On Rewriting Buddhism
Or, How Not to Write a History

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ABSTRACT: Through a detailed reading of a recent study of medieval Buddhism and politics in Sri Lanka in conjunction with a number of other works, this article explores the troubling legacy of translating the historical questions of subjectivity into the modern language of ‘agency’, ‘autonomy’, ‘innovation’, and ‘creativity’. This legacy cannot easily be separated from the politics of white privilege in post-colonial studies of Buddhism and South Asian religion. The problem with trying to expose creativity, so pervasive in the studies of South Asian religion, is not merely a matter of anachronistic conceptualization of divergent historical forms of religious practice and subjectivity. It is that the very possibility of translating subjectivity into easily digestible aestheticized modes of being (e.g., creativity) is predicated on an uninterrogated assumption about the self-evidence of such concepts independent of temporal forms of power encountered in forms of life.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist studies, creativity, medieval Buddhism, Romanticism, South Asian religion, Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan art, racism, white privilege

“Living a tradition is not, strictly speaking, a matter of justifying obedience to another person by reference to an intellectually recognized authority but of learning to live without justification.” — Talal Asad, Secular Translations

As a growing minority has begun to argue, the neglect of the question of power in Buddhist studies is part of the field’s troubling relation to the post-colonial present. Despite Talal Asad’s work, which made power central to the study of religion, the field—which is still largely dominated by white scholars and is ghettoized by the insistence on the production of an area studies archive—echoes the legacy of the politics of colonial knowledge production. The field continues to churn out studies of Theravada and even Mahayana entrenched in making outmoded yet normative assessments about Buddhism, history, and politics (Abeysekara 2019a, 2019b). One of the concepts central to these endeavors is ‘agency’. And before it gained inroads into Buddhist studies, and in the wake of ‘subaltern studies’, Ronald Inden’s (1990) Imagining India claimed agency’s centrality to the study of South Asian religion, particularly in terms of the recovery of subjectivity presumably concealed by Orientalist representations of India. Inden’s grand opening salvo reads: “This book is about human agency, about the capacity of people to order their world … I wish
to make possible studies of ‘ancient’ India that would restore the agency that those histories have stripped from its people and its institutions (ibid.: 1). In the conclusion to this article, I will briefly take up a specific question about the possibility of Inden’s turn to agency. What I want to note here is that since its entry into Buddhist studies in the early 1990s, agency has been translated into a language of ‘autonomy’, ‘innovation’, ‘creativity’, and, by extension, ‘responsibility’ of the individual. The agency is presented to be synonymous with the native subject’s ‘voice’, which in turn is viewed as having been denied by scholarship overly concerned with the role of colonialism in Buddhist societies—beginning with Edward Said’s Orientalism itself (Abeysekara 2011, 2019a).

Concomitantly, power itself comes to be equated with a negative force pitted against human freedom. In failing to consider how power produces distinct forms of capacity (Asad 1993a, 1996, 2003; Mahmood 2005; D. Scott 1999b), scholars vest agency with a universal ability whereby the individual can (and must) be responsible for oneself. The result is a growing body of scholarship that ends up proliferating, in publication after publication, the disconcerting relation between agency and responsibility: insofar as these scholars attribute agency to one person, they absolve another of responsibility for something. The rhetoric that relates agency to (individual) responsibility can easily be found in a modern history of slavery, racism, colonialism, state sovereignty, capitalism, the politics of health care and insurance, and international development and poverty elimination (Abeysekara 2020; Asad 2018; Dirlik 1995; D. Scott 1999a, 2004, 2018). Buddhist studies’ quest to assign (or reassign) agency to individual ‘agents’ ends up exonerating, for example, the colonial powers of the very atrocities they were responsible for. One cannot help but wonder what kind of privileged position one would have to occupy in order to be blithely at ease with deciding how much agency and responsibility should be placed squarely on the shoulders of natives for the growing pains of modernity, thereby minimizing colonial power. Such publications reproduce the particular privilege of scholars who are by and large white and who have access to the scholarly platforms of publication. By joining forces in this conversation, while excluding others, the field has become an echo chamber reverberating with discussions of whether the native subjects have a will (‘agency’) of their own—and if so, whether they are ultimately responsible for the management of their own daily affairs independent of historical conditions like colonialism. In joining forces to take up this question, scholars preserve the connection between agency and responsibility that underwrites it and become (wittingly or unwittingly) conscripted into the history and the future of racism.

