

## Introduction

Analyses of self-immolation in the Tibetan context tend to focus on either its religious or dramatic and performative aspects.<sup>1</sup> While both these lenses are useful, they neglect the sheer materiality of the act. This paper will give an account of self-immolation which focuses on the body, and the way that self-immolation functions as an enactment through the display of pain and the destruction of the body. I will argue that there are at least five levels at which the destruction of the body in self-immolation works: narrative, performance, sacrifice, existential threat to the state, and actualization of alternative sovereignty. Recognizing the multiple enactments and audiences involved in any single act of self-immolation, rather than trying to

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<sup>1</sup> Starting in 2008, Tibet experienced a significant escalation in the rate of self-immolations. Accordingly, there has been an intensification in the Chinese government's crackdown on self-immolations and potential immolators. There are numerous factors in the escalation, ranging from the increased criminalization of Buddhist practice to the publicity and visibility opportunities afforded by the 2008 Beijing Olympics. In their "Storm in the Grasslands" report, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) argued that there "appears to be a direct correlation between the self-immolations and an intensified campaign against the Dalai Lama [as well as] tightening state control over Tibetan religion and culture" (ICT 8). The majority of recent immolators are young – 18-30 – and their timings and locations are clustered around major religious and political events and centers. The ICT argues that these self-immolations constitute a political, religious, and moral crisis, which can only be resolved through a "fundamentally new approach" including the international community "re-evaluating its approach on Tibet as an issue tied to Asian and global security" (ICT 10). Despite the escalation of self-immolation, and its apparent political importance, there is no theoretical consensus on how self-immolation actually works and what it achieves. There are, of course, also self-immolation cases which are unrelated to Tibet. Perhaps the most famous individual immolation was that of Thích Quảng Đức, a monk who self-immolated in 1963 to protest the treatment of Buddhists in divided Vietnam. His immolation will be discussed at more length below. Jan Palach, a student in Prague, self-immolated in 1968. In the American context, Norman Morrison famously self-immolated outside Secretary of Defense's Robert McNamara's office in 1965. And of course, in more recent history, there is the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi in Tunisia, who is credited with helping to spark the Arab Spring revolts. This is only a short sample from a long – and growing – list. However, this project will focus specifically on self-immolations related to Tibet.

give a single definitive account, I will examine self-immolation from its various angles to construct the fullest reading possible.

Tibetan self-immolation cases must communicate with at least three audiences: first, immolators must address the sympathetic audience of fellow would-be Tibetans.<sup>2</sup> This group is the one most likely to “speak the language” of the immolators themselves, and to interpret the act in the context of specific oppression, as well as in a lineage of Buddhist self-sacrifice and Tibetan resistance. Second, there is the other immediate audience: the Chinese, usually manifest in the form of security forces present on the scene at self-immolations and responsible for responding to them.<sup>3</sup> Third, there is the audience at some remove: the international – primarily Western – audience which may or may not choose to sympathize and intervene in perceived human rights abuses and conditions of occupation in Tibet. Self-immolation speaks effectively to these three audiences. However, the division of audiences does not mean that there are three entirely discrete projects for a self-immolation. There is overlap and comingling across audiences. For example, I will argue that self-immolation communicates dedication to all three audiences, even if that dedication means something very different across contexts. Speaking to these multiple audiences is nevertheless a complicated problem for the immolator. As John Whalen-Bridge notes in *Tibet on Fire* (2015), “Self-immolation sometimes increases audience identification with the Tibetan cause, but there is also the risk that this way of ‘speaking’ about Tibetan issues will alienate members of the audience” (9). The potential efficacy of self-immolation is therefore always tempered by a certain risk, which places limitations on its

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<sup>2</sup> Whalen-Bridge points out the unlikelihood that the Chinese alone, despite being the apparent “targets” of self-immolation, are its sole intended audience (Whalen-Bridge 4-5).

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that not all self-immolations focused on Tibet actually take place in Tibet, or even in China. At least two immolations this year have taken place in Dharamsala, India, which is the base-in-exile of the Dalai Lama and the Central Tibetan Administration.

deployment. The question, however, remains: when self-immolation “works,” what enables it to be effective?

First, pain plays a central role in this kind of communication. Elaine Scarry argues in *The Body in Pain* (2006) that pain is divisive, in that it is “the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty’” for the person experiencing it, while for the person hearing about pain or observing pain it may be “the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt’” (Scarry 12). However, the politics of self-immolation bely this idea. Pain does not always destroy language, as Scarry argued, but rather can work as a form of language itself. The sight of pain “speaks” to people, even if they cannot exactly *feel* another person’s pain. In other words, despite Scarry’s claim that physical pain in general is unique because it lacks referential content, self-inflicted pain is always referential. This is especially true of the pain of bodies in protest or insurgency: although their pain is a complete sensory and material experience, it is also an allusion to other kinds of pain which are less immediate and less corporeal, such as the humiliation of repression. The pain of the Tibetan self-immolator is not merely the pain of fire meeting flesh, but also the pain of cultural deprivation, the pain of being oppressed, the pain of occupation. As such, pain becomes a state of consciousness which has multiple points of reference and contact in the external world, and these points are both inescapably imbricated in the act and necessary for understanding it.

The function of this language of pain, for insurgent self-immolation, is to reopen denied possibilities. Here I agree with Scarry’s foundational claim that, “what is quite literally at stake in the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world” (Scarry 31). In the case of self-immolation, the body in pain is involved in both these activities simultaneously: it is the unmaking of falsehoods, and of the hegemonic status of Chinese authority in Tibet. It is simultaneously the making of a nation, complete with a culture, a religion, and a people.

