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Politicizing Refugees' Identities: Performance, Theatre and the Body

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Abstract

Doing something with or about the body is a performative act. Doing self-harm to one's body is a deeply political message that refugees have used when literal speech was impossible. Self-harm became a form of testimony, of making a plea for social recognition and regaining control when all power seems to reside outside the body. This has happened multiple times in recent history: refugees were sewing lips, eyes and ears in Australia Woomera camp (2002), they went on hunger strikes (2006) and set themselves on fire in UK (2003-2005).

Tibetans inside Tibet and since recently also Tibetans living in exile in India, set themselves on fire as an extreme form of protest against Chinese occupation of Tibet. From March 2009 until March 2018 there have been reports of 152 Tibetans who have self-immolated in China, acts condemned by the Tibetan Government in Exile and by the spiritual leader of Tibet, the XIV Dalai Lama.

In this paper I argue that these acts speak about a politicized and performative form of identity that refugees embody in the 21st century, in both European and non-European contexts. If the washed-up body on the Turkish beach of the little Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi, on 2nd September 2015, was the peak of a dehumanised political response to the 'refugee crisis' in Europe, I argue that the politicization of refugees' bodies continues elsewhere, as long as the political takes over the human, moral and legal dimensions of migratory movements, denying the human need to live in safe and free spaces.

Key words: identity, performance, refugees, body, politicization.

Introduction

In this paper I will explore theoretical understandings of identity, performance and the body in relationship with the experiences of migration and asylum by refugees living at the borders (Anzaldua, 1987) and in spaces of 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 1994), in Europe and India. I will weave in auto-biographical writing and personal narrative as a performance strategy. Personal narrative as cultural performance has transformative power to assert "who matters and what matters and to create and celebrate a community's identity and values" (Langellier, 1999, pg. 134).

Writing autobiographically and doing auto-ethnography in postcolonial context (Madison, 2012) helped me making sense of my experiences, thoughts, feelings and questions in relationship to the research while analysing the larger context where the experiences took place. This is important since identity and experience are a symbiosis of performed story and the social relations in which they are embedded (Langellier, 1999).

"To be reflexive is to be at once one's own subject and direct object", argues Turner (1982, pg. 100). For this reason, personal narrative performance is fundamental to the people who have been left out of the privileges of dominant culture, in this paper meaning the migrants and refugees, "those bodies without voice in the political sense" (Langellier, 1999, pg. 129).

The search for a methodology that allows the personal life story to co-exist together with the stories from the field has a point of departure in Anzaldua's work (1999). She coined the term "autohistoria-teoria" in order to reveal the interventions of women of colour and the transformations of the traditional Western auto-biographical form. "Autohistoria" is infused with the search for personal and cultural meaning and is inspired by reflective self-awareness. This is the methodology that this paper is based on.

The question of identity, its politicization and its performance has been a point of interest in social science research for several decades. Albeit a complex concept in the language of social scientists, identity offers a relevant framework in which people conceive of themselves and are characterised by others (Vertovec, 2011).

Identities are generated and constructed through an interplay of internal (self-attributed) and external (other-ascribed) factors and attributes (Jenkins, 1996). "Identity has its subjective root in the person, but it manifests itself through the mobilization of collective self-consciousness" argues Singh (2004, pg. 215).

Identity has also been understood in terms of belonging, which is seen by scholars today as a political and cultural field of contestation. The notion of belonging often describes an emotional attachment to a homeland, a place of origin, whether this is real or imagined. But 'home' is not always conceptualised as a specific location (Sigona et al., 2015). The self-constructed definitions of belonging resonate with new spaces of culture, freedom and identity (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Performance is often referred to as a 'contested concept'. Studies focused on the concepts of 'performance' and 'location' in order to make claims about identity and politics are central in contemporary critical and cultural theory (Dolan, 1993).

Performance has been understood in different ways, from theatrical practice, drama or acting in the past to the recent history when performance has evolved into ways of understanding how human beings make culture, power, and reinvent their identities in the world (Hamera, 2005). Understanding performance in this complex way makes it possible for us to better grasp the meaning of history, identity, community and politics.

Performing the Body: the Social as Theatre

"The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body" writes Anzaldua (2015, pg. 5). She further calls the space where she struggles with her creations "nepantla." Nepantla is the place where her cultural and personal identities oppose, where these different worlds blend in her writing. Nepantla is thus the point of contact between worlds— between imagination and physical existence, between material and spirit realities (Anzaldua, 2015).

