the graduated stupa of the universe and convene a deep, horizontal comradeship (borrowing from Benedict Anderson) of the faithful from every part of the plateau, every age, class, and monastic lineage. This commitment to the institutions and relationships that sustain the sacred universe is visible to all. The Jokhang provides a resonant accompanying narrative by symbolizing the defeat of underworld forces, "turning them from evil to good," uniting a victorious Buddhist nation "under the governance of a righteous king" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 34).

Given this potent public witness, it is unsurprising that over the years, the most explosive confrontations between Tibetans and the authorities have begun in the Barkhor (Figure 3). Seeing kora in action is a touristic mandate for Western and Chinese visitors, whose dollars help offset the more than \$5 billion invested in Han development since liberation.

In 1984, an access road was widened into a broad plaza in front of the temple with parking for tour buses. The plaza made a show of religious tolerance while providing open ground for troops to swoop in at any sign of disorder. A police station nearly opposite the entrance to the Jokhang signals the jittery (Flusty's term for constantly observing) readiness of authorities to clamp down on dissent. Especially notable amidst the eddying crowds is what does not move: an elaborate security apparatus of loudspeakers, cameras, and officers of the People's Armed Police (PAP). Streams of circumambulators part around these human islands of enclosure seated on four sides of the temple beneath parasols that block

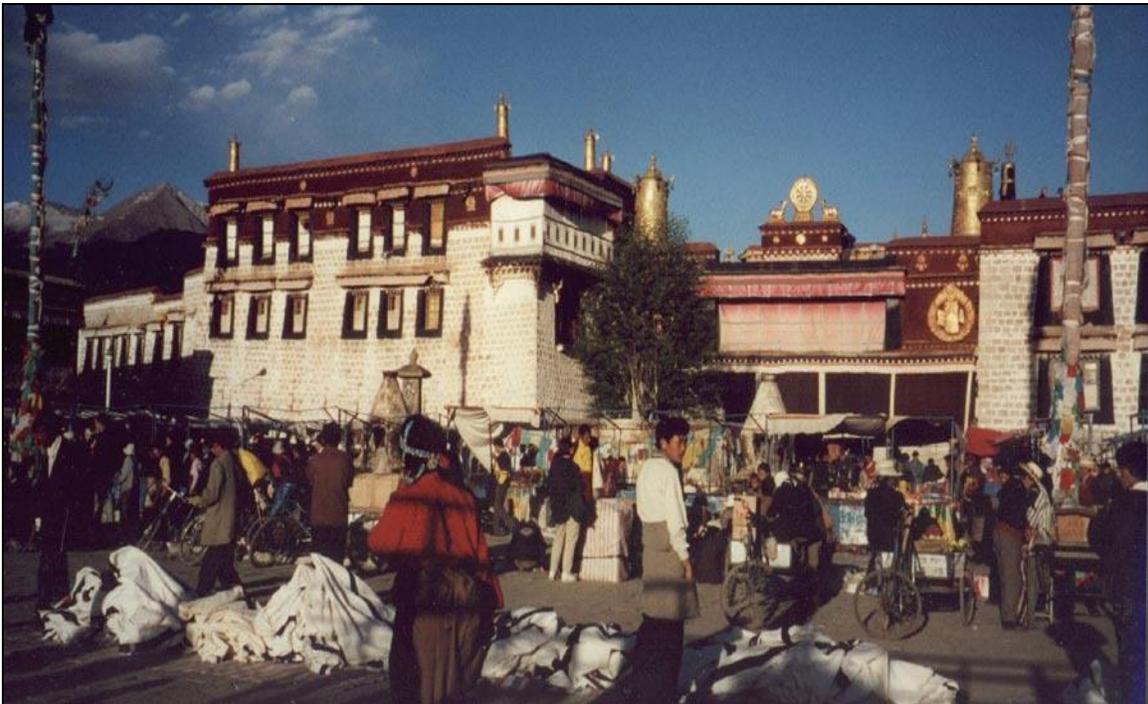
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<sup>8</sup> After 2008 the Chinese increasingly restricted Tibetan travel within and outside the TAR, thereby disrupting Tibetan pilgrimages to sacred religious sites (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2013, May 20, p. 8)

<sup>9</sup> Despite their reputation for nonviolence, Tibetans have forcibly resisted the Chinese. They seized the Chinese capital of X'ian and established a puppet government in the eighth century. They successfully expelled Qing dynasty troops from Lhasa in 1912. They put up armed resistance during the 1959 uprising against Chinese rule, the establishment of the Tibet Autonomous Region in 1965, a Cultural Revolution massacre on June 7, 1968, and riots in 1987 and 1989. The 2008 riots are the latest in this narrative. Today factions of the exile community oppose the Dalai Lama's Middle Way of nonviolence and cultivation of the Chinese.

