

Himalayan Nature Representations and Reality

EDITED BY ERIKA SANDMAN AND RIIKA J. VIRTANEN

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Nakza Drolma: “mTho ris la, a mountain pass at the top of Brag dkar sprel rdzong, and a Buddhist pilgrimage site in Xinhai County, Qinghai Province, People’s Republic of China.”

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“LOOKING OVER AT THE MOUNTAINS”: SENSE OF PLACE IN THE THIRD KARMAPA’S “SONGS OF EXPERIENCE”

Ruth Gamble

ABSTRACT

The third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje, was a life-long poet who specialized in the *mgur* genre of Tibetan folk poetry. By his time, this genre had become particularly associated with the *mabāmudra* tradition, which placed great emphasis on the metaphoric potential of relative truth. As such, in Rangjung Dorje’s poems, the environment is presented as a catalyst for seeing the enlightened “view” (Tib. *lta ba*). This paper looks at the metaphorical landscape that Rangjung Dorje’s poems evoke, or, to incorporate a helpful term from contemporary literary studies, their “psycho geography”, their “sense of place”. In doing so, it will explore the relationship between this sense of place and the ‘view’ in respect to his use of the Tibetan word *yul*, which means both a ‘place’ and an ‘object of the senses’. It will examine, for example, how Rangjung Dorje plays with this term in these poems, using it to link the vast spaces of the Mongolian Empire with the restricted site of his ink evoking them on paper. It will also examine further particulars of his environmental presentation with regards to his privileging of the rural over the environment, and the peripheral “mountain dwellers” over the government’s city dwelling elites.

In 1337 CE, two years before his death, the third Karmapa hierarch, Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339 CE), found himself trapped, unhappily, in Xanadu, (Tib. Shang to; Chinese: 上都, Pinyin: Shàngdū), the summer capital of the Mongolian Yuan Empire (1271–1368 CE). It was a square, planned city of approximately one hundred thousand people.¹ Constructed from marble, wood, stone and glass, its walls could be seen for miles across the Mongolian grasslands on which it stood,

¹ For more detailed descriptions of Xanadu, see Schinz (1996: 275–295); Man (2009).

and according to several contemporary commentators it was already the synonym for exotic opulence that it remains today.² Rangjung Dorje, however, was not a fan, as the following poem – written during his stay in Xanadu – demonstrates:

Outer appearances are masters of deception,
 These children of the mind are crazy in the head.
 Disturbing thoughts visit more often, stay longer,
 And good friends are hard to find.
 The veils and fog of ignorance [grow] thick –
 And [I wander] along so many moral cliffs.
 Bad company leads to
 Prison, in the three lower realms, and
 There I will wander without end.³

Xanadu was a long way from his homeland, the mountainous solitudes of Himalayan Tibet, and as the poem continues, he plans his escape:

Now is the time,
 To stop craving cities,
 And wander, alone, in the mountains.⁴

These mountain solitudes had been the setting for most of his earlier poems, and, indeed, for most of his life. He was born near Tingri Langkor (Tib. Dingri glang 'khor), in the Everest region. But as he was the first Tibetan recognized in childhood as a *sprul sku*, or reincarnate teacher, he did not grow up there, moving instead to the seat of the first two Karmapas, Tshur phu, where he received a thorough education from some of the greatest Tibetan teachers of the time. Later, he became famous for his *tantra* commentaries, which incorporated elements of both the old and new traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, but he was also – although this is less well known – a lifelong poet, specialising in the *mgur* genre that is often translated into English as “Songs of Experience”.