Voluntarily undertaking pain provides a way to participate in these otherwise foreclosed activities and provides for an identification between the individual body and the body of the nation. Through pain, the individual is enabled to simultaneously stand in for the nation, and serve as its representative.

Paradoxically, pain acts as a defense or safeguard for the immolator: through pain, the immolator transforms their body into a site of invulnerability. This claim is best understood by examining its inverse: torture, pain inflicted externally and involuntarily, reveals the openness of the body, and by extension is meant to unearth the violability of the mind and the psyche. It relies on pain to unmake the integrity and inviolability of the body. Pain lays bare. Pain reveals, not the truth but whatever the torturer wants to reveal. I will return to this comparison at some length at the end of this paper, but for the moment let us simply note that self-immolation does exactly the opposite: the immolator speaks their truth – a truth that often contradicts the official “truth” and then makes themselves invulnerable through literal trial by fire. Immolation is a uniquely effective method of achieving this kind of sealing of the body, and I argue that this is one of the reasons it has become so iconic. It is not the only method of self-destruction-as-protest that monks in Tibet have attempted. For example, there are at least two recorded examples of monks attempting to commit protest-suicide with knives. These other methods, however, have been largely replaced by self-immolation because self-immolation does not *only* kill. It is not merely a sacrifice of a life, it is a sacrifice of the body. Unlike suicide by knives, which causes limited visible external damage, self-immolation visibly destroys the body. What remains is barely recognizable as human, and certainly not recognizable as any individual – descriptive accounts of humans burning frequently note that the heat of the flames melts away facial features relatively early in the process. Beating and shooting the body, as the security forces have done in

a number of cases, can hardly cause more destruction to the body than the fire has already caused. The immolator is not only beyond further harm, but their body is also functionally immune to most forms of additional destruction, since they cannot surpass the destruction voluntarily undertaken.

### **Self-immolation as Necroresistance**

Taking this voluntary pain and death into account, I argue that we should classify self-immolation as a form of “necroresistance” or “weaponization of life.” In doing so, I draw from Banu Bargu’s immensely useful book *Starve and Immolate* (2016), although I would like to offer a few amendments to her argument. In her account of Turkish political prisoners who undertook death fasts and self-immolations, Banu Bargu refers to these acts as “the weaponization of life,” which she observes taking place with increasing intensity across contexts. Picking up on Fanon’s exposition of the usefulness and necessity of violence for anti-colonial movements, Bargu explains that weaponizing life has both specific political purposes and a transformative effect on those whose lives are weaponized. These goals are linked, allowing “an assertion of subjectivity (that may or may not have been denied previously) in which one’s humanity is constitutively entwined with a politicized interpretation of life itself” (Bargu 17). Accordingly, Bargu theorizes the idea of *necroresistance*, as a “negative form of biopolitical struggles, based not on the affirmation of life but on its willful destruction” (Bargu 27). Necroresistance, as the term suggests, is a form of resistance predicated on the voluntary embrace of death. She situates the usefulness of necroresistance in its responsiveness to biosovereignty, a take on Foucault’s governmentality which recognizes the persistence of traditional forms of sovereignty under the regime of governmentality. The tactics of necroresistance “turn biopolitics against itself” by negating life (Bargu 69). Bargu usefully draws attention to Agamben’s figure of *homo sacer*, the “bare life” which as, Agamben notes, can be killed “without committing homicide and without

celebrating a sacrifice” (Agamben 83). The production of bare life is the power of sovereignty, and the foundation of all sovereign orders.

Self-destructive violence, then, is both the refusal and negation of the state’s power of exception. Self-destructive insurgency not only mobilizes the body in service of resistance, but turns the body itself – that which is within reach of even the barest form of life – into resistance. These acts do not merely mimic or make visible state violence, but rather refuse the state’s assignation of certain bodies as outside politics. In this way, through necroresistance the self-immolator turns their body into a subject and site of resistance, and not merely an object on which state power is exercised.

The body is at the very core of necroresistance: the body speaks politics because the body *is* politics. As Agamben himself notes in his discussion of the ambiguity of the *homo sacer*, “the first foundation of political life is a life that may be killed, which is politicized through its very capacity to be killed” (Agamben 86). Fully exploiting this ambiguity, necroresistance demonstrates that there is no such thing, in practice, as a body outside politics. The sovereign can create exceptions, but the sheer material existence of the body refuses to be excepted. Even the most repressive conditions, the most extreme forms of oppression, cannot truly create an exception where a body is outside of politics, because the body maintains its inherent status as a site of resistance and possibility. Necroresistance not only insists on the political-ness of the body, but allows its practitioners to occupy seemingly impossible political positions. Whalen-Bridge describes the power of necroresistance in the Tibetan case: “While the protestor cannot legally declare herself Tibetan-and-not-Chinese, Tibetan self-immolation conveys that the person is Tibetan *at all costs*. The illocutionary force of the statement *makes* the self-immolator Tibetan” (Whalen-Bridge 39).