the harsh plateau sun, poised to shut down any unfurled Tibetan flag, any flash of a protest sign or picture of the Dalai Lama, or self-immolation attempt.<sup>10</sup>

The Barkhor has been a relatively unsuccessful presumptive space. In the porous center of the old city, closing down the corridor in response to protest is politically clumsy. Confrontations between Tibetans and police are quickly reported in social media, so that even the most ideologically innocent are informed of the structure of force that coerces Tibetan protests and religious activity. This makes China vulnerable to international criticism. More important, it endangers the touristic romance that translates into revenues.



**Figure 2. The Jokhang Temple and Barkhor Corridor, Lhasa.**

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<sup>10</sup> Stationing police around the temple goes back to 1987. Ronald Schwartz (1994) chronicled the 1987 uprising that launched the modern fusion of religion and political protest in Tibet and its aftermath.



**Figure 3. Disorder in the Barkhor, March 24, 2008.**

Source: Anonymous tourist photo. *The New York Times* at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/24/world/asia/24tibet.html?fta=y>

Ethnic resistance last exploded in 2008. The anniversary of the March 10, 1959, national uprising converged with the Tibetan New Year, a frequent occasion of unrest. A group of monks marched on the Barkhor to protest the detention of colleagues from Drepung Monastery.<sup>11</sup> The PAP truncheoned them. Four days later, Tibetans responded by looting and burning Han shops and dwellings and setting fire to vehicles. Over two days, 19 ethnic Han were beaten and killed. According to Xinhua, 382 civilians and 241 police were injured ("Beijing's Blind Spot," p. A38). Dharamshala, the Tibetan government in exile, placed Tibetan deaths at 203, and thousands were detained (Barboza, 2008, p. A14; Wong, 2008, p. A6). The turmoil traveled quickly across the plateau.

Having learned in Tiananmen Square that local space has a different scale in a viral age, and mindful of international scrutiny just before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, authorities moved slowly. By some accounts their delayed response was calculated to embolden Tibetan rioters and furnish footage of Chinese restraint for international circulation. Tourists' and journalists' travel permits were revoked. The Barkhor circuit was closed. In the words of James Miles, the sole Western journalist in Lhasa at the time:

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of the riots see Barnett (2008).

The road around the [Jokhang] temple, normally packed with pilgrims spinning their prayer wheels and murmuring prayers, is now nearly empty. At one point those trying to walk around it—an act of piety—were required to walk through a column of gun and baton-toting troops, one by one, and present their identity cards. Your correspondent saw several turned away—usually it appeared, pilgrims from out of town—before the circuit was blocked to all. The pious had no choice but to turn back, retracing their steps around the temple in an anti-clockwise direction (to Tibetans unholy). (Quoted in “Lhasa under Siege,” 2008).

Six weeks later, Tibet was reopened to closely supervised groups of Han sightseers and journalists. During the jittery interval surrounding the Olympics, authorities tried to prevent additional dissent without further tarnishing the image of Chinese harmony or drying up tourist dollars. Restrictions on travel and the skittishness of prospective visitors shrank tourist arrivals from 4 million in 2007, the first full year of the Qinghai-Tibet railway operation, to 2.2 million in 2008 (“China Aiming,” 2009).