In these poems the environment, with its metaphoric potential to represent the enlightened “view” (Tib. *lta ba*) of the tantras on which he commented, plays a major role. Using this popular form of poetry, Rangjung Dorje paints

2 See Komroff (2008: 304); Mote (1999: 501).

3 Rang 'byung rdo rje, Kar ma pa sku 'phreng gsum pa, *mGur gsung gi thor bu*, 414–415. The Tibetan reads: *phyi yi snang ba brid pa mkhas/ yid kyi khye'u chung 'go lo rgod/ rnam par rtog pa'i rgyun ma mang/ bsod nams grogs po shin du nyung/ gti mug [415] mun pa grib ma che/ log pa'i g.yang sa shin du mang/ mi dge'i grogs po kbrid nas kyang/ ngan song gsum gyi btson ra ru/ thar pa med par 'khyam nyan yod/*

4 Ibid. 415–416. The Tibetan reads: *grong khyer sred pa spangs nas kyang/ ri kbrod bas mtha' 'grim re ran/*

pictures (Tib. *mtshon pa*) of both the panoramas of the Tibetan wilderness and the minutia of everyday life in the villages and towns of Tibet, Mongolia and China. Yet, according to Rangjung Dorje all these places he describes are not just reflection of a familiar environment but also images of emptiness, illusions which can be read like a text for those who hold the tantric worldview.

This paper will examine this metaphorical landscape, or, to incorporate a helpful term from contemporary literary studies, the poems' "psychogeography", their "sense of place". In doing so, it will highlight some of their details and themes; particularly the afore mentioned privileged mapping of the rural over the urban; the influence of the Tibetan word *yul*, which carries the dual meanings of an 'object of the senses' and 'place'; the literary creation, and social positioning of the new category of "mountain dwellers" within these poems; and finally how sense of place is complicated in these poems by Rangjung Dorje's incorporation of the poems' performative place – on paper or as spoken words.

Before examining "place" in Rangjung Dorje's poems, however, it may first be helpful to briefly determine their position in literary history, for Rangjung Dorje's poems are in many ways very much bound by their literary predecessors. Two hundred years before their composition, the poet and hermit Milarepa (1052–c.1135 CE) had adopted the *mgur* genre as his favourite mode of expression, and in so doing, created a biographical and literary trope that his lineal descendants, including Rangjung Dorje, felt duty bound to follow. By all accounts, however, this mimicry was not only a mark of respect, but also a practical acknowledgement of the *mgur's* liberative worth. These poems used colloquial language, but alluded to grand philosophical truths, they incorporated personal, everyday details – with a particular focus on the environment – but re-cast them as flexible, metaphoric "text" to be read and interpreted. This encouraged their audiences to reappraise their environment, and examine the habitual way they had previously engaged with it. This, in turn, made these poems an indispensable tool for the *la ma* (Tib. *bla ma*), or *guru* who was attempting to evoke the "unutterable" (Tib. *rjod med*) essentially negated, enlightened state that would result from the breaking of these habitual perceptions.

By Rangjung Dorje's lifetime, the composition of *mgur* was a standard biographical trope for all yogi teachers; yet as with most adventures in genre writing – and biographical tropes – the author was still left with plenty of room for innovation. Indeed, in many ways Rangjung Dorje's *mgur* read like his personal memoirs. Rather than the standardized and purified version we find of him in his hagiographies these poems paint a portrait of a man experiencing depression and breakthroughs, the pressures of public life and the pull of mountain retreats. This is a little strange, especially considering they were collected

and collated into a *mGur 'bum*, or “Hundred Thousand Songs” by the same students that composed his first hagiographies,⁵ but in this case the pressure to record their teacher’s words exactly seems to have trumped the cultural demands to mythologize him.

The previously quoted poem is an obvious example of this disjuncture in discourse. Despite his obvious distaste for Xanadu, in his hagiography his journey there is described as a triumph of his fame and influence, a political reflection of his spiritual gravitas in which he was warmly welcomed and indeed worshiped in this great capital by the world’s greatest emperor.⁶

The poem not only reflects Rangjung Dorje’s preference for relaying personal, often uncomfortable experiences directly, instead of more expedient, political narratives, it also highlights another of his personal preferences that becomes the strongest, most persistent theme in his poems: the desire for a mountainous solitude. Indeed, in almost every one of the 138 poems in this collection, there is at least one reference to a life lived “amongst the mountains” (Tib. *ri khrod*).