## **Violence as performance**

I have argued that self-immolation is an especially destructive form of self-destruction. That argument has a corollary: it is also an especially spectacular form of self-destruction. Spectacles are captivating and forceful; they hold sway over their audience. It is a prolonged and intense sensory experience for the observer. To witness a self-immolation is also to be called as a witness in other ways: to bear witness to the power relations and injustices in one's world, and to one's own complicity in these dynamics. The power of the spectacle is that it demands – not asks – to be seen, and in doing so it forces the viewer to reckon with the conditions of its production. If, as Scarry argues, pain goes underrecognized and underattended is because it is “so flatly invisible [that] almost any other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it” (Scarry 20), then one solution is to simply make pain more visible. Self-immolation does exactly that. What Scarry says of the pain of torture – that “the physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of ‘incontestable reality’ on that power that has brought it into being” (Scarry 35) – seems equally true of self-immolation. Indeed, it is exactly this capacity of pain to confer “incontestable reality” which self-immolation mobilizes, but since the immolator voluntarily accepts the pain they also control “the power that has brought it into being.” By explicitly undertaking this pain in the name of Tibet, the insurgent immolator attempts to name Tibet (or perhaps more accurately, the necessity of Tibet) as incontestably real.

The relationship between this pain and violence is complicated, because the act of self-immolation itself does not necessarily appear as violence. It is nearly impossible to categorize self-immolation in the terms of peaceful or violent protest. On one hand, it seems impossible to categorize a protest that ends in death as a peaceful protest. On the other hand, it seems dishonest to categorize a protest in which it appears that all physical harm is voluntary as violent. There is

something unintuitive about either classification. To put it plainly, something about it doesn't feel right. While self-immolation seems, on one level, like an act of incredible courage and heroism, it also provokes a complicated combination of attraction and repulsion; of fascination and disgust.<sup>4</sup>

In *On Suicide Bombing* (2007), Talal Asad, focusing on the spectacularity and intimacy of the violence in particular, suggests that “terror” is actually an imprecise description of the response that suicide bombers in particular evoke. He argues that it is not terror but *horror* that a suicide bombing inspires. Or, perhaps more accurately, he denies that it is the experience of terror which characterizes acts of martyrdom like suicide bombing (and, perhaps, of self-immolation as well). Instead, he argues, the suicide bomber provokes horror in a very specific way. The witness of a suicide bombing, be they an immediate victim or spectator, or a more remote observer, is brought painfully and jarringly to face the sudden degradation of the human into the non-human; the coherent into the mangled. While Asad does not make reference to it, the Freudian *Unheimlich* lurks just beneath the surface of his description: the suicide bomber is the subject who is you, yet not you. Likewise, in the aftermath of a suicide bombing what was human – what was you – is suddenly transformed into that which is nothing and yet, impossibly, still human. The same is true of self-immolation, except that self-immolation presents an even greater challenge of comprehension for witnesses. After all, most viewers in the Western world have no difficulty condemning suicide bombers. Even if one is sympathetic to their motivations and their causes, most people would easily and emphatically answer the questions “*Could you do it? Would you do it?*” with a “*No.*” The identification with the destroyed body – with the *Unheimlich* – is both more complete and more complicated in self-immolations. After all, one is

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<sup>4</sup> I will discuss the issue of attraction at greater length below, in the section “Narrativity of Nationhood”



not only *forced* to identify with the self-immolator. One may wish to do so. This is especially likely to be true when we read the self-immolator as voluntarily undertaking pain *as a replacement* for other innocents. In this reading, the immolator is a thoroughly nonviolent, peaceful protestor. The questions “*Could you do it? Would you do it?*” become harder to answer, in no small part because one may wish to believe one’s self capable of such a sacrifice, given the right conditions.

Regardless of the reading, it is difficult to deny that the scene which surrounds a self-immolation is visibly one of violence. Monks and other observers bearing witness have had to fight, in some cases, with the security forces for possession of the burnt bodies, living or dead. Those taken by the security forces are often never seen again, and for some immolators the Free Tibet Watch and the International Campaign for Tibet have been unable to even acquire photographs of the individual who committed the immolation. The scenes – not so clearly captured and memorialized – can only be chaotic: the fire, the bullets, the monks fighting with the police, onlookers running up to deliver prayer flags and gestures of respect. The presence of security forces, and their intervention in the immolation, materializes the violence which might otherwise be contained in the background, masked by the non-aggression of the protest.

The state needs this violence to manifest. If violence is the primary means by which the state – particularly one seen as illegitimate by its subjects – can exercise its power and assert its sovereignty, then the self-immolations present a significant problem exactly because they are – at least at some level – nonviolent. Nonviolent protests, especially nonviolent protests which demonstrate independent mastery over life and death, are the ultimate threat to the state’s projection of power. Reinserting violence into a protest that might be otherwise categorized as peaceful is an attempt to bring the immolator back under state control. If violence belongs to the

state, then the enactment of violence is also paradoxically a claim of ownership. The capacity to introduce violence allows the state to try and assert authority not only over the life and death of the immolator, but over the entire scene. The performance of nonviolent protest is disrupted, and some authorship reverts to the state. However, this disruption is not entirely successful. Indeed, the state's inability to control insurgents is key to the extremity of its response.

The immolator is, in a way, performing the state's violence on their own body, insistently bringing this violence into the public, visible realm. In the same moment, the immolator is also *hailing* the state. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)*, Althusser argues that state ideology operates by interpellating individuals as subjects. The ideological state apparatuses recruits all individuals and transforms them into subjects through this moment of "hailing." Interpellation translates the ideological into the material. Althusser explains that the individual is "*interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*" (Althusser 182, emphasis in original). Althusser describes interpellation as a "duplicate mirror-structure," that which "*subjects the subjects*" (Althusser 180). The state calls upon the individual, who is always-already a subject, and the subject submits. However, he does not discuss the possibility that this mirroring might work in another way: that the subjects might call up and call on the state. In events like self-immolation, necroresistance allows the protestor to interpellate the state, demanding that it present itself through violence. The state recognizes that they "Hey, you!" of self-immolation is directed at its abuses. Seen in this way, the state's response to self-immolations is not *creating* violence but rather manifesting the violence which, according to the immolator, was already (perhaps always-already) present. The immolator seeks

to call forth the state's violence into the visible realm through their immolation and the state essentially obliges by "performing" their role.