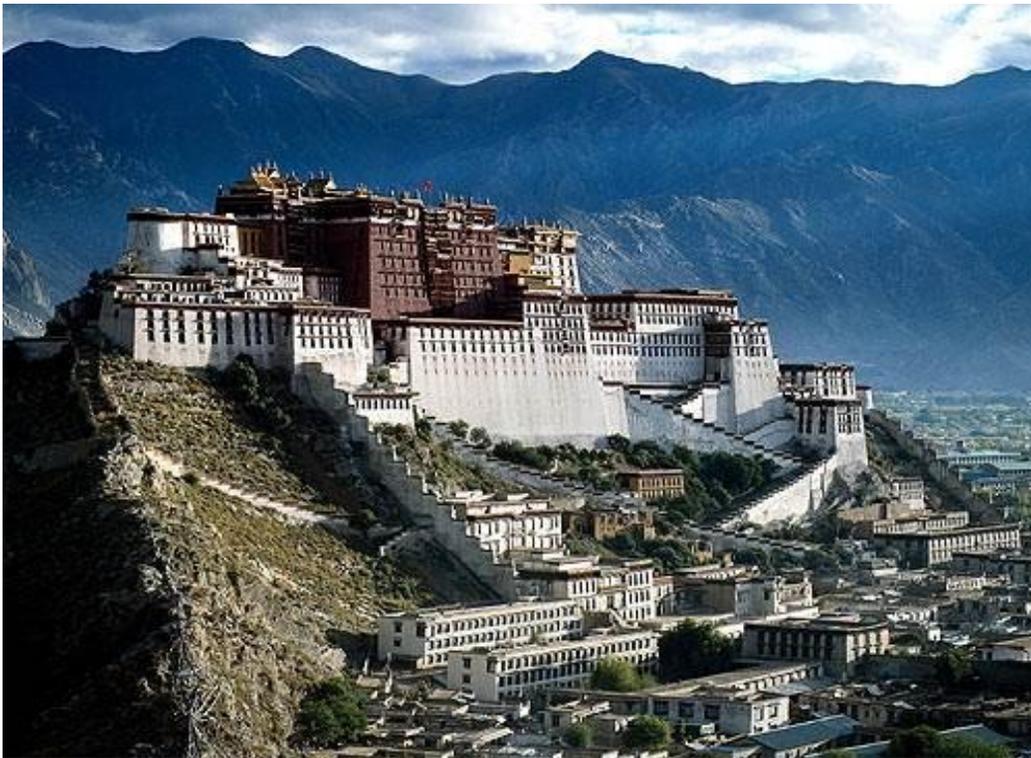
On the same anniversary a year later, the Chinese, hoping to dampen unrest, launched a preemptive tactical enclosure by offering cash for New Year celebrations to monasteries across the TAR. It was mostly refused. March 28, 2009, was designated “Serf Liberation Day.” Under military lockdown and in the absence of foreign tourists, displays of mass compliance commemorated the official emancipation of Tibet (Dasgupta, 2009; Shakya, 2009). Troops patrolled monasteries. Cell phones were jammed. The State Council Information Office released a white paper lauding half a century of Democratic Reform, as the Han takeover is called, and the liberation of a million people from an oppression “darker than medieval Europe.”

Despite the political risk, local surreptitiously court Westerners for their ability to focus world attention on the plight of Tibetans (Schwartz, 1994). Meanwhile, the spiritual and material desires of well-intentioned Western and Chinese visitors pose their own kind of peril. “Tibet is once again being Orientalised, this time not by Western orientalists but by the urban elite of new China,” one observer wrote (Shepherd, 2006, p. 254). Locals have been accused of performing scripted simulations of the “authentic Tibetanness” visitors demand (Adams, 1996, p. 511). No doubt such performances exist, but the ranks of dedicated circumambulators gave no impression of play-acting during my visit in the summer before the 2008 riots. Outside the scrutiny of resident Hans, ordinary Tibetans took pains to signal displeasure with the Chinese at every opportunity in buses, restaurants, and tea shops. I heard similar reports from other Western visitors.

Simulation will now emerge on a different scale in staged backgrounds for restaurants, bars, and art galleries aiming to draw new kinds of tourists to the renamed Lhasa City. Having survived the removal of mani cylinders and Buddha statues, prohibitions on religious practice, the desecration and looting of the Jokhang during the Cultural Revolution, and demolitions of stately mansions at the margin of the corridor, the Tibetan quarter now faces a new challenge. At stake is the rapid ingestion of the dense fabric of the quarter by malls and open squares, plans to stealthily relocate most residents of the old city (making them hard to find) to a slippery western suburb (with no contiguous connection), the crusty denial (posing a barrier) of entry permits for Kham and Ando pilgrims from outside the TAR, and the pull of a popular

culture that inundates the young with images of a dazzling world beyond the quarter. The goal is to weaken the spiritual power of the Barkhor by demolishing a seeable history of patient suffering and endurance within which kora makes sense, and in which the Chinese must be careful in showing their hand.

To sum up: The daily undertow of kora has long reproached Han efforts to fashion a presumptive landscape of unity. In Flusty's terms, the Barkhor Corridor has been a jittery space manifestly under surveillance. Exchanges of covert messages among the streaming pilgrims make it a prickly space for both devotees and police. Porosity, its greatest protection, managed to put authorities visibly on the defensive. Plainly visible coercive techniques shored up a Han version of public order even as the infiltration of monasteries and detention of dissidents was concealed. Limited enclosure enjoyed limited success. The Chinese once accepted the costs of public visibility to convince Tibetans of the futility of dissent in a presumptive space of controlled expression, but that tolerance appears to be over. They are remaking the space with the sole object of generating tourist revenue and eradicating a holy tradition's visible sedimentation on any terms other than theirs. Architecture will no longer take exception to power. Security will be more present and less obvious. Only the Jokhang itself is likely to survive, stranded in a built environment that insures the presumptive separation of protest from the temple itself.