Yet, perhaps ironically, in this advocacy of mountainous solitude, Rangjung Dorje is not alone. This idea of an escape to the mountains, and this privileging of mountainous environments over towns and cities – snowy peaks, roaring rivers, turquoise lakes and vast skies over the bustle of urban life – is a recurring, and remarkably persistent theme not only in Rangjung Dorje’s poems but in much Tibetan literature. It is found in the environmental subjugation myths of Princess Wenchen and the demoness,⁷ again in the tantric colonization of the mountains by Guru Rinpoche and Milarepa,⁸ through the poems of Kalden Gyatso (Tib. *sKal ldan rgya mtsho* 1607–1677 CE) and Shabkar (Tib. *Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol* 1781–1851 CE) in the 19th century,⁹ to the evocation of the mountains as an emblem of identity in much contemporary Tibetan poetry and prose.¹⁰

5 There are several versions of Rangjung Dorje’s hagiography. The earliest still in existence was written by mKha' spyod dbang po (1350–1405), the second Zhwa dmar pa, who was a student of the fourth Karmapa, Rol pa'i rdo rje. His work is entitled *Rang byung rdo rje'i rnam thar tshigs bcad ma*. Rangjung Dorje’s life story is also included within the more famous collections of bKa' rgyud hagiographies like Situ Chokyi Jungne’s *bKa' brgyud gser phreng rnam thar zla ba chu shel gyi phreng ba*. And, dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba’s *Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston*. Rangjung Dorje’s collected songs include colophons that indicate where some of them were composed, but they do not include a colophon for the entire collection, and therefore do not indicate who was their collator.

6 Situ Chokyi Jungne (op. cit. vol. I: 385); dPa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba (op. cit. vol. II: 970).

7 Hazod (2007: 25–30); Gyatso (1989: 38–40).

8 See Quintman (2008).

9 Sujata (2008).

10 Phelan (2007: 26–31); Virtanen (2009: 5); Kapstein (1999: 45–48); Hartley (2003: 261–271); Yangdon Dhondup (2008: 45).

Given the geography of their country, it should not come as a surprise that Tibetans write poems about mountains. What is interesting, if not surprising, however, is the complexity of Tibetan poetry's environmental mimesis, and the way this relationship reflects developments in Tibetan intellectual history. In the case of the subject of this paper, Rangjung Dorje's *mGur 'bum*, for example, the mountains were "read" through both the lens of tantric imagery – which led to a process of mandalization that has been investigated by other commentators¹¹ – and the vast metaphors of the *mahāmudra* (Tib. *phyag rgya chen po*), or "great gesture" tradition.

The overriding influence of *mahāmudra* on these poems means that, before getting to the specifics of the mountainous places they evoke, it is probably a good idea to look briefly at *mahāmudra's* view.¹² *Mahāmudra* is a specific tantric lineage, which was passed down from the Indian *siddhas*, or Buddhist yogins, to Tibetan travellers like Marpa the translator (1012–1097 CE), and in Tibet became particularly associated with Rangjung Dorje's own Kagyü (Tib. *bka' rgyud* or *dka' rgyud*) lineage. The meditative techniques of this tradition focus on seeing both external and mental phenomena as illusory ephemera with only analogous truth. As Rangjung Dorje explains in one of his *mgur*:

Appearances, existence – all phenomena –
 Are, by nature, like an illusion.
 They're not there – and their perceived there-ness
 Should be understood like the sky's clouds.¹³

As this poem exemplifies, in its explications of its meditative techniques, the *mahāmudra* tradition tended to place more emphasis on everyday – particularly environmental – metaphors rather than logic, and was therefore easily conveyed through poetry. In India, it was taught through the *siddha's dohā* (rhyming couplets), *caryagītī* and *vajragītī* (or "performed" and vajra songs).¹⁴ Tibetan yogins, including most notably the afore mentioned Milarepa, his redactors and imitators, adapted this performative tradition to the *mgur* genre of folk poetry, which served a similar, direct, accessible and poetically flexible function to the *dohās* and *gītīs*. Through the performance and *written* composition of these poems – and this later literary innovation can in part be credited to Rangjung

11 Hazod (1997: 25–54); Buffetrille (1998: 18–34); Huber (1994).

12 There are many books in English and Tibetan on *mahāmudra*. See, e.g., Dakpo Tashi Namgyal (2006) and its Tibetan source Dwags po bkra shis rnam rgyal (2005).