It is also worth noting that the common understanding of self-immolation as harming only the immolator is not entirely accurate. To take seriously the pain involved in self-immolation requires recognizing all of its consequences, even those which are less immediately visible. One of the political benefits of self-immolation as a form of protest, as I have noted at some length, is that it does not leave the perpetrator vulnerable to the opposition. The immolator cannot be threatened, interrogated, or forced to recant. It shares this quality with suicide bombing, but with a difference: a suicide bomber causes obvious harm to those proximate to the blast. The immolator does not. However, violence against those proximate to an immolator – both physically and personally – is nevertheless a direct consequence of their protest. People standing near an immolator – either bystanders or witnesses – have been beaten and shot at by Chinese security forces (Whalen-Bridge 66-67). Of course, many of these bystanders are more like participants in a public protest than random unfortunates. They may have foreknowledge of the immolation and choose to participate by bearing witness, and by not attempting to put the fire out.<sup>5</sup> If the immolator is committing a crime, by the standards of the security forces, the witnesses are not exactly innocent either. When they are injured or killed by security forces, perhaps they are more accurately figured as secondary sacrifices than as unsuspecting victims. They share, to some extent, at least complicity.

However, the same cannot necessarily be said of the friends and family of an immolator, who become targets for "re-education." The torture which cannot be inflicted on the insurgent

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<sup>5</sup> The Chinese government has attempted to train monks at certain monasteries as "firefighters" and first aid providers (ICT 14). There is no evidence that these efforts have been successful at enlisting the monks for the cause of "stability maintenance work."

immolator is displaced and visited instead on those close to them, both to make potential immolators reconsider and to attempt to extract a recantation of the protest even though the protestor is dead. Since the immolator cannot recant, public disavowal by friends and family becomes next best propaganda option. As Whalen-Bridge explains, “the act of self-immolation no longer involves only self-sacrifice. The surrounding family, friends, and fellow monastics are hostages in advance” (Whalen-Bridge 79). These people are, effectively, the casualties of a self-immolation, insofar as the violence against them is an entirely predictable consequence of the act itself. Given this outcome, the violent consequences of self-immolation must be understood as more dispersed than simply the self-inflicted pain of the immolator.

I began this section by arguing that self-immolation drew power from its spectacular quality. Treating self-immolation as a kind of performance makes clear the importance of its spectacular character. However, it remains problematic to treat self-immolation as a performance alone. The problem with treating self-immolation as performance alone is that self-immolators occupy two seemingly opposite relationships towards their own bodies. On one hand, they fully inhabit their body, turning them into the utmost manifestation of their will and their political lives. On the other hand, they are divorced from their bodies by the very same turn: the body becomes a weapon, and extension of the self. In taking one’s own life, one is able to act *as if* they have power over their own life and, in enacting this performance as reality, shift the boundaries of possibility. As Karin Fierke explains in *Political Self-Sacrifice* (2014), “‘Acting as if’ one is free can be understood as a performance that contributes to the construction of a new set of rules and practices, capable of imitation by large numbers” (Fierke 227). The performance is therefore a powerful one, but in the very process of being staged the performance becomes

more than performance alone. It is, as I have argued, more useful to think of self-immolation as an *enactment*, recognizing its joint performative and declarative functions.

### **Unmaking the State**

I have suggested that self-immolation and other self-destructive tactics present a unique threat to the existence – and the founding justification – of the state. Punishment is an essential way the state exercises its sovereignty. Foucault famously advanced such an argument in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Friedrich Nietzsche argued for an even more fundamental link between sovereignty and punishment. He wrote in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) that “pain was the most powerful aid to mnemonics [...] The worse man’s memory has been, the more dreadful his customs have appeared” (Nietzsche 38). Pain is therefore the way that power imprints its prerogatives onto those who are subject to it, not only onto the body but onto the memory more generally. The right to inflict pain – to punish, to make remember – is the right of the master. This relationship between power and subject is, in Nietzsche’s terms, a relationship between creditor and debtor. The creditor extracts payment in the form of pleasure, which the debtor supplies in the form of their pain.<sup>6</sup> To punish is, therefore, the heart and origin of all sovereign power, and indeed of all relationships of domination more generally. But paradoxically, the need to punish is also a problem for the state, because to admit the need to punish is to admit the existence of crime. To punish crimes against the state, in particular, is to admit that the state can be threatened, that the state has vulnerabilities. I suspect that this is part

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<sup>6</sup> This equivalence between the creditor’s pleasure and the debtor’s pain provides another perspective on the economy of violence I discuss above, wherein the state insists on making violence manifest. The value of punishment for the sovereign comes in the pleasure of its inflicting – “the pleasure of having the right to exercise power over the powerless without a thought, the pleasure ‘*de faire le mal pour le plaisir de la faire*,’ the enjoyment of violating” (Nietzsche 41). Sovereignty is, therefore, precisely an economy of pleasure and pain. Necroresistance upends the balance of payments, by taking pain out of the control of the powerful and placing it precisely within the hands of the powerless.

of the reason why states tend to refer to punishing their colonized subjects and occupied territories in the language of “pacification” rather than punishment. They are not punishing crimes; they are simply keeping things quiet. In keeping with this tradition, the Chinese security forces refer to their project in Tibet as “stability maintenance work” (TCHRD Handbook). This term performs two important erasures: first, it effaces the resistance in Tibet. The security forces are not punishing specific acts or putting down insurrections, but merely “maintaining stability.” The alternative to stability is unclear, and resisters are erased from the landscape. Secondly, “stability maintenance work” erases the violence of their own activity. They do not attack, they maintain. Their goal is not repression, it is stability.