Anzaldua's argument about the non-duality of the world and the embodied experience of writing and being in the world has been evoked earlier on by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1982). The Eurocentric philosophy of Cartesian dualism insisted on separating subject and object, us from them, and it has led to treating disrespectfully the deep bonds between body and mentality, unconscious and conscious thinking and self (Turner, 1982, pg. 100).

Arguing against an ideology and practice based on Cartesian dualism, the space for creativity and performance comes from what Turner calls 'reflexivity' (1983), what Madison writes about as 'autethnograpy' (2012) and Anzaldua as 'autohistoria' (2015). For Turner, cultural and social performance constitute order and authority which he refers to as structure and human action or anti-structure (Hamera, 2005).

For Judith Butler performativity is understood as a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, pg. 519). Butler is inspired in her argument by theatrical, anthropological, philosophical and phenomenological theory and she shows that:

[W]at is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status (Butler, 1988, pg. 520)

The performativities become a cultural convention inscribed on the body and performed through the body as a marker of identities and so identity categories are not biologically determined but socially constructed. This means there is a possibility for alternative performativities and ways of being in the world (Hamera, 2005, pg xviii).

In a broader sense, performativity as metaphor is used to describe the "non-essentialized constructions of marginalized identities", like women of colour, gays and lesbians, and other combinations and intersections of these categories and positionalities (Dolan, 1993, pg. 419). The argument is that these marginalized identities are self-consciously alienated from what has constituted traditional subjectivity (white, heterosexual man) and here the concept of performativity becomes useful to work with.

I will add to Dolan's argument another category of marginalized identities: the migrants, refugee and mobile populations moving across borders. Their experiences, narratives and performance of their identities constitute the focus of this paper. And so I will argue that the politicization of refugees' bodies and the performance of their identity constitutes "the metaphor of a body staged [and] figures the social as a theatre" (Dolan, 1993, pg. 434).

 In Turner's theory (1982), the social or "experimental" theatre is a "performed" or "restored" experience, in which meaning emerges by reliving the original experience, which may constitute a social drama subjectively perceived, and is given an aesthetic form. This is called "communicable wisdom" (Turner, 1982, pg. 18) and it helps others to understand better their own being in the world and the times and cultural conditions which compose their experience of reality.

For Schechner (2005), performance is an inclusive term and theatre is only one point on a continuum that moves from ritualizations to everyday performances, such as greetings, emotion, family scenes, professional roles, to play, sports, theatre, dance, ceremonies, rites, and other performances (Schechner, 2005, pg x).

Both Turner and Schechner, although approaching the topic from different directions, envision theatre as an important means for the intercultural transmission of "achieved modalities of experience" (Turner, 1982, pg. 18). This means that in the effort towards transcultural understanding, enacting one another's social dramas, rituals, and theatrical performances will inspire the actors to seeing and apprehending the reality of human symbolic formations (ibid).

It is important to return to a previous argument here, the personal narrative performance. "Personal narrative is a site where the social is articulated, structured, and struggled over" (Langellier, 1999, pg. 128) and it constitutes the means for producing and reproducing identities and experiences.

Therefore, personal narrative is a performance strategy which has importance for socially ignored groups or for persons who identities have been "spoiled" (Langellier, 1999, pg. 134) by the political and social rendering of their existence. This argument will be expanded in the following sections of this paper. I will refer to examples from recent migration history in Europe, with a particular focus on the refugee exodus and my own lived experience in the summer of 2015 in Hungary. The second part of the paper will discuss my PhD research about the performance of identities by Tibetans living in exile in India and the auto-ethnographic writing central to this research.

Politicizing Migration and Refugees in Hungary, 2015

In 2015 more than 850,000 refugees left the shores of Turkey and walked through the Balkan countries, in the hope of reaching the safe haven of Western Europe (Kingsley, 2017). On their way to Austria, Germany and Sweden, around 350,000 crossed Hungary in the summer of the same year. Hungary treated them without dignity and human respect, with humiliation and detention upon arrival on the border, thus employing a "depoliticizing narrative of crisis" (Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016).

As I was living and working in the capital city of Budapest, Hungary, at the time, I was an eye-witness and direct participant to the events described by the media as one of the great mass migrations of history, especially post-WWII European history (Kingsley, 2017).

During 2015 I was working a full-time job and volunteering on evenings and weekends with a local NGO, assisting migrants, refugees and minorities living in Hungary. Together with other volunteers, I provided support in the form of small gestures, like offering water and food, ice-cream to small children waiting in the hot weather at the two train stations: Kelety and Nyugati, waiting for trains to take them to other, more hospitable lands. Other institutions collected clothing and baby items, while Turkish restaurants offered halal food, and some of the local inhabitants of Budapest offered their homes to the refugees waiting for many days at the train stations, in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions (Garbovan, 2015; Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016).