13 Rangjung Dorje (op. cit. 210) Tib.: *snang zhing srid pa'i chos rnams kun/ sgyu ma lta bu'i rang bzhin no/ med bzhin snang ba'i dngos po 'di / nam mkha' i sprin bzhin shes par gyis/*

14 See Jackson (2004); Kværne (1986).

Dorje¹⁵ – the yogis were able to interrupt their audience’s habitual view of their environment, prompting, instead an alternate perspective that emphasized both the limited, relative truth of sensory perceptions and its metaphoric potential. Their poems used, in other words, the ability poetic imagery has to create and manipulate what the French poet, Guy Debord called our “psychogeography”.

This term “psychogeography” is particularly appropriate descriptor of the landscape of these poems for two main reasons. Firstly, in contemporary literary theory, it is strongly associated with the poet’s “intention”. In Debord’s Marxist/Surrealist poems, the psychogeographical intention was to interrupt the habitual consumption of the environment, and therefore the modes of its production. “People can see nothing around them that is not their own image”, he said paraphrasing Marx, but sounding “surreally” like the third Karmapa, “everything speaks to them of themselves”.¹⁶ This technique was later taken up by various groups and authors with intentions as diverse as re-orientating people to the roads of London at the expense of the “tube map tyranny”, and a project to develop a “vertical” map of New York that recognized the socio-spatial organization of wealth.¹⁷

The intention of “the language of *mahāmudra*” – as Rangjung Dorje described his poetry – is also to interrupt habitual viewing patterns. In this way, also, it is strikingly similar to other psychogeographic projects. But Rangjung Dorje’s agenda – like that of much Tibetan thought – is focused more on individual than societal transformation, and as such is much more socially conservative, and ontologically radical than Debord’s work and other psychogeographic projects. In evoking *mahāmudra*, he is imploring his audience to make this vast, metaphorical, self-less view their experience, and in doing so to see through the cycle of existence that he perceives as suffering. This he explains in the following poem:

When mountain hermits, yogis like me,
Look out at the sky’s expanse,
Instantly, we know clarity – luminous and empty.
Manifestly unborn, unceasing.

Look down at the stream’s flow,
Instantly, we remember continuity,
Manifestly unutterable.

¹⁵ There is also a record of one *mgur* included within a letter by the first Karmapa. See Dusum Khyenpa (2008).

¹⁶ Debord (1990: 23).

¹⁷ For an overview and these examples, see Coverley (2006: 125, 134).

Look over there at the mountains,
Instantly, we remember immutability.
Manifestly still.¹⁸

This poem also demonstrates the second reason the term "psychogeography" is a helpful tool with which to analyze these poems – it highlights the mutable relationship the *mahāmudra* suggests between our psyche and the geography it perceives. Indeed, in Tibetan these two seemingly separate entities are often covered by one term, *yul* (Skt. *viśaya*), which can mean both a 'place' and an 'object of the senses', including, importantly, the "mental sense", which is to say objects of mental perception. In English translation, these two meanings are usually interpreted discreetly, but in many instances in Tibetan, and particularly in these poems, these two aspects of *yul* are undifferentiated. In other words, any "place" is an object of the senses, and any object of the senses – including objects of the mental sense that are visualized or created in poetry – are places. Rangjung Dorje exemplified this idea when he wrote: "Mind runs straight to places/objects, and ends up in Rahula's mouth."¹⁹ And, in another poem: "When you don't know everything is *in* mind. Places – outside and in – aren't much use."²⁰