Even when they use the language of conflict, the Chinese government is very careful to avoid publicly using the language of war to describe the situation in Tibet, because war is *not* a battle between a state and an aberrant group, or the state and its dissenters. It is a competition – as Scarry, among others, notes - to the death (or more accurately, to *some* deaths) between at least two competing state narratives, one of which will be indelibly altered by defeat (Scarry 152). Even if the capacities of the competing sides are vastly dissimilar, they enter the competition with similar status as combatants, as propagators of narratives partaking equally in the force of truth. This is only one of the many ways in which Tibetan state-ness, in particular, presents a thorny problem for its opponents. Perhaps the most important problem comes in the relationship of the state to sacrifice.

Weber famously argued that the state is the entity with the monopoly on legitimate violence. Building on this thesis, Bargu argues that the state also has (or at least wants to have) a “monopsony of sacrifice,” which is to say that it is the only legitimate buyer or receiver of political self-sacrifice (Bargu 123). Thus, in the Tibetan case, self-immolation disrupts Chinese

hegemony in two ways. On one hand, self-immolations could undermine the *Chinese* state's legitimacy by directing self-sacrifice elsewhere. That is to say that if the sovereign state is the only legitimate recipient of sacrifice, then China is not *the* sovereign state. On the other hand, they could reify the concept of *a* state's monopsony. If the state is the only legitimate receiver of political sacrifice, and sacrifices are and legitimized in the name of Tibet, then Tibet must be a state. According to the monopsony of sacrifice, to sacrifice the self for Tibet is to realize the state-ness of Tibet. Self-immolation therefore provides a foundation for an alternative, Tibetan sovereignty.

### **Narrativity of nationhood**

Self-immolation also gives credibility to this alternative sovereign by mobilizing narrative in two ways: it undermines false narratives, and it affirms the truthfulness of the immolator as a narrator. The alternative narrative of Tibetan nationhood that they go on to offer is therefore preemptively invested with sincerity. Immolation also takes on a preservationist role, in addition to its destructive function. While it destroys pretense (and bodies), it also asserts and preserves the possibility of resistance under and against any conditions. Self-immolation is, therefore, not only an act of desperation but also a radical act of hope. The act itself performs into existence the "possibility of protest" (Whalen-Bridge 10): it is both a form of resistance and the proof of possibility.

A self-immolation is also two different *kinds* of narrative: the act is both a completed story or event of its own, and part a larger set or tradition of acts. At issue is not only visibility, therefore, but also comprehensibility. Despite the frequent descriptions of self-destructive insurgencies as "incomprehensible" or "senseless violence," as a self-contained narrative self-immolation is in fact very comprehensible. The act takes place entirely in the public eye; it

presents a complete story for consumption. This is not to suggest that the motives of every insurgent immolator are obvious, nor that their intentions are perfectly clear. As the ICT somewhat wistfully admits, “the motivations of individual Tibetans who self-immolate are ultimately unknowable” (ICT 13). Despite this, because self-immolation is a complete narrative, its communicative power is intensified. Interested and informed “readers” will be able to see meaning in the act (even if those meanings may differ across audiences).

This second piece, the role of immolations as part of a larger narrative, is equally important. In fact, self-immolations belong to several larger narratives, including the broader history of resistance to Chinese occupation in Tibet, the Buddhist tradition of self-sacrifice, and the numerous international cases of self-immolation mobilized for other causes. Each of these sequences invokes a set of associations, which populate the full set of referential content for any given immolation. The repetition is not only performative, but also imaginative (in that it inspires further repetition) and imagistic (in that it creates materially reproducible images).

Self-immolation lends itself to reproduction. First, it is an easily replicated act (assuming one has the commitment and willingness). The materials needed – accelerant, perhaps pins and wire to hold the accelerant-soaked cloth onto the body, a method of fire-starter – are all easily accessible, even in a repressed and regulated society where access to technology or conventional weapons is highly restricted. To totally restrict all access to these materials would be virtually impossible. Second, the image of the immolation is easily reproduced. Although the Chinese security forces have been reasonably effective at limiting the circulation of images of immolators, the ones which do get past censors are powerful and striking. Furthermore, images of other self-immolations are able to function as surrogates or supplements for the ones we cannot see. Malcolm Browne’s Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of Vietnamese monk Thích



Quảng Đức immolating, for example, gives American audiences a powerful point of reference for “picturing” all later immolations in the same tradition. While photographs and reproductions are no doubt less impactful than witnessing an immolation first-hand, because self-immolation lends itself to the creation of images (either through photographs or description) it has greater power in circulation than many other forms of protest. The images that have emerged from Tibet have effectively traveled around the world, and for many Western observers self-immolation is the only thing they know about the conflict in Tibet. Organizations rallying for Tibetan freedom and independence like the International Campaign for Tibet and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy regularly digitize all their images and materials for the specific purpose of increasing global circulation.