Perceiving the refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries to be the 'other', different (read non-Christians) and inassimilable migrants, Hungary refused to host them and raised a fence on its border in September 2015. Prior to that, on the 04th September 2015 the hundreds of thousands of people who left conflict-ridden countries like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea and other countries in the region, embarked on what has been called a "March of Hope" (Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram, 2016), walking from Budapest to Vienna, on a hot, summer day (Figure 1, pg. 4). They have been assisted by Hungarian and international volunteers, local and European press and other concerned citizens.

Figure 1. Refugees walking from Budapest to Vienna, 04 September 2015

Source: The Guardian, 05 September 2015,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/05/refugees-travelling-from-hungary-can-enter-germany-and-austria

In the summer of 2015 I was living in the middle of the so-called 'refugee crisis' and was able to document it in a Country Report for the NGO *Issues Without Borders* (issueswithoutborders.com, 2015) and in an academic article (Garbovan, 2015), following my presentation of *The End of Democracy and Human Rights in Hungary*, at an International Conference.

My writing about the politicization and criminalization of migrants and refugees by the Hungarian Government in 2015 connects with Denzin's argument (1997) in the short piece called: 'Mystories: Connecting the Personal and the Political'. Bringing the past into the autobiographical present means employing a particular version of autho-ethnography in sociological research, writing from one's biography into the spaces of history and culture.

In this writing "the body is not looked at as an inert object but its agency contributes to the active narration of the participants' stories of migration" (Vachelli, 2017). Writing is a gesture of the body and a gesture of creativity, a working from the inside out, because the body is the ground of thought, writes Gloria Anzaldua (2015). And this is what inspired me to document the personal angle in the refugee exodus.

Other European countries were more generous towards the refugees, with Germany accepting over 1 million refugees in 2015. On 5th September 2015 the then Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann granted passage to 10,000 migrants and refugees stranded in Hungary, after the Hungarian government left them on the Austrian border (*The Atlantic*, 2015).

However, Merkel's open door policy has come under attack in the coming years, since the controversial Cologne sexual attack for which migrants from Northern Africa were held responsible (*BBC*, 09 January 2016)

The political events that followed the migration exodus to Europe in 2015 (Kinglsey, 2017), including the re-election of Victor Orban as the Prime Minister of Hungary (April, 2018) and his anti-immigration propaganda, show that Hungary is not a hospitable place for non-(EU) citizens, for those deemed to be marginal, to live "disposable lives" (O'Donoghue, 2018).

This rejection applied to my personal story, as well. Although I am a citizen of this country, my non-EU partner has been denied permanent residency in Hungary in 2016 and this, together with other events, led me to moving out of Hungary.

'Disposable lives' is a term used by the visual artist O'Donoghue to refer to the collective ambivalence that was shown to the deaths of refugees and migrants at the borders around Europe.

In his project *Dead Reckoning 2016* (www.bernodonoghue.com/dead-reckoning/), each boat represents an individual who has been recorded as drowned in 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea on the way to Europe (Figure 2, pg. 6). O'Donoghue used data collected by the IOM in their *Missing Migrants Project* (missingmigrants.iom.int).

"Every one of the 5,083 paper boats symbolises a loss of someone significant: a daughter, son, neighbour or friend" (O'Donoghue, 2018, no page number).

One of these sons and brothers was the little Syrian boy Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach on 2nd September 2015. The photo of his body was shared on social media within hours, accumulating million shares. The European governments were suddenly compelled to open closed frontiers (Demir, 2015).

His death by drowning in the Mediterranean Sea in September 2015 had triggered an unexpected response of political empathy from European leaders, and the then UK Prime Minister David Cameron pledged to welcome 20,000 Syrians in the UK over the next five years (*The Guardian*, 07 September 2015).

However, 8,500 people lost their lives at sea since the death of the three-year old Alan Kurdi (*The Guardian*, September 2017).