What this means in terms of the imagery of these poems is that there is a sense of fluidity between the spheres of "mental sense objects" created in the poems and the "visual sense objects" perceived "outside". This idea is articulated through images of the sky, dreams, mirrors, illusions, and the mandalization of the environment – imagery that blurs the line between external and internal places. About Zhel dkar, the Crystal Mountain at Tsari, for example, he says: "All the directions of this great place, are inside a mirror – like reflections."²¹ And in another poem, he says: "All elements, feelings, realizations / are like bird's footprints in the sky."²²

This flexible perception of "place" also allows the mountains to be what the yogi makes of them. Indeed, in these poems we find this generally inaccessible alpine environment undergoing an extensive re-imagining, or what Andrew

18 Rangjung Dorje (op. cit. 191) *bdag 'dra'i rnal 'byor ri khrod pa/ nam mkha'i dbyings la phar bltas pas/stong pa 'od gsal tur gyis dran/ skye 'gag med pa mngon du gyur/ chu bo'i gzhung la mar ltas pas/ rgyun chad med pa tur gyis dran/ brjod du bral ba mngon du gyur/ ri bo 'di la phar ltas pas/ gyur ba med pa tur gyis dran/ g.yo 'gul med pa mngon tu gyur/*

19 Rang byung rdo rje (op. cit. 216) Tib.: *yul la rab tu rgyugs pa'i sems/ sgra gcan khar ni gzhug par bya/*

20 Ibid. 240. Tib.: *thams cad sems su ma shes na/ phyi snang ba'i yul gis dgos pa chung/*

21 Ibid. 238. Tib.: *gnas chen gyis sa phyogs thams cad kyang/ me long nang gi gzugs brnyan bzhin/*

22 Ibid. 230. Tib.: *byung tshor rtogs pa tham cad kyang/ mkha' la bya yi rjas bzhin du/*

Quintman has called “landscaping”.²³ In the literature of the imperial period,²⁴ and still much of the literature of Rangjung Dorje’s time,²⁵ the mountains were viewed as the uncontested abode of the more hardy, non-human members of the Tibetan imagined community – deities, spirits and animals. But in the years preceding the composition of Rangjung Dorje’s poems, within the bounds of the Tibetan cultural *imaginaire* at least, the process of their subjugation and colonization had begun. This creative process started with the conquest myths of Guru Rinpoche that flourished in the 10th and 11th centuries, and was reinforced by the oral biographies of Milarepa in the 12th and 13th centuries. With the concurrent construction of a network of sacred sites and pilgrimage routes based around the heroic encounters of these men with natural and supernatural forces, they had – literally – made their marks on the mountains.²⁶

This re-imagining is still under-construction in the third Karmapa’s poems, and they in many ways aid the project. While there were very few people living in the mountains during Milarepa’s time, Rangjung Dorje spends much time either travelling to already established hermitages, or founding new ones. He and his entourage journey to new border areas – Tsari in the south, Karwa Karpo in the south-east and Lha-teng in the mountains of north-eastern Kham – “opening the doors of holy places”, as they put it, through a process of “seeing” the localities’ maṇḍala, living and teaching there, and singing poems in their praise.²⁷ Quite a few of Rangjung Dorje’s songs reflect this process. Like this extract from a song about Tsari.

In Jambudvīpa’s north, in the land of Tibet,²⁸ or
 To be more precise, in this most sacred of sites,
 A place difficult for anyone to reach,
 Surrounded by piles of vajra rocks, [where]
 Myriad waterfalls fall everywhere [and]
 It’s bursting with green trees and flowers.
 This is a place where gods, demi-gods,
*Kinnaras*²⁹ and ghosts all make offerings.

23 Quintman (2008: 365).

24 See, e.g. Dalton & van Schaik (2006).

25 Gyalbo, Hazod & Sørensen (2000: 195).

26 Quintman (2008) is a detailed discussion of this process.

27 Situ Chokyi Jungne (op. cit. vol. I: 372); dPa’ bo gtsug lag phreng ba (op. cit. vol. II: 960).

28 Jambudvīpa (Tib. ’Dzam gling) is the southern continent in Buddhist cosmology that is said to contain the earth.

29 A *kinnara* (Tib. *mi’ am ci*) is a class of spirits who offer singing. The Kinaur people of northern India are said to be descended from them.