**Figure 4. The Potala Palace and the Square.**

Source: <http://www.presscluboftibet.org/china-tibet-29/potala-palace.htm>

From a Han perspective, the second ethnosite has been a more successful enclosure. The Potala Palace, a 13-story fortress-monastery at the summit of Marpo Ri, consists of 1,000 rooms (Amundsen, 2001). Rising as if sculpted from the cliffs, its chunked trapezoidal masses echo the spectacular peaks around them (Figure 4). The palace's mystical associations draw the devout and spiritually adventurous—or rather, they used to. Climbing the Potala's seemingly endless steps once meant ascending Mt. Meru toward enlightenment. These days Mt. Meru is full of tourists wearing costumes and taking photographs. Many arrive in Chinese-approved tour groups, social enclosures that manage how tourists spend their time. Tibet's largest industry is tourism, and the Potala is its largest draw. At night it glows with the jarring luminosity of a Las Vegas casino.

Built over a thousand years from the 7th to the 17th centuries, the palace is the mythical abode of Avalokiteśvara-Chenrezig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, reincarnated in successive Dalai Lamas who presided over predecessors entombed within, each a link in a continuously emanated chain of the living and the dead. A Tibetan song that sees the Dalai Lama's face in the sun's reflection off its golden roof, and his robes in the *khatags* at its base (Woeser, 2007), testifies to the identification of His Holiness with the palace in the imagination of the faithful. These days the palace is a trophy of Democratic Reform, seized when the Dalai Lama fled to India, leaving his predecessors in the custody of the PRC.

A time-consuming process of securing tickets to the palace gives authorities the opportunity to screen and limit tourists on a given day. For strictly limited periods, visitors are shepherded past surveillance cameras and state-licensed guides on tightly controlled tours through the museum portion of the palace. Ethnic Tibetans, their numbers adjusted to accommodate daily tourist allocations, visit through a separate entrance. Some perform small rituals when the guards are not looking.

In 1995, the Chinese razed the Shöl, an ancient settlement at the base of Marpo Ri. In its place a vast military parade ground, un-Tibetan in scale and horizontality, stamps the Chinese brand on the noblest structure in Tibet. The plaza references Tiananmen Square, the premier public space of the PRC. New Potala Palace Square's egalitarian expanse pokes a revolutionary thumb in the eye of the aloof, mysterious Potala, the architectural jewel of feudal Tibet. Just as Tiananmen's annexation to the Forbidden City usurped and assimilated imperial mystique for revolutionary China (Hung, 2005), New Potala Palace Square appropriates the palace's majesty and prestige for state occasions and military parades. On the far side of the plaza, the sculpture "Memorial to the Liberation of Tibet" represents Mt. Everest and China's claim to the world's highest mountain (Figure 5). The point for a local population is that Everest is higher than the peak on which the highest palace in the world rises. Tibetans have their own narrative for the plaza. They call it Kalachakra Square, imagining the Dalai Lama's future return to conduct a world-creating Kalachakra initiation for 100,000 devotees on this very site (Barnett, 2006, pp. 82, 186).



**Figure 5. Memorial to the Liberation of Tibet, New Potala Palace Square.**

Source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/asipos49/4813036540/sizes/o/in/photostream>

The square was a fraught setting in the prelude to the Olympics. The Olympic torch's global journey commenced shortly after the Lhasa riots, and "Free Tibet" demonstrations followed it around the world to reach Lhasa in June. It traversed five miles of heavily policed streets filled with spectators sporting identical nametags and waving identical Chinese flags. Avoiding the Tibetan quarter and the site of the riots, the torch advanced to New Potala Palace Square, where the Chinese Communist Party's Tibetan secretary denounced the "splittist" schemes of the "Dalai clique" (Reynolds, 2008). "Tibet's sky will never change and the red flag with five stars will forever flutter high above it," he declared (Yardley, 2008, para. 2). Rhetorically, he elevated the Chinese standard above the palace, a pointed image in a Buddhist nation where fluttering prayer flags transport believers' wishes to heaven.