Figure 2. Dead Reckoning Project 2016

Source: http://www.bernodonoghue.com/dead-reckoning/

I originally began this project mid-April 2015, when two news reports six days apart showed that boats carrying refugees had capsized off the Libyan coast. I was stopped in my tracks by the fact that 1200 people had drowned. It was so shocking and distressing such a huge number of people had died in this way, but equally troubling was the pejorative language used by certain politicians and sections of the media in response to the accidents. I found it disturbing to see numbers used as a means of distancing people living in safety from the human tragedy and felt compelled to make some work to bridge that distance and began researching the refugee crisis. As the crisis continued to unfold, living and dead seemed to be afforded little dignity or compassion (O'Donoghue, 2018, no page number)

Contemporary migration politics are characterised by increasing numbers of displaced persons but also by practices of detention and dehumanising those on the move (Squire, 2018). These migration politics raise multiple questions of security and economics for the countries affected and this is reflected in the media representations of migration-related issues becoming prominent (Squire, 2018).

However, this is not only the case in relation to the so-called 'European migration crisis' of 2015, but also in relation to political decisions made by the people living in the European Union, such as the UK's referendum to leave the European Union in June 2016 and outside the EU, the election of Donald Trump as US President in November 2016, to mention just the changes in Western Europe.

It has been argued that in this climate, the active subjecthood of people on the move in precarious situations is less explored. Irregular migration struggles in this respect to raise crucial questions about "how to understand the agency of people who are marginalised" (Strange, Squire and Lundberg, 2017, pg. 244).

In an attempt to document and visually represent the agency of people on the move, crossing land and sea to find safety and a better life, the University of Warwick, UK, initiated the research project *Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat* (crossing-the-med-map.warwick.ac.uk).

The project is built on a research methodology consisting of over 250 in-depth qualitative interviews with people who have entered the European Union, or who were contemplating making the journey, by travelling across the Mediterranean Sea without legal authorisation.

The project collected these personal stories and presented them visually on an interactive map (Figure 3, pg. 7). The purpose was to enhance the understanding of the migratory journey and experiences of the human subjects at the center of it: refugees and migrants themselves.

Figure 3. Map: Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by boat Project

Source: https://crossing-the-med-map.warwick.ac.uk/athens
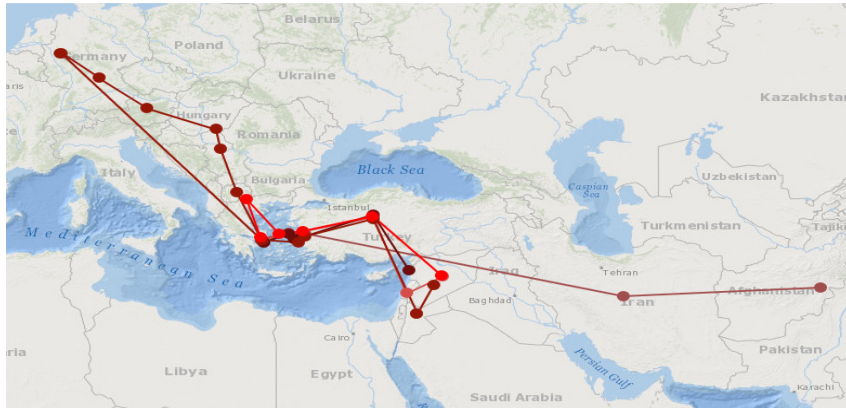
In this section of the paper I selected these projects, stories and pieces of news about migrant and refugees' experiences in European countries being fully aware that they do not represent a holistic view of the 2015 migration exodus.

My aim was to show selectively how the politicization of migrants' journeys, young refugees' bodies and my own narrative in the midst of it, in spaces of trouble and suffering, came to be an intricate part of a contemporary political, personal and collective performance of identities.

Multi-vocal Ethnography: Tibetans in Exile in India

After having moved out of Hungary in October 2015, I started doing a PhD research about Tibetan refugees living in India. Having witnessed and studied about the asylum system in Europe for seven years, I decided to learn from a non-Eurocentric framework about a different history and different way of accommodating different identities, since India has been exposed to cultural contacts with over civilizations for millennia. Thus, the country has been continually making adaptive changes in its cultural forms as it encountered other cultures: India has a "history of accommodating identities" (Singh, 2004, pg. 216).

Therefore, in this accommodating land of many cultures, ethnicities and religions living together for millennia, there might be enough space and tolerance for just another group: the Tibetans. This group of migrants / refugees/ stateless/ guests/ (potentially) citizens is an analytical category difficult to categorize in the current academic terms.

The starting point of my PhD research is an attempt to understand how Tibetans living in India make sense of who they are, their social and political identities in the current times (2010-2020). In particular I explore how they position themselves vis-à-vis the question of acquiring Indian citizenship, a possibility debated and contested since 2010, when the first Tibetan applied for and obtained Indian citizenship. Tibetans currently live in a fluid political status, between guests, migrants, refugees and citizens, since India is not a signatory of the UNHCR 1951 Convention on Refugees.