Externally it has the aspect of a maṇḍala.
Internally it is a collection of self-arising deities.³⁰

This was, again literally, visionary work, and it is portrayed in his hagiography as the honourable endeavours of a tantric coloniser, but Rangjung Dorje also reflects in many of his *mgur* on its operational difficulties – the hard work of mentally transfiguring rugged environments into poetry. In another poem about Tsari, for example, he sings:

It's like the food you wanted went down the wrong way,³¹
When despair comes from untold³² tiredness –
Dirt, stones, mountains, rocks, trees –
The mind untrained, unstable, un-concentrated
Sees the ravines as pointless prickles...

You won't mind haze outside,
When the fog of ignorance clears up,
You won't mind sunsets outside,
When the sun of wisdom rises.
You won't mind it pouring outside,
When the rain of conception ceases,
You won't mind rugged chasms outside,
When you've seen saṃsāra's cliff,
You won't mind prickly barbs outside,
When there are no more thorns of hate,
You won't mind flooding rivers outside,
When the streams of craving dry up,
You won't mind high peaks outside,
When you've levelled arrogance's mountain.
You won't mind bland food,
When you've tasted a meal of concentration,
When afflictions' jungle ravines are no more,
You won't mind the gloom of the gorge – outside.³³

30 Rangjung Dorje (op. cit. 239). Tib.: 'dzam gling byang phyogs bod kyi yul/ khyad par gnas mchog chen po 'di/ kun gyis bgrod pa rab dka' bas/ rdo rje brag ri'i tshogs kyis bskor/ chu klung tsna tshogs phyogs med' bab/ ljon shing me tog tshogs kyis gang/ lha dang lha min mi'am ci / byung po kun gyis mchod pa'i gnas/ phyi ni dkyil 'khor rnam pa can/ nang ni rang byung lha yi tshogs/

31 Literally 'it goes down the coughing path'.

32 This word literally says 'immeasurable', but as this does not make sense when translated directly into English, I have changed it to the idiomatic 'untold', which conveys the same meaning as the Tibetan *dpag med*.

33 Ibid. 241. Tib.: za 'dod glo lam bgrod pa 'dra/ yi mug thang chad dpag med' byung/ sa rdo ri brag rtsi shing rnam/ bsam gtan sems kyis ma sbyangs na/ don med cong rong tsher mar mthong. ... ma rig rmugs pa dangs pa na/ phyi yi na bun 'thibs kyang bzod/ ye shes nyi ma shar ba na/ phyi yi nyi ma nub kyang bzod/ rnam rtog char ba zad pa na/ phyi yi char pa bab kyang bzod/ 'khor ba'i g.yang sa rtogs pa na/ pyi

Another aspect of this project to colonise the mountains, was the gradual development of a new sector of Tibetan society, “the mountain dweller” (Tib. *ri khrod pa*), or hermit. Again, this category of person is first encountered in the earlier versions of Milarepa’s life story.³⁴ But in Rangjung Dorje’s poems this group has reached a critical mass, and instead of merely encouraging people to live in the mountains as Milarepa did, Rangjung Dorje’s poems start developing a sense of community, social position and ethic for the mountain dwellers. Almost all of these poems start with a line that says “For other mountain dwellers like me”,³⁵ or something similar.³⁶ They also glorify mountain hermits by likening them to previous teachers, and acknowledging the dangers of their pursuits. Rangjung Dorje’s 40th poem, written while he was in isolated retreat at the base of Mount Everest, says, for example:

Too few live alone in the mountains,
Like the gurus did.
No one wants to do as they did.
Those who wanted to help others
Aren’t here, they’re all dead.³⁷