The square is the site of real-estate promotions, car exhibitions, commercial fairs, fashion shows, and military parades (Figure 6). The Tibetan-Chinese pop singer Han Hong performed there in 2004 after a furious blogging campaign denounced her plans to land on the palace in a helicopter as a desecration. Instead she landed on the square. The image of the palace is a commercial staple, appearing on mobile phone advertisements, 50 RMB currency notes, MTV, and clothing. The blogger Woesser (2007, para. 15) laments, "The Potala Palace has even been miniaturized into models made from very cheap materials for

use as window displays in hotels, restaurants and shops, decorating the vulgar landscape of this commodity-driven society controlled by ideology. Through such a process of being endlessly reproduced, [the palace] has been thrown down into the world of mortals from the heights of heaven.”



**Figure 6. Youth Day in Potala Square, May 4, 2009.**

Source: <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/showthread.php?156617-Today-s-Photos-Tuesday-May-5th-2009Reuters>

As an enclosure, the Potala is stealthy, its interior concealed from outside view; slippery, as bureaucratic obstacles block direct access; crusty (physically barricaded); and jittery (constantly observed). Whereas the Barkhor’s circling parade publicly rebukes Han control, the Potala museum ingests Tibetan history in a triumphalist narrative that lacks any punctuating debate. Still, it is gloriously porous. Towering unenclosable above the city, it poses and reposes the question of the Dalai Lama’s absence to all who see it. The Chinese regard it as a monument to their victory over feudalism. For Tibetans it signifies the constancy of the Dalai Lama, whose return they long for. Because the *sight* of the Potala is

unenclosable, so is its final meaning. The Chinese are doing what they can do about this, constructing a skyline of tall buildings that reduce the Potala's domination of the horizon from the vantage of the streets.

### **Train to Heaven**

The high-speed Qinghai-Tibet railway, completed in 2006, brings new enclosures to Tibet. First is the railway station, until recently the city's largest Chinese-built edifice (Figure 7). The station reprises the Potala in modernist terms, duplicating the palace's white and ochre palette, mimicking its massed volumes and trapezoidal shapes, and, like the palace, exaggerating the traditional scale and proportions of Tibetan architecture. There are differences as well. The station's concrete walls straighten the tapered grace of the Potala's silhouette and regularize its irregular masses in the manner of such monuments to Soviet classicism as the Ten Great Buildings in Tiananmen Square. Whereas the original Potala embeds itself in the landscape, the reprised version is a "drama of intimidation" (Carrasco, 1981) standing solitary on its concrete plain.

Before 1959 the inner Red Palace of the Potala contained a monastery and ritual precincts. The outer White Palace housed administrative offices. The reinvented Potala inverts that palette, perhaps deliberately. The more secular white has migrated to the station's central elevation and is flanked by ochre wings. At opening ceremonies in 2006, Han broadcasters described this traditional Tibetan hue as the "red of Chinese happiness."

The station is a supremely confident landmark of Chinese nationalism with, it could be said, Tibetan characteristics. Fused Han and Tibetan elements testify to political and cultural integration. Alternatively, one could say that Tibetan traditions are imprisoned in Chinese stone. Ingesting the palace and reanimating it in sinicized form, the station is the 21st-century version of nailing down the demoness. The symbolic compression of enclosure appropriates the palace's emanated majesty to serve Chinese triumphalism. The semiotics of domination sucks the life but not the politics from Tibetan space.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I adapt Vincent Miller's figure of speech (2006).



**Figure 7. Lhasa Railway Station.**

Source:

[http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.rmtbristolrail.org.uk/archives/Lhasa2.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.rmtbristol.org.uk/2006/06/&usg=\\_\\_5tlrvTbLqmklsmCIgHI59k9J0WU=&h=305&w=450&sz=46&hl=en&start=44&zoom=1&tbnid=Yj\\_jdUgd7xUnQM:&tbnh=155&tbnw=238&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dlhasa%2Btrain%2Bstation%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26biw%3D1160%26bih%3D839%26tbs%3Disch:10%2C1444&um=1&itbs=1&iact=hc&vpx=149&vpy=297&dur=1747&hovh=185&hovw=273&tx=165&ty=115&ei=ZFK\\_TKaVNYH78Abk\\_si-Bg&oei=8VG\\_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&esq=8&page=3&ndsp=18&ved=1t:429,r:4,s:44&biw=1160&bih=839](http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.rmtbristolrail.org.uk/archives/Lhasa2.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.rmtbristol.org.uk/2006/06/&usg=__5tlrvTbLqmklsmCIgHI59k9J0WU=&h=305&w=450&sz=46&hl=en&start=44&zoom=1&tbnid=Yj_jdUgd7xUnQM:&tbnh=155&tbnw=238&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dlhasa%2Btrain%2Bstation%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26biw%3D1160%26bih%3D839%26tbs%3Disch:10%2C1444&um=1&itbs=1&iact=hc&vpx=149&vpy=297&dur=1747&hovh=185&hovw=273&tx=165&ty=115&ei=ZFK_TKaVNYH78Abk_si-Bg&oei=8VG_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&esq=8&page=3&ndsp=18&ved=1t:429,r:4,s:44&biw=1160&bih=839)