Stuart Hall (2017) argues that identity is not a set of fixed attributes, but a process of constant positioning, a never-completed process of becoming and shifting identifications (p. 16). Hall's work is important in historicising ethnic and cultural identity, argues Anthias (1998) but to some extent it undermines a de-essentialised notion of cultural identity and does not adequately deal with the relevance of inter-ethnic, class and gender differences that identities are made of (Anthias, 1998, pg. 560).

Juxtaposing the question of identity and who is being spoken for, the literature on subaltern identities questions the problem of representation and speaking for others. There is a growing recognition that "one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location." (Frow, 1995, p. 161).

In line with this idea, Linda Alcoff (1991) follows closely Spivak's thesis in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' arguing that the simple solution is not for the oppressed or less privileged to be able to speak for themselves, since their speech will not necessarily be liberating or reflective of their own interests. However, ignoring the subaltern's or oppressed person's speech means a continuation of the imperialist project.

The problem with speaking for others is then contained in the very structure of discursive practice, and therefore it is this structure itself that needs alteration (Alcoff, 1991, pg. 23). Summing this up, Frow (1995) argues that outside the politics of representation there is no simple answer, only an unequal negotiation of relations of power that are structurally contained within it (pg. 163-164).

Brah (1996) argues that a diasporic group is situated within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality in the country where it migrates, and thus it is placed in a variety of different discourses, economic processes, state policies and institutional practices. This "relational positioning" helps deconstructing the regimes of power, the forms of inclusion and exclusion from the nation as a political body (Brah, 1996, pg. 182-183).

Furthermore, for Brah the concept of 'diaspora space' is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a meeting point between economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. "It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed" (ibid, pg 208).

Bhabha also speaks of the liminality of migrant's experience and the indeterminacy of diaspora identity, "that will not be resolved here", quoting Rushdie's Satanic Verses (1988) (cited in Bhabha, 1994, p. 322).

Rushdie's work has been classified as blasphemy by certain religious groups. Bhabha reads this act as the interpretation of a religious text into cultural translation and hence in the sense of hybridity itself being classified as heresy.

The migrant culture of the 'in-between' or the minority position shifts the question of culture's appropriation towards a process of hybridity that identifies with the culture's difference (Bhabha, 1994, p. 321). Culture, in this sense, becomes an "uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity – between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private" (ibid, p. 251).

The epistemological approach to this research understands that reality is socially constructed by the people who experience it and we live in an intersubjective world that we share with others (Berger and Luckman, 1996).

I chose a particular set of methods that resonate with a social constructivist and interpretive approach to reality (Berger and Luckman, 1996; Denzin, 1997). This philosophical approach translate into methods that include multi-sited ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured and informal interviews and autoethnography as main tools for collecting and co-constructing data and theory.

The data collection in the form of ethnography, participant observation, semi-structured, informal and ambulant interviews, took place during two fieldwork

trips to India: July – September 2016 and August – September 2017, total five months spent in four places across the country.

Walking Methods, Performance Ethnography and the Body

While doing ambulant and walking interviews, in a tour of the Majnu ka tilla camp in New Delhi, or of the Tibetan Parliament or in the Tibetan camp in Mundgod I had to pay attention to the sounds of the traffic and the Yamuna River in New Delhi, walk and feel the touch of grass and trees in the vast agricultural fields in Mundgod and the taste and smell of dust or the amazing rain on the streets of McLeod Ganj.

The innovative approaches to methods (Back and Puwar, 2012), that include walking tours and ambulant interviews engage words, images, text and sounds while allowing space for flexibility, changes and contingency. These experiences aim to make space for the co-existence of a multitude of senses and allow their representation in the research process.

Interpretive Ethnography searches for new ways of capturing voice, beyond the transcribal voice, there can be discordant voices, visions and feelings within an epistemology that is multisensual and multiperspectival and includes sounds, touch and taste, instead of privileging speech and images (Deznzin, 1997, p. 36).

This approach resonates with the argument made by Irrigaray (1985) about the feminist gaze that is multisensual, including touch, hearing, taste and vision and thus reverses the logic of the traditional and masculine investigative project.

Alexander (2008) writes about performance ethnography as the "embodied experience of the cultural practices of others" (p. 76). This method uses theatre as performance in order to reveal cultural politics and it has the potential to invoke change.

Although I did not use theatre with my research participants in 2016-2017, I reflected upon the strength of this alternative method and the implications it may have if used in my next fieldwork (2018) or in another research setting.