This poem, and others like it, reflect something of the complexity of the relationship between the yogis and their mountainous environment: on the one hand they are hard places to live – all of the poems and stories reflect this – but on the other hand they are also perceived as places of potential transformation. According to the view of *mahāmudra* to which Rangjung Dorje and his intended audience subscribed, the “places” in these poems, yogic visualization and the external environment were *all* constructed by mind, and as such, could *all* be transformed. Rangjung Dorje uses this commonality of construction to transform his and his listeners’ perceptions. By first understanding the processes involved in the construction of a poem, or a yogic visualization, he explained, his

yi cong rong gzar yang bzod/ zhe sdang gi tsher ma med pa na/ phyi yi tsher ma rtsub kyang bzod/ sred pa'i chu bo skam pa na/ phyi chu bu 'brub kyang bzod/ nga rgyal ri bo non pa na/ phyi yi ri bo mtho yang bzod/ ting' dzin zas kyi ro myon na/ zas kyi rnam pa med kyang bzod/ nyon mongs shing rong med gyur na/ phyi yi shing rong 'thibs kyang bzod/

34 rGyal thang pa bde chen rdo rje, *dKar brgyud gser 'phreng*.

35 Rang byung rdo je (op. cit. 189).

36 For example *ibid.* 188 “Yogis like me, among the mountains”, Tib.: *bdag 'dra'i rnal 'byor ri khrod pa*; 189 “For all mountain hermits like me”, Tib.: *bdag 'dra'i rnal 'byor ri khrod pa*; 191 “When mountain hermits, yogis like me...”, Tib.: *bdag 'dra'i rnal 'byor ri khrod pa/*

37 Rang byung rdo rje (op. cit. 231). Tib.: *ri khrod dgon par sdod pa nyung/ bla ma rnams kyis mdzad pa ltar/ tshul bzhin bsgrub pa'i gang zag med/ gzhan don dgongs pa mdzad rnams kyang/ mi bzbugs yongs su nya ngan 'das/*

listeners would eventually come to see the processes of karma and delusion play themselves out as the experience of an "I".³⁸

In order for this strategy to work, however, in order for the listener to see through the processes of meditation and poetry, it had to involve an inherent de-construction; the strings, as it were, had to be visible. In the visualizations of tantra, this was not that difficult, the visualizer is aware, at the outset that they are constructing the world they will inhabit. And, if they forget, if they are lost in their own visualizations, the process of deconstruction is made explicit through completion stage practices that involve dissolution.³⁹ Rangjung Dorje achieves a similar end in his poems by employing two strategies: acknowledging the setting of the poem at their beginning, and dismissing their worth at the end. The first of these strategies – acknowledging the setting – reflects the poems' two modes of composition: those that are composed on paper and those that are spoken word performances, usually given at tantric ritual gatherings, but sometimes in dreams.

To acknowledge the process of writing, Rangjung Dorje plays with the idea of text. He refers repeatedly to the image of "black ink on white paper", reducing the building blocks of his poems to their material element. He also plays with the Tibetan word *dpe cha*, which is usually translated into English as 'text', but literally means 'a piece of metaphor'. "When you don't know all appearances are text/ pieces of metaphor", he says, "Black inky letters aren't much use."⁴⁰ And in a later poem with a slight variation: "Not realizing everything you encounter is a metaphor, these many texts – theses pieces of metaphor – stay fragmented."⁴¹

The deconstructive strategy he uses in spoken word performances is audience inclusion. Many of the poems' colophons indicate that these poems were performed for an audience gathered to hear him teach, or to receive an empowerment. Rangjung Dorje usually acknowledges this audience in the poems themselves. "Fortunate ones", he says repeatedly, "sit for a while and listen to my song".⁴² He even acknowledges when the intended audience is only himself, as in the following example:

I say these things,
To encourage my own depressed mind.