These images are compelling, and circulation and repetition only increase their appeal. To quote Whalen-Bridge, the narrative series of self-immolation “has an aesthetic component. It appeals to our love for the poetry of fire, fury, fervor – of the human spirit that will not be contained [...] the image does satisfy the desire for a compelling, unified image of the Tibetan situation” (Whalen-Bridge 57). It is therefore also an aesthetic act, or more accurately the mobilization of aesthetics in service of the immolator’s cause. The body of the immolator becomes part of a political aesthetic which, by satisfying its audience, also compels them. This political aesthetic – summarized by “our love for the poetry of fire, fury, fervor” – falls somewhere on the border between the romantic and the martial. It appeals to both our desire for completeness and for a kind of artistic pleasure.

### **Politics and Sacrifice**

I have been arguing that self-immolation is a method of protest which works to enact and realize Tibetan nationhood through spectacle, image, and pain. I have touched on the idea of

sacrifice as it relates to the state. It remains to demonstrate *how* self-sacrifice is able to speak the nation of Tibet and the Tibetan political community into existence. In this section, I draw particularly on Karin Fierke, who argues in her work of political self-sacrifice in international relations that “political self-sacrifice may play a role in bringing alternative forms of community into being” (Fierke 38). Self-sacrifice expresses the pain and humiliation of an oppressed people, but it does more than this: it deliberately creates more pain. In cases like self-immolation, the act of self-sacrifice is extraordinarily painful. In fact, as I have argued, pain is perhaps its most obvious element. This pain, however, is creative in addition to destructive, and that is a key reason self-immolation is not only a protest but also a moment of hope and of building.

One of the generative forms of political self-sacrifice is martyrdom. In becoming a martyr, the insurgent immolator performs two movements which resist the “state of exception:” they assert of political life, and they reject of social death. They refuse to the position which the oppressive state has assigned them and simultaneously create for themselves a new space of possibility. This space is not just for the martyr (indeed, it is only “for” the martyr in the barest sense, since the martyr does not survive their act of self-sacrifice), but rather for the reconstituted political community. The death of the martyr does not entail their disappearance from the political sphere, but rather the “embodiment of the suffering nation” through the opening their sacrifice creates.

The martyr, in this formulation, is not so much a human sacrifice as the site of a dispute over sovereignty. As Fierke argues, political self-sacrifice “shifts away from a focus on static sovereign bodies to the processes and practices by which the boundaries and identity of the sovereign body are contested and potentially transformed” (Fierke 83). The phrase “sovereign bodies” is key here, because it recognizes and reveals the slippage between the body and the

state, either of which can be reasonably referred to as “sovereign bodies.” Political self-sacrifice operates exactly by mobilizing this grey area, and showing how the deployment of a body can reproduce a nation.

### **Actualizing alternatives**

Bargu described the politics of necroresistance as mobilizing the space between two kinds of lives: the biological and the political, or the bodily and the ideological. Whalen-Bridge posits a different duality: the communal and the personal. In his reading, self-immolation is not a form of self-destruction but rather “an affirmation of group identity bespeaking a desire to exist rather than the opposite. Paradoxically, the act of suicide can be interpreted as the protection rather than the destruction of a communal identity” (Whalen-Bridge 39). Indeed, this is a common thread in the collected last words of immolators. After blessing the Dalai Lama and calling for his return, perhaps the most common sentiment expressed by immolators is the defense of the Tibetan community. The emphasis on immolation as a defense of and active contribution to the Tibetan cause reaffirms that self-immolation is not – or at least not exclusively – about destruction.

From these statements, it is also evident that the idea of Tibet is multi-dimensional: it is imagined as a nation-state in the fullest sense (i.e. as both a people and a sovereign entity). It is also a cultural and religious community, with a defined language and territory. It is certainly not just an idea or just an image; the concept of Tibet has been endowed with content, and it is for that content in addition to the idea itself for which people self-immolate. It is also an idea and an image which marks itself on the body. This marking can be literal, as in self-immolation, but can also work through more subtle means. The narrative series of self-immolation plays an important role here. While Scarry argues that the wounds of war are “empty of reference” without “some

other cultural insignia, a symbol and fragment of disembodied national identification,” (Scarry 127) the repetition of self-immolations in the Tibetan struggle have made the wounds of immolation extremely referential. The burnt body – even devoid of additional cultural insignia – symbolizes a certain act of resistance and an enactment of Tibetan-ness even after the fact. Self-immolation demonstrates that it is in dying and in being wounded that a person is able to be the *most* Tibetan. Legally, it is impossible for a person to be Tibet. But in passing out of the state’s control through death, and by dying as part of a series imbued with referential content, the Tibetan exists in the moment of self-immolation *and* even after. Although the person may be dead, the body which remains is inalterably marked with Tibetan-ness. Perhaps this explains the Chinese government’s obsession with providing medical treatment to immolators who survive, even when they do not want it. With enough medical care, it is perhaps possible to remove the physical markers of Tibetan-ness which self-immolation leaves behind – or, at least, this seems to be their hope.

Self-immolation is, therefore, similar to an act of initiation. Self-immolation presents the insurgent’s body as a “solution” to what Scarry calls a “crisis of substantiation”. The body, even as it is destroyed, substantiates the idea of Tibetan-ness as it initiates the immolator into being Tibetan.

### **Creative pain: Self-immolation in comparison**

Early in this paper, I alluded to the comparison between torture and self-immolation. This comparison connects two different lines of argument I have offered: those regarding pain and enactment. I have argued that self-immolation is proof of sincerity. In this respect, the pain of immolation works in precisely the opposite regard to the pain of torture. As Whalen-Bridge notes, “to put one’s body on the line in a public protest, one in which there is some danger of

harm, is a way of saying that the message is sincerely intended” (37). To enact a public protest through one’s body in which there is *definite* harm only magnifies this effect. Rather than the pain causing self-betrayal, as in torture, the pain which the immolator endures attests to the truth of their of claims. This shift takes place for two reasons, which correspond to the two components of torture: pain and interrogation.