In November 2017 I participated at a theatre workshop, as part of a Conference on Research Methods in London. The workshop was conducted by Sanjoy Ganguly, writer and director of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Calcutta, India. The three-day workshop consisted of short performances, role-play, short dramas, playback theatre and games that made a strong impact on my understanding of the power of theatre for self-reflection and for invoking change. One particular moment stayed with me and I marked it in my post-fieldwork diary.

I was impressed by the alternative - or maybe fundamental - way of expressing one self. Through the body. And without words. Or sometimes both. How to imagine a situation or story and to enact it "in three dimensions" as Erene (the Sociology and Theatre professor) said. I liked it. I felt this is what I missed in my search for "what to do". Yes, research is interesting. But theatre seems to be more powerful. Why am I looking for something powerful? I don't know. Maybe I don't know what to do with the body. I sometimes try to hide it under good clothes or sometimes try to show it off in nice clothes. But to use the body to convey a message - that is powerful. (Diary entry, 11 November 2017: Theatre and London 09-10-11 November)

The body has "shared political meaning" (Jeffers, 2012, pg. 107), like the Suffragettes' act of inscribing the message 'votes for women' on their body with a needle. Doing something with or about the body is a performative act. And the realization of this potential made a strong impression on me in 2017. It has also

contributed to my reflections on the negative aspects of bodily acts, like the self-immolations committed by Tibetans living in Tibet and in India.

Doing self-harm to one's body is a deeply political message that refugees have used when literal speech was impossible and thus self-harm became a form of testimony, of making a plea for social recognition and a way "to regain a degree of control in the situation where all power appears to reside outside the body." (Jeffers, 2012, pg. 104) This has happened multiple times in recent history: refugees were sewing lips, eyes and ears in Australia Woomera camp center (2002), they went on hunger strikes in UK 2006 and they set themselves on fire in UK 2003-2005.

Tibetans inside Tibet and also some living in Dharamshala set themselves on fire as a form of protest against Chinese occupation. Up until March 2018 there have been reports of 152 Tibetans who have self-immolated in China, and eight in India, acts that have been condemned by the Tibetan Government in Exile and by the spiritual leader of Tibetans, the XIV Dalai Lama (ANI, 2018).

In a fact sheet on Tibetan self-immolation protests in Tibet since 2009, available online (tibet.net/important-issues/factsheet-immolation-2011-2012/), the total number of self-immolations until March 2017 are 152, with 130 Tibetans who died as a result. The list shows each person with their names, age, affiliation (monastery), date of self-immolation and current status (Figure 4, pg.10).

Figure 4. Fact Sheet on Tibetan Self-Immolation Protests in Tibet since February 2009. Central Tibetan Administration

CENTRAL TIBETAN ADMINISTRATION
RESTORING FREEDOM FOR TIBETANS

Fact Sheet on Tibetan Self-Immolation Protests in Tibet Since February 2009

* Names in bold indicate individuals whose whereabouts and condition remain unknown

Total no. of Self-immolations: 152 (126 Male and 26 Female), (2009: 1; 2011:12; 2012: 85; 2013: 26; 2014: 11; and 2015 : 7; 2016: 3; 2017: 7)

No of Tibetans died: 130

(Last updated on 7/03/2018)

S.No	Name (Gender)	Affiliation	Location of incidents	Age	Name of Father	Name of Mother	Date of Self-immolation	Current Status
1	Tapey (M)	Kirti monastery	Ngaba county, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Ch: Sichuan Province)	20s			27/2/2009	Whereabouts and condition unknown
2	Phuntsok (M)	Kirti monastery	Ngaba County, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture(Ch: Sichuan Province)	21	Tsering Tashi	Dzongkar	16/3/2011	Died on 17/03/2011
3	Tsewang Norbu/ Norko (M)	Nyitso monastery	Tawu County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Ch:	29	Tsokye	Choklek	15/8/2011	Died on 15/08/2011

Source: http://tibet.net/important-issues/factsheet-immolation-2011-2012/

The list shows that the vast majority were young Tibetans, in their 20s and 30s. Although many monks and nuns have set themselves on fire, most self-immolation protesters have not been from monasteries and other religious institutions. They include people with different occupations, teachers, students and herdsmen, as well as mothers and fathers. The youngest Tibetan who committed self-immolation was just 15 years old (freetibet.org).