38 Mi skyo rdo rje, *mGur mts'ho*: 7.

39 There are many books on these two stages of Buddhist Tantric Meditation. See, e.g. Jamgon Kongtrul & Harding (1996).

40 Rang byung rdo rje (op. cit. 240). Tib.: *snang ba dpe char ma shes na / yig nag po tis dgos pa chung/*

41 Ibid. 224. Tib.: *snang ba dpe ru ma shes na/ dpe cha mang yang dum bu yin*

42 Ibid. 204. Tib.: *gson dang 'dir bzhugs skal ldan kun/*

If no one else listens,
I'll tell you – the empty sky.⁴³

The other way that he incorporates the process of composition into the poem is by undermining its worth at the end of most of his poems. They end with lines like: “These spoken words are a *mala* of conception. But it is only a small one, so please be patient with it.”⁴⁴ And, “For those who understand, this is instruction. For those who don’t understand – I hope you still had fun.”⁴⁵ At the end of a group of poems sung while he was staying at Tsari, he goes one step further, implying that the main purpose of the poems is fun. “Naturally,” he says, “they were sung for fun”.⁴⁶

It is perhaps a strange coincidence that these de-constructive strategies and this sense of fun, should be found in both the poetry of a 14th-century Tibetan monk and 20th-century reformers like the psychogeographers. But, then again, both Rangjung Dorje and the psychogeographers were trying to adjust their poetic vision to re-imagine difficult environments; for Rangjung Dorje it was the arduous experience of living in the Himalayas, for the psychogeographers it was – and is – the paradoxical isolation of modern urbanity; although many people in cities are surrounded by people, their writing and art often reflects their disconnection from community and subsequent loneliness.

As many other commentators attest, contemporary Tibetan writers have also struggled with the expression of urban living in their writing.⁴⁷ The trope of mountain solitudes that was under construction during Rangjung Dorje’s time has proved a more enduring entity even than Xanadu, which now lies in ruins. The urban exile of many contemporary Tibetan writers – in the cities and towns of China, the West and India – only make this narrative more poignant. Perhaps in this regard Rangjung Dorje’s final poem, written in the Mongol’s winter capital Dàdū (Beijing) in 1338, marks an interesting literary departure, and a basis for comparison with contemporary writers. The song comes from a dream – not, like Coleridge, a dream of Xanadu – but a dream of a mountain retreat where he goes to meet Marpa the translator, whom he finds in conversation with a large

43 Ibid. 228, 229. *de ltar ngag tu brjod pa 'di/ skyo ba'i yid kyis rab bskul nas/ gzhan dag [229] nyen par mi 'gyur yang/ nam mkha' stong pa khyod la smras/*

44 Ibid. 230. *rnam rtog phreng ba ngag tu brjod/ cung zad thal na bzod par gsol/*

45 Ibid. 253. Tib.: *go ba rnam gyis gdam ngag mdzod/ ma go ba rnam nyams dga' mdzod/*

46 Ibid. 208 Tib.: *rang bzhin ku re'i tshul du blangs/*

47 See, e.g. Virtanen (2008: 236–263).

group of people. A poem from their discussion stays in his mind. It describes a technique for dealing with the bustle of cities while still maintaining his much cherished *mahāmudra* view, and perhaps marks an acceptance, on the part of at least one Tibetan, of city life away from the mountains. He writes:

Whatever you think, whatever blocks you,
 Transform it into samādhi's joy,
 It won't take long to cultivate and
 You'll be free of thinking, clarity will arise.

It is innate, natural.
 You don't have to look for signs and such.
 Whatever and whatever are on your mind,
 The nature of this and that,
 Are jewel like, with infinite reflections.⁴⁸

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48 Ibid. 214. Tib.: *gang zhig rtog pas bar bca'd na/ dga' bdé'i ting'dzin nyams gyur bas/ dus ring sgom kyang dgos pa med/ rtog bral gsal ba skye rgyu pa/ lhan cig skyes pa'i rang bzhin te/ mtshan pa'i la sogs btsal mi dgos/ gang dang gang la sems bzhag pa/ de dang de'i rang bzhing te/ sna tshogs gzugs can nor bu'dra/*

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