First, there is no immediate torturer/interrogator in self-immolation. The pain is undertaken voluntarily, and is self-inflicted. In her description of how torture works on both the body and language, Scarry explains that “Torture inflicts bodily pain that is itself language-destroying [...] the purpose of which is not to elicit needed information but to visibly deconstruct the prisoner’s voice” (Scarry 27-28). Here again, self-immolation takes the opposite course from torture. It amplifies the voice of the person in pain, rather than silencing it. It instantiates new language, rather than destroying it. What, then, is precisely the difference between torture and self-immolation? Both rely on the destruction of the body, and its unmaking through pain in particular. One might argue that the distinction is simply what I have stated above: self-immolation is undertaken voluntarily, while torture is involuntary. However, this is not a satisfactory differentiation. It does not account for the statements of immolators which suggest that they had no choice; that they saw self-immolation as a necessary and unavoidable outcome of their situation. Similarly, it does not account for those who willingly place themselves in a situation where torture is an unavoidable outcome, such as freedom fighters committing terrorist attacks which will end in certain capture. While these individuals certainly do not “want” to be tortured, they choose it as a reasonable sacrifice in service of their larger goal. Likewise, it is not the case that Tibetans “want” to immolate. This distinction, therefore, is unpersuasive. In order to

parse these differences, one first requires a formal and affective definition of torture itself. Scarry defines torture as a three-pronged process, with two distinct components:

First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person's body, is also amplified in that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person's body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power [...] Torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation. The first rarely occurs without the second. (Scarry 26)

She adds that in torture, the torturer and the prisoners are a linked pair: "Pain and interrogation inevitably occur together in part because the torturer and the prisoner each experience them as opposites." As banal as this observation may seem, it is important to remember that there is no torturer without a body to torture, and no interrogee without an interrogator. The minimizing and eventual disappearance of the prisoner's voice is not only caused by pain; it is partially a result of the ever-expanding voice (and power) of the torturer.

The three-pronged process which Scarry describes (infliction of pain; amplification and objectification of pain; conversion of pain into power) is equally applicable, on its face, to self-immolation. Immolators describe themselves as responding to a kind of existential pain caused by the repressive conditions of occupation and the suppression of their culture. Regardless of how serious that pain may be, self-immolation can only be an escalation of their *physical* pain. The pain intensifies as the flames spread and consume. Second, the amplification and objectification of pain is equally important in both self-immolation and torture. In torture, the interrogator seeks to make pain primarily visible to the prisoner. The prisoner's body, and the torture inflicted on it, are hidden away from public view. All amplification and objectification of their pain is contained within the designated space of torture. It is concealed even as it is made

visible. Self-immolation, on the other hand, wants to amplify and project pain beyond any confines and concealments. In fact, as I have argued, one of the primary tasks of self-immolation is to manifest viscerally the existential pain of the immolator (and, by extension, of all Tibet). As a result, the immolators themselves are the *objectification* of pain: they remake their bodies as spectacular displays of pain. They attempt to amplify their pain by performing their protest in public, preferably in front of a large crowd who can bear witness. Ideally, some image or at least retelling of the immolation will survive the event, and further amplify their act to sympathetic audiences throughout Tibet and in the West.

Organizations such as the International Campaign for Tibet (whose logo is, interestingly and perhaps unsurprisingly, a burning torch) attempt to keep extensive records of the insurgent immolators, including photos of them in life. While some of the images are grainy photos of elderly monks in robes, others show selfies and glamour shots of teenagers and young adults holding cellphones and wearing sunglasses. The counterpoint to these images of life are the less available and less pleasant imagery: in some cases, photos of the immolation in progress or the burnt body have escaped police censorship. In a few cases, videos of the immolators speaking, or of their cremations after a successful immolation, are available online.<sup>7</sup> Both of these image sets serve to further amplify the pain of the immolator: the quotidian images depict what could have been, the lives sacrificed by necessity in the fire. The second set, showing the mangled remains of a “successful” immolator, visually manifest their pain in a way which can be endlessly circulated.

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<sup>7</sup> The Chinese authorities also produced a documentary on self-immolations, heavily featuring monks who survived their insurgency attempt describing their healing process and the reasonable treatment they have received in state-authorized hospitals. According to the ICT, this video was produced largely for international dissemination, to cast the immolators as irrational or forced into their act, and the Chinese forces as their benefactors. Given the pressures implicit in a state-made documentary, these statements do not provide much insight into the mindset of the immolators themselves.

They keep the immolation (though not the immolator) “alive.” In either case, it is clear that an important component of self-immolation insurgency is exactly to amplify and objectify the pain of Tibetans. Thus, self-immolate and torture correlate in this regard.