"How has this previously unknown form of protest become the primary symbol of political opposition in Tibet today?' asks Carrico (2015), noting the lack of a tradition of self-immolation in Tibetan Buddhist culture. He then goes on to show how the reasons for this incomprehensible act lie within the current sociopolitical context, the occupation of Tibet by China and the violation of human rights and religious freedoms of Tibetans inside Tibet. The Tibetans who managed to flee to

India and whom I met during my 2017 PhD fieldwork spoke about the self-immolations in Tibet as an extreme act committed in extreme circumstances:

The boys tried hard to explain why the Tibetans inside Tibet commit this act of burning themselves and why they are seen are heroes. In their theory, this is in the only way to draw the attention of the outside world to what happens in Tibet, the Chinese occupation, the lack of freedom Tibetans have, the destruction of their language and culture. Since China has closed up all means of communicating with the outer world, no social media is allowed, no conversations about Tibetan diaspora and the Dalai Lama, self-immolation is indeed the last, extreme form of protest and fight and giving one's life for freedom. (PhD Fieldwork diary entry: 29 August 2017)

Writing about the relationship between language, power and pain in refugees' stories, Prosser (2001, cited in Jeffers, 2012) argues that the skin has the function to record a life lived, hence the concept of 'skin scapes' become an image of the skin as a vehicle for the story-telling of a life (pg. 104).

Furthermore, skin is at times deliberately wounded by its 'owner' when literal speech is impossible: "deliberate infliction of pain on the body becomes a way to regain a degree of control in the situation where all power appears to reside outside the body" (Jeffers, 2012, pg. 104). This way the skin "becomes a form of testimony, making a plea for social recognition" (ibid).

These arguments help making sense of some of the conceptual and symbolic meaning behind the Tibetans' acts of self-immolation. They do not reduce in any ways the degree of gravity, suffering and violence committed on their own bodies and one could perhaps never entirely grasp this extreme act, as the Tibetan boys told me while doing fieldwork in India, in 2017.

Writing myself into the Research

In this section I will weave in the personal circumstances surrounding the beginning of my PhD research and some of the auto-ethnographic writing that helped making sense of my research as well as my thoughts, feelings and experiences while doing fieldwork in India (2016-2017).

After having completed a Master's degree in Sociology and Social Anthropology at Central European University (CEU), Budapest, Hungary, in 2010 I moved to New Delhi with the goal of pursuing anoter Master's degree at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

Instead of JNU, I had secured admission at Banares Hindu University, in the city of Varanasi, but for multiple reasons, including financial, Visa- related and personal, I did not accept the admission offer from Varanasi and decided to return to Europe at the end of 2010.

When in India, I continued building and maintaining contacts with Tibetan students at JNU in the hope of returning to India for an extended period of time for doing my research and thus, keeping in contact with potential research participants was important for me. In fact, the same JNU student whom I befriended in 2012-2013 was one of the interviewees in 2016.

Also, since I could not study at JNU in 2010 (my application had reached the Admission office after the deadline due to being lost in the post office in New Delhi) I maintained hopes that in the future I would be able to join JNU and be part of the research community I have heard about from my Tibetan, Indian and Hungarian friends who had studied there.

After having commenced my PhD research, in 2017 I visited the Refugee Reception Center in Dharamshala, after going through some security checks and

phone calls. During the interview with the Reception Director, I mostly felt like a journalist sitting on the opposite side of a desk where an important figure – the Director - was waiting for my questions.

This situation made me feel quite uncomfortable, but towards the end of the interview the Director asked me a question: "what do you think about the Tibetan refugees?" I felt speechless for a moment. This time I felt the "informant" and on other side it was the journalist, asking me difficult questions. This moment created an awareness of how a participant responding to my interview questions must feel like. I considered my answer very carefully in order to be honest to the person who asked me and who had spent the previous 45 minutes answering my questions.

I then spoke about the Tibetans I had met in the past two years and their stories of resilience, of fighting for freedom of their country or building lives in India with a lot of work and efforts. I said that these stories are important so that we all, from India, England or any other country, can learn about the resilience of Tibetan refugees. But also I have heard of stories of difficult life conditions, loneliness and lack of hope and these were equally important. He seemed to receive my answer with consideration and asked me to keep in touch and send him my written articles in future, which I did after I returned to the UK.

During my fieldwork, I was also aware about the possible consequences of sensitive questions and about a researcher who comes and goes back to her home, leaving the field and participants exposed.

Dinesh (2012) writes about this when quoting her participants' views:

[B]ut at the end of this project you'll return to New York and we have to live here. We need to think about this carefully. (Dinesh, 2012, pg. 65)

I felt that maybe it would have been easier if I had lived in India at the time of doing this research, like I had lived here in 2010. But my affiliation with a UK University and my work as Instructor does not allow me to do that for 12 months per year.