Scholars cannot easily disentangle the relation between agency and responsibility from its genealogy, a point Nietzsche taught us a long time ago. To ascribe agency to a person is to assign legal-political responsibility. As Asad (1996: 271) has argued: “‘Agency’ operates through a particular network of concepts within which the historical possibilities and limits of responsibility are defined.” But the uncritical appeal to agency sets aside precisely the sorts of questions that Asad suggests should be asked: “What are the culturally specific properties that define agency? How much agency do particular categories of person possess? For what and to whom are agents responsible? When and where can attributions of agency be successfully disowned?” (ibid.: 272). These sorts of questions take agency to be not a universal property but a distinct capacity—made possible by shifting practices authorized by relationships of power—to act and feel in particular ways and not in others (Asad 2003). In Buddhist studies, as in the humanities more generally, the relation between agency and responsibility is portrayed in terms of the subject’s always being capable of ‘resisting’ by way of ‘adjusting’ and giving that adjustment ‘meaning’, even in the wake of forces like capitalism, colonialism, and communism. This view is not really different from the neoliberal rhetoric that human agency can (and will) triumph over devastating conditions of even natural disasters, such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.
Ironically, scholars who are so dogmatically inclined to see the Buddhist history of practices through the lens of human agency end up concealing the very past forms of life they want to reveal. The concept of agency is shot through with liberal-moral judgments about the autonomous and creative capacity of the subject of the modern state and capitalism (Asad 2003, 2018).

The unsettling legacy of agency constitutes the entire architecture of *Rewriting Buddhism*, Alastair Gornall’s (2020) account of medieval Buddhism, monasticism, and politics in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Sri Lanka. *Rewriting Buddhism* is clearly the work of a talented scholar of the Pali language. By reading works of Pali grammar, commentary, and poetry, Gornall suggests that during periods of political fragmentation and chaos from 1157 to 1270 in medieval Sri Lanka, and in the absence of royal patronage and intervention, the Buddhist scholar-monks conducted their literary activities and reformed and united the monastic community all by themselves. As Gornall puts it: “The process of reform, characterized by constant attempts to reconcile the different factions of the Sangha and unify them under a single administrative structure, continued even during times of minimal royal intervention, patronage and protection.” What emerged, we are told, is a monastic community that was a “more coherent and autonomous entity better able to regulate itself” (4).

The attempt to understand the relation between community and coherence is noteworthy. But it is quickly undermined by another more problematic claim that Gornall repeats throughout—that is, that the new forms of literary activity constitute new senses of innovation, autonomy, creativity, aesthetics, and so forth. In the end, as we will see, coherence itself comes to be wrongly equated with autonomy defined by self-regulation. Thus, the story of the medieval monks that Gornall tells is a story of monastic agency. In what follows, I undertake a critical reading of the ways in which Gornall uncritically reads these modern notions—especially that of ‘creativity’—into the medieval monastic practice. I submit that many of Gornall’s theoretical-empirical claims are based on a multitude of highly questionable assumptions and conjectures about religion, history, and subjectivity. Those assumptions warrant examination because they are not the product of a single work but remain implicated within the legacy of a colonial and post-colonial discipline like Buddhist studies whose raw ambition grants unrestricted liberty. I will argue that the questions animating Gornall’s work are precisely the kinds of questions to be avoided at all costs when writing a history of religion and politics, pre-modern or otherwise.