Finally, there is the question of the translation of pain into power. In torture, this translation occurs through the denial or invalidation of the interrogee’s pain, and the reification of the interrogator’s power. As Scarry describes it, “The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly present by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, absent by destroying it” (Scarry 57). The end result of the torture, then, is that the tortured person experiences a total skew of power: the interrogee becomes all body (and a destroyed body, at that), while they experience the interrogator as all voice. The interrogator is not voice and power only because they ask the questions. As Scarry points out, their questions are often both formally and substantively meaningless. It is the combination of the questioning with the capacity and prerogative to cause pain which gives the interrogator their power, and which indeed makes them seem all-powerful as the power of the interrogee seems to fade. After all, anyone can ask questions, and while to ask questions is to claim and project a certain kind of power, the person questioned maintains the ability to rebalance the power relationship by rejecting those questions. The same is not true in torture: rejection of the question or refusal to answer can delay the interrogator’s power, but it cannot totally undo it. This is because, as Scarry argues, “the very content of pain is itself negation” (Scarry 60), and in this case the pain negates the interrogee’s refusal.

Since there is no interrogator in self-immolation, insofar as anyone besides the immolator participates in preparing the act, they act as collaborators and assistants. The insurgent immolator both asks and answers the questions, claiming the interrogator’s power for their own. The act of



self-immolation itself implicitly asks (and answers) at least two important questions: “*is this a life worth living,*” and “*does the state truly have power over my life and death?*” The answer, in both cases, is emphatically “*no.*” The immolator also inverts the “golden rule” of torture: that the subject must always believe there is a possibility they will get out alive.<sup>8</sup> The immolator attempts to replace the possibility of life with the certainty of death, which emphasizes the definitive quality of their “answers.” While the victim of torture may answer what they must to survive, the insurgent immolator has neither the hope nor intention of surviving. Their “answers” are, in the most literal sense, final.

Fierke gives her an alternative formulation of the relationship between torture and self-immolation, focusing on the sacrificial nature of the act:

In torture, the victim, through an act of self-betrayal and mock consent, substantiates the power of the torturing regime. *Self-sacrifice reverses the relationship.* The crucial move that transforms the relationship from one of humiliation to one of political agency is the refusal to double the voice of the regime[...] (89, emphasis mine)

In the absence of an interrogator, and an external inflictor of pain, the valence of pain changes. There is no “voice of the regime” to double, only the insurgent’s own voice. The insurgent immolator voluntarily seeks to transform their pain into power, and they actively participate in the direction of that power. Since their voices are amplified through pain, rather than minimized, immolators become the embodiment of their voices. Rather than these voices committing acts of betrayal through confession, they engage in a form of testimony. While some of the immolators leave formal testimonies, attesting to the pain of their repression and their dedication to Tibet and

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<sup>8</sup> It is one of Frantz Fanon’s psychiatric patients who introduces this precept as the “golden rule,” in the chapter on “Colonial War and Mental Disorders” in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967).

the Dalai Lama, the act of immolation itself is also a kind of testimony. Rather than inflicting, objectifying, and denying as the torturer does, the immolator inflicts pain, objectifies pain, and then presents their pain as proof of truth. The pain does not undermine their legitimacy by causing betrayal, but rather visibly evinces their dedication to a cause.

### **Conclusion: Realities and Possibilities**

While attesting the potential and power of self-immolation, we must also be realistic about its limitations. Tibet has not achieved independence. There is every reason to believe that the current Dalai Lama will die outside Tibet, and – in a fascinating turn of necropolitics which is beyond the scope of this paper – the Chinese government is already working hard to control the conditions of his reincarnation. Given these difficult realities, it seems impossible to judge the Tibetan self-immolation campaign a success. Despite this, it seems that self-immolation does *something*. One need only look at the security force's frantic efforts to contain and prevent self-immolations to be sure that they have an effect. I have argued that self-immolation speaks the language of politics through the destruction of the body. In the bodily destruction and pain of self-immolation, falsehoods are exposed and new sovereignties are enacted. Self-immolation is – performatively, narratively, and perhaps even materially – an existential threat to the Chinese state's presence in Tibet. It undermines both the monopoly of violence and the monopsony of sacrifice. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, self-immolations enact Tibetan-ness and, by extension, the Tibetan state itself. Even if these enactments are only temporary, they preserve a possibility which would otherwise be foreclosed.

Necroresistance in general and self-immolation in particular also raise important questions for how we understand death itself as a political activity. Death, after all, can be a reminder and promoter of equality, community, and even democracy. It is an important point of

intervention for acts like self-immolation, which use death to emphasize connectedness in a way which is generative. However, death is not merely a leveler, revealing the equalities and similarities between all people: it also emphasizes our identities. Thus, the insurgent immolator is able to amplify both their identity as Tibetan and affirm their place in a shared human community.

As Alfred Killilea argues in *The Politics of Being Mortal* (2014), dying and citizenship are inextricably linked. As he argues, “In our present culture, death and democracy are neglected, yet both challenge our passivity. No one can die for us, and no one can act as a citizen for us” (110). Dying and citizenship are, in this formulation, constructed as parallel activities. Dying is an act of citizenship. This is important in the Tibetan case for two reasons: first, one must be a citizen *of somewhere*. Hannah Arendt and others have persuasively argued that the rights of citizenship are denied to stateless persons. The declaration of citizenship, through self-immolation, is a powerful counter to the feeling of statelessness under Chinese domination. In order for Tibet to have citizens, as the immolator claims it does, it must first exist. Secondly, it is important that dying is related to being a citizen as opposed to, for example, a subject. The citizen is not just a member of a polity, they are an active participant. To die is therefore also to call for more democratic political relationships. In a situation like Tibet, this call is not a gentle reminder but a radical demand. The sheer act of dying, and of political self-sacrifice in particular, communicates a call to action: because we are all capable of dying, and in fact are going to die, we are essentially the same, and our relationship is therefore fundamentally an equal one. Self-immolation calls us to attend to this equality, while also calling us to recognize, foster, and respect the particularities of identity.

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