So I repeatedly questioned myself and tried to be cautious about the research I was doing about Tibetans in India – a topic which is politically sensitive because of geopolitical implications in terms of China's problematic relationship with India and with the world over the issue of Tibetans.

For instance, in a recent event documented in the Tibetan Journal (online version), the Royal Court Theatre in London has apologized to Tibetans for cancelling a play about Tibet and promised to produce the play in the next season. The Theatre was involved in a heated argument and criticism from around the world for banning a play about Tibet following alleged Chinese pressure (TibetanJounrnal, 2018).

During the visit to the Nunnery in Mundgod, Karnataka (2017) I felt more like an intruder who was not really welcomed. These feelings had to do with the person I interviewed, the head of the nunnery. She was willing to meet me after my interpreter introduced me but gave short and rapid answers to my questions and told me (via the interpreter) that there is more info on their website. When I offered her a kata (white scarf symbolizing respect for Tibetans) she immediately offered it to my interpreter, under my shocked looks.

I thought that my gender assumptions about how women and especially nuns behave – the ones I have met in my fieldwork in McLeod Ganj in 2016 were friendly – were completely wrong. The head of the nunnery looked very strong physically, more like a wrestler, her face was always very serious, her tone grave, and she did not even try to smile once, her head was shaved, I felt that the person in front of me was not a woman in the traditional sense of gender categories, so I began to question my own assumptions about how I expected a woman to be like and to behave.

I realised how ingrained the gender categories and expectations are in my own head, despite the academic training I have been doing. I seemed to have completely forgotten that gender is not a stable and fixed identity, but an identity instituted through a repetition of acts, through the stylization of the bodily gestures and enactments, which create an "abiding gender self" (Butler, 1988, pg. 519).

Gender is a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanctions (Butler, 1988, pg. 520), and so the head of the nunnery was performing an identity that I could not easily categorize and I found myself confused and questioning my own assumptions.

The visit to the Old Peoples' Home in Mundgod (2017) was particularly uncomfortable as I was surrounded by people in their old age, at the end of life, in a space that seemed occupied by feelings of imminent death and questions were actually running in my head about the purpose of life. I felt that life should not be followed by death but maybe by a transformation of the body into something else, without going through weakness and suffering. I also thought that these Tibetans and their stories would be lost forever and this is painful.

I did not want to ask anything at all, as I did not feel like I should, but just kept silence in this environment, but my interpreter told me that the carer, a Tibetan lady in her 40s, had come to talk to me so I should take out my interview guide.

I felt paralysed emotionally but intellectually I had to hide all these feelings and perform my role, act as if I was the researcher who came to ask her questions, because this is what was expected out of me. So I took out a paper and pen and started forcing thoughts out of my head, asking reasonable questions about the work of the institution, the families of the old people and the Tibetans rituals of death.

This way, I was perhaps doing a form of performance auto-ethnography (Dinesh, 2016, pg. 4). This does not erase the researcher's own subjectivity, but makes a conscious attempt to include the 'I' in the research.

And that has been an unavoidable component of my writing in the attempt to unravel the complexities of researching the life in exile – and death – stories of Tibetans living as guest / migrants / refugees/ citizens in contemporary India.

Conclusion

In this paper I explored some of the contested understandings of refugees' identities, the social as performance and theatre and the politicization of the migrants' bodies at the margins of sociological, cultural and political theory. This conceptual work relied on examples from several geographical and historical spaces intertwined with personal narratives in a reflexive, auto-ethnographic and *auto-historia* writing style.

The refugee exodus in Europe in 2015 and its particular unfolding in Hungary as presented in this paper reflects the contemporary nature of the political and its disregard for 'disposable lives' but also the performative aspect of migrants' stories, as shown in the 'March of Hope' from Budapest to Vienna, on 4th September 2015. The death at sea of thousands of refugees trying to reach Europe and the single example of a small Syrian boy who drowned on 2nd September 2015 tell once again how refugees' bodies have been politicized in a climate of perceived threat, crisis and lack of political empathy.

Moving away from the European stage, the paper argues that there is ongoing politicization of migrants' identities in postcolonial settings, albeit this is arguably a more accommodating space for multiple and diverse identities. Doing

performance ethnography, using walking and feminist methods while researching Tibetans living as refugees in India, I have weaved in stories and images of fluid identities, self-interrogatory interview practices, gender performances and the stories of death via self-immolation. These have the potential to speak about the minds, souls, spirits and bodies of the people whose human subjectivity is asserted and celebrated in this paper.

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