For centuries, every traveler's first glimpse of Lhasa was the shining grandeur of the Potala growing larger and more splendid on approach (e.g., Seth, 1987, pp. 117–118). An exquisitely competitive architecture of address now redirects that moment to the concrete and brick doppelganger of the station, where travelers disembark. As the train approaches Lhasa, the original palace may be glimpsed, remote and fleeting, paling before the monumental immediacy of the station. More than an ancient travelers' beacon has been displaced. The station has created a new urban periphery linked to the city not by pilgrims' paths but a multilane highway for automobiles, the Chinese status symbol of choice. Tibetans cannot walk or prostrate along it. It is unsuited to the modest vehicles of most Tibetans—rusty, wheezing, oft-repaired cars and trucks of ancient vintage, human-powered *tuk-tuks* and bicycles, and animal-powered carts. The station explodes the Lhasa *Dharmachakra*, the divine blueprint that grounds

the city. Once a symbol of the center of a universe, the Potala has become a frontier outpost in the thrall of Beijing. Taunted by the station, annexed to New Potala Palace Square, it is a conscripted collaborator with the regime, a monument to what the Chinese regard as a dead past yoked to a Han portal to the future. Emptied of its aura of divine singularity, it stands as the more remote of a matched pair of temples to the rites of tourism.

The production of "solidification" continues within. A bronze, wall-sized topographic map of the TAR naturalizes the military-bureaucratic conquest of modern Tibet (Figure 8). A larger tapestry of the Potala hangs in an immense VIP waiting room nearby. (An even larger Chinese carpet covers the floor.) The eight auspicious Tibetan symbols carved in relief on the ochre walls of the waiting rooms have been sinicized in submission to the dominant culture.



**Figure 8. Topographic map inside the Lhasa railway station.**

Source:

[http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.traveladventures.org/continents/asia/images/train-to-lhasa07.jpg&imgrefurl=http://pictures.traveladventures.org/images/train-to-lhasa07&usg=\\_\\_fsoU-dYk7Wn3oaHmRApyDF6Jsh4=&h=350&w=525&sz=72&hl=en&start=0&zoom=1&tbnid=7A8GtsN8kBW40M:&tbnh=130&tbnw=173&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dlhasa%2Btrain%2Bstation%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26biw%3D1160%26bih%3D839%26tbs%3Disch:1&um=1&itbs=1&iact=hc&vpx=118&vpy=221&dur=1435&hovh=183&hovw=275&tx=147&ty=102&ei=8VG\\_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&oei=8VG\\_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&esq=1&page=1&ndsp=26&ved=1t:429,r:5,s:0](http://www.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.traveladventures.org/continents/asia/images/train-to-lhasa07.jpg&imgrefurl=http://pictures.traveladventures.org/images/train-to-lhasa07&usg=__fsoU-dYk7Wn3oaHmRApyDF6Jsh4=&h=350&w=525&sz=72&hl=en&start=0&zoom=1&tbnid=7A8GtsN8kBW40M:&tbnh=130&tbnw=173&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dlhasa%2Btrain%2Bstation%26um%3D1%26hl%3Den%26sa%3DN%26biw%3D1160%26bih%3D839%26tbs%3Disch:1&um=1&itbs=1&iact=hc&vpx=118&vpy=221&dur=1435&hovh=183&hovw=275&tx=147&ty=102&ei=8VG_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&oei=8VG_TKXYLYi6jAeGjtm6Ag&esq=1&page=1&ndsp=26&ved=1t:429,r:5,s:0)

The Tibet-Qinghai rail link spans 1,142 kilometers (about 710 miles) from Gormo in Qinghai province to Lhasa. This, the highest railbed in the world, traverses permafrost for more than half its length to summit Tanggula Pass at 5,072 meters (16,640 feet). Building it took five years, 100,000 workers, and \$4.1 billion. Eight daily trains run in each direction. Students, migrants, and families of modest means buy a hard seat from Beijing to Lhasa for about \$50. Higher up the scale, tourists and businessmen spend \$174 on a soft sleeper in a four-berth compartment ("Train Travel in Lhasa," 2011). During its first six months of operation, tourist visits jumped 86.3% compared to the same period in the previous year ("Callers Decry," 2007). In its first year, 1.4 million travelers arrived by air, and 1.5 million took the train ("Potala, Norbu Lingka Palaces," 2008).