**Authenticity**

It is both astonishing and sadly not all that astonishing that Gornall would frame his account of the medieval monks first and foremost around the notion of agency. Throughout the work, Gornall credulously reinforces the claim that the monastic texts represent “an expression of agency” (11). Gornall apparently feels no compunction in assigning agency to all and sundry because he has thrown in his lot with a field of like-minded scholars who similarly pay no attention to the literature that has critiqued the concept of agency (Abeysekara 2011, 2019a; Asad 1996, 2003; Mahmood 2005; D. Scott 2004). What we find in Gornall’s work is a flawed idea repeatedly broadcast from a privileged academic perch into the echo chamber of the field already awash in such claims, presumably in the hope that one more reiteration of it would finally make it factually and conceptually valid. Thus, Gornall criticizes the notion (found especially in Steven Collins’s work) of “culture playing a role in structuring agency” only to make the even more troubling claim: “We can view the ideas of Pali texts, where suitable, either as cultural structures—part of the system—or as part of ‘socio-cultural life,’ that is, as a key expression of agency in history.
that allowed individuals to actively and purposefully change and reshape their already existing circumstances” (11; emphasis added). Gornall does not even suspect how the reduction of medieval socio-cultural life to “individuals” who can reshape their circumstances is implicated in an anachronistic history of liberal, capitalist, racist appropriations of agency and responsibility. That ‘individual’ is enmeshed in a history of ‘individual responsibility’ (Abeysekara 2020).

Gornall underscores the individual agency of monks by way of chastising the Orientalist Wilhelm Geiger and historians of India who dismissed the medieval Pali texts as “imitations” of Sanskrit works owing to their “intellectual chauvinism” (8). Scholars, Gornall says, had neglected the Pali texts because they thought that “medieval Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka was conservative and culturally isolated, or it was derivative and provincial” (ibid.). He writes (ibid.; emphasis added):

This book challenges both positions by demonstrating firstly that Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka was always intimately connected with the history and culture of the Indian subcontinent but that the contours of its engagement appear differently depending on the texts and genre one is looking at. In addition, we will see in the six case studies that the Pali literature of this long century was not simply a mere imitation of continental literary traditions, but rather that it played a genuine and authentic role in Sri Lanka’s changing religious and political life.

But in arguing against these scholars, Gornall inadvertently concedes the very terms of their dismissal. First, note that imitation is contrasted with agency (for Gornall, this amounts to creativity) constituting “genuine and authentic” change brought about by the texts. Gornall, like the Sanskrit scholars he charges, simply assumes that imitation could not possibly play a “genuine and authentic role in Sri Lanka’s changing religious and political life” because it is not the hallmark of an agent, but presumably the mark of the automaton. Thus, even what is initially identified as imitation is quickly translated into innovation. Gornall’s liberal view of subjectivity, with its concomitant condemnation of imitation, would find little place in even modern Buddhism or medieval Christianity, where the central religious and political role of the formation of the self (i.e., agency) is dependent on the practices of the virtue of imitation.

Briefly, the idea of imitation—the word used sometimes is anugamanaya in Sinhala Buddhism—is connected with the disciplined life of monks, nuns, and even lay people. The disciplinary practices of Buddhist life geared toward developing and cultivating distinct dispositions are not based simply on the individual practice of rules (cf. Wittgenstein 2009). They are linked to practices of the imitation of common virtues that can be discursively identified in terms of bodily effects—for example, sanvarakama (restraint) or gunavatkama (uprightness). And in particular, the relation between ‘rule’ and self-formation in the Buddhist monastic communities is not understood in the terms of nitiya (law) and jivitaya (life) because the practice of discipline is part of a set of regular activities that constitute a way of living (cf. Salgado 2013). In the medieval monastic practice of St. Benedict’s Rule, the imitation of saintly models was connected to a network of practices like “watching, testing, learning, teaching” of virtue (Asad 1993a: 113). A monk’s disobedience was sometimes followed by “the open announcement of faults, the formal humiliation of the transgressor, and his public chastisement … in the daily chapter” (ibid.: 161), but the purpose of such disciplinary practice was not to instill “fear and shame” (ibid.) or merely to maintain order in the monastery. Rather, as part of the virtues of observation and imitation, chastisement sought to correct faults and enable the development of distinct Christian dispositions forming a coherent way of life in a monastic community. The monk’s body was a “monastic body” in the collective life of discipline (ibid.: 113–114). But in the Renaissance courtly world, “the political effectiveness of conventional behavior requires the devising of strategies, not the imitation of models or the following of rules” (ibid.: 66). Here discipline takes a backseat to “prudence” (ibid.: 69).
Consider that even in modern capitalist forms of life (e.g., ‘fashion’) in the West, imitation and creativity—however much they constitute a ‘trend’—are not easily separable from each other, either analytically or in practice. They can be separated through copyright laws (on top of existing patents), but at the expense of not only raising consumer prices but also setting in motion costly lawsuits about the “uniqueness” of designs, to be “assessed by a judge, whose sole experience with fashion might consist of a semi-annual trip to a department store” (Raustiala and Sprigman 2010). Apropos of Senator Charles Schumer’s 2010 legislation to change copyright laws to protect designers, Raustiala and Sprigman have argued (ibid.):