Months before the opening of the rail link, state media broadcast a haunting ballad depicting the train as a Chinese gift to grateful Tibetans: "Heavenly Road," sung by the Tibetan-born pop star Han Hong. The video version, which migrated to YouTube in 2007 (Han, n.d.), punctuates stunning plateau scenery with cheerful close-ups of herders on pilgrimage, at home with animals and tents, performing traditional dances and rituals, and proffering warm hospitality to Han Hong and smiling workers laying train tracks. Tibetans in traditional dress run after construction machinery and adorn it with blessing scarves.

Han Hong secured the song rights from another Tibetan artist, Basang, for the CCTV3 Spring Festival Gala, a huge entertainment platform with strong government support. Basang's video, posted with English subtitles to YouTube in 2008, is more suited to prospective tourists (Basang 2008). The landscape it features looks like what travelers glimpse from the train. Traditional herders have all vanished. Singing on an empty, beautiful plateau, Basang wears an ornate folkloric costume associated with touristic performance. The only human company she meets is aboard the sealed train, where smiling Tibetans in contemporary clothes gather round her. A Chinese conductor serves tea. In Basang's video, religious tolerance is on display. She stands before a Tibetan temple with a holy man and makes a butter offering. His robes identify him as a practitioner of the Nyingma school, the oldest Tibetan Buddhist lineage, which has a tradition of refusing political power (Ortner, 1978).

The translation text accompanying "Heavenly Road" figures the plateau as a dream-like vista beheld from afar and not a landscape of distinct places:

*At dawn I stand on the green grassland  
I see a magical eagle bathed in ruddy light  
Like an auspicious cloud soaring through the sky  
Bringing good luck to the Tibetan people.*

*At dusk I stand atop the tall mountain peak  
I see the railway built to my hometown  
A colossal dragon soaring through the mountains  
Bringing prosperity to the snowy plateau*

*That is a magical Heaven Road.*

*Bringing us to paradise on earth  
Barley beer and butter tea will taste more sweet  
Joyful songs echo in all directions.*

What do passengers on the Road to Heaven actually see? Here is one account (Qiu, 2007):

Traveling at about 100 kilometres an hour . . . I have the opportunity to review the scenery—the magnificent Mount Yuzhu reaching up to 6,178 metres, the turquoise Namuco Lake shimmering under the unearthly Tibetan light, nomads dressed in colorful robes, turrets with red, blue and green prayer flags fluttering near a Communist flag. Fourteen hours later, at the end of an uneventful journey, the train pulls into the great vault of Lhasa’s new railway station. (p. 402)

Uneventful indeed. An extreme terrain is tamed by preventing all encounters with it.<sup>13</sup> On-board narratives fashion a remote, hazy landscape innocent of history. Sinicized names of passing settlements appear in Mandarin and English on digital message boards in each car. Lhabhagar becomes Bayi, which means “8-1” in Mandarin. The name recalls the founding of the People’s Liberation Army on August 1, 1927. Tibetans joke that Bayi, once a tiny settlement and now an industrial town swelled by immigration, means eight Chinese for every Tibetan (Buckley, 2006).

On the train the visible landscape is fleeting:

The P.A. system announced the Tanggula Pass, the highest point of our journey. . . . I had a mental image of the pass based on visits to other high passes in Tibet: the snowcapped mountains arrayed imperiously against the blue sky, supervising subsidiary ranges that stretched in rich layers below them. But I couldn’t tell when we passed Tanggula. None of the cairns or prayer flags that flame views of Tibetan passes appeared. The railway seemed to have forgone some of the dramatic vistas offered by the road. . . .

Once, a herd of antelope skipped beside the tracks. Looking for more of them, I saw black nomad tents on a distant hillside. Yaks with white stripes on their backs appeared in the dank yellow grass. The train whizzed past empty stations; on the rare occasion that we stopped, there were hardly any Tibetans to be seen. This seemed the strangest aspect of a rail service designed to benefit local people: their meager presence outside as well as inside the train. (Mishra, 2007, pp. 82–98)

Compare this to a Chinese rail tour company’s account: “From the train windows, an authentic China slideshow is presented in front of you to look and speculate”(“What to See,” 2006). Periodic announcements recite the height, speed, weight, and length of the train, and the number and length of tunnels, tracks, and bridges. Not the landscape or the people, but the train is the star of the show. Still,

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<sup>13</sup> The romance of direct encounter is recounted in Thubron (2011) and Seth (1987).

the website rejoices, "You can have a close contact with local people on board. Isn't it an adventurous experience?"

Pressure-sealed against the sub-frigid thin air of the plateau, the train shrinks scenic encounters to the visual far. Inside the cocoon of the train even this engagement is optional. Lifting propaganda shorts in English and Mandarin trumpet the health of high-altitude construction workers, the environmental sensitivity of the train, and the "luck and fortune" it brings to Tibet. Travelers observe no deforestation, grassland degradation, soil erosion, or biodiversity loss. They do not see the militarization of the plateau concealed in tunnels up and down the tracks (International Campaign for Tibet, 2003, pp. 47–48). They do not see nomads herded into prefab roadside housing, the growing gap between rich and poor, the environmental assault on the plateau. The train's neocolonial bearers of modernity remain tidily segregated from the Tibetans they have come to transform, lest unenclosed encounters complicate a presumptive narrative of largesse and pristineness.

As a structure of enclosure, the train to Tibet is wildly successful. The ride is seamless—neither prickly (uncomfortable to occupy) nor obviously jittery (constantly observed), neither stealthy (difficult to locate) nor slippery (lacking direct approach). Its defining crustiness (as a barrier to the natural environment) wraps riders in comfort. Train travel, Michel de Certeau (1984) aptly wrote, is a "module of imprisonment that makes possible the production of an order, a close and autonomous insularity" (p. 111).

### Conclusion

Enclosure is a Han strategy for starving a spiritual sphere that once was materialized in Tibetan public life. Beyond the ethnosites examined here, Han refusal to permit the Dalai Lama's return to Tibet amounts to an ongoing enclosure of the faithful. As a preemptive strike in the upcoming struggle to name his successor, the PRC has decreed that all newly reincarnated lamas must be PRC-approved. The Fourteenth has parried by predicting the appearance of his reincarnation outside Tibet (Bernama, 2010; Mirsky, 2011; Yardley & Wong, 2011, p. A1). This is a risky tactic. An emanated Chenrezig severed from the landscape that holds up the cosmic universe threatens to cut the sacred ground from under its devotees, a peril not diminished by the demolition of the Barkhor or its reconfiguration as a shopping corridor. The Chinese will offer their own handpicked reincarnation, whose rootedness in Tibetan soil will be staked against a deterritorialized competitor with no ritually sanctified connection to the land.

In this light I reflect at last on Tibetan self-immolation. Like kora, its mode is embodiment. Perhaps unexpectedly for so violent a gesture, the Dalai Lama refuses to condemn it, provided it is done in a loving spirit (Central Tibetan Administration, 2013). Intrinsically and disturbingly speechless in the event,<sup>14</sup> the power of self-immolation lies in its double meaning. On one hand and in the most gruesome way, it reveals and publicly dramatizes the violence of Han annihilation of Tibetan culture. On the other,

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<sup>14</sup> The blogger Woesser has posted the last words of 19 Tibetan self-immolators (2012). These were translated into English and posted on the blog *Global Voices* (Lam, 2012). Each testimony gives voice to the injustice of religious and cultural oppression in Tibet.

acting on their own bodies on their own terms in defiance of the regime, self-immolators transform violence into unwavering self-sacrifice. Such self-inflicted pain continually unmakes (Scarry, 1985) the presumptive space the Chinese strive to nail down. Onlookers cannot, figuratively speaking, turn away. Profound acts of presence in desperate landscapes grant a hearing to human beings with no other rights to speak. Such gestures reconfigure the visible and sayable, even if the final horizon of their political effects remains uncertain.

Though the odds against the Tibetans are long, and though unimaginable self-immolation has been met by unthinkable architectural destruction, it should be remembered that the Chinese have failed to extirpate Tibetan Buddhism for 60 years, and that Tibetans understand their own history as an oscillation of decline and revival on a scale of centuries. Overlaying a transcendent order on a political one through the public practice of kora and now self-immolation, devotees testify to who they are and what they intend to become in relation to the forces that surround them, secular and divine. Their patient animation of the numinous against enclosure exposes them to destruction, but also carves out a domain that temporal power cannot reach. "The Chinese say this is all one country," a monk from southern Qinghai told a journalist on the first anniversary of the 2008 riots. "They don't know what's in our hearts" (Wong, 2009, p. A6). The monk tapped his chest. Here is the most protected enclosure of all.

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