The greater risk is that once it’s in the hands of lawyers and judges, such a law would expand in a way that harms many designers and consumers. Plaintiffs’ lawyers would make creative arguments, and judges would tend to interpret the bill’s language expansively. This has been the pattern in copyright for decades. Indeed, lawyers (and those designers who could afford them) would be among the biggest beneficiaries, as disputes would likely erupt into expensive, time-consuming lawsuits featuring designers squabbling over ownership of allegedly unique styles.\(^{12}\)

Paradoxically, before the intervention of (proposed new) legal safeguards, what sustains the life of fashion as such, then, is the “freedom to copy” (ibid.). This freedom does not signal the autonomous uniqueness of individual designers, to be argued by lawyers and judges, but a social activity that enables a collective life of fashion.

These sorts of historical relations between imitation, power, and forms of life—in monastic discipline or modern fashion, however different their temporalities—point to ways of living not easily assimilable to what we call ‘law’ today. Lest Buddhist studies scholars wonder what all this has to do with ‘Buddhism’, my point is this: Gornall’s account of agency contrasted to imitation makes it difficult to understand that a discursive tradition remains critical to a form of life. In Gornall’s work, agency is confused with the coherence of a tradition (4). What is missed is that a tradition aspiring to coherence is the work of power and not the work of an essential subjectivity. Gornall claims that even where monks imitated, or “adopted new textual models from the Sanskrit tradition” (6), they engaged in creativity. This view of creativity incorrectly reduces power (i.e., conceived as autonomy) to agency. And the emphasis on the agency of the Buddhist monks, whose autonomy is said to be “more akin to the Benedictine monasteries of Cluny” (48),\(^{13}\) makes Buddhism out to be a unique tradition separate from others. In so doing, Gornall fails to consider how even secular forms of power aspire to a tradition.\(^{14}\) Gornall makes it even more difficult to think about the intersection of power and tradition as he carelessly insists on finding innovation and agency even where monks themselves claim to be following a tradition: “Reform-era commentators on handbooks not only adopted new forms of exegesis but also used their powers of synthesis to innovate doctrinally. The ability of commentators to reshape doctrine has often been overlooked largely because the authors themselves were very conscious to present their work as a continuation or a recovery of tradition rather than something new” (89; emphasis added). The practice of tradition is justified by way of creativity. And ultimately, as we see later, language itself is turned into a sign that signifies something independent of what people (monks) say and do.

Second, Gornall’s claim about the monastic agency, that “the Pali literature of this long century … played a genuine and authentic role in Sri Lanka’s changing religious and political life” (8), seeks to conscript the reader into a kind of ham-fisted moralism. The central claim of the book, that the literature of this period is genuine and authentic, raises the basic question that should be obvious to any passably cautious scholar: how can we know that a particular historical (religious) practice “played a genuine and authentic role” in social change (as opposed to some
other, less genuine role)? Let us be clear. The judgment that a practice is “genuine and authentic” social change is not an objective fact apprehensible to everyone across history. My point is not that the question of what is authentic is relative, but that Gornall’s judgment assumes the general ability to see a given form of language (‘discourse’) as authentic or not. The notion of ‘authenticity’, like that of ‘sincerity’, is part of a genealogy coming down to us from Romanticism, modern literary sensibilities, colonialism, and missionary conversion efforts, not to mention its relation to the tourism industry. Of course, what constitutes authenticity is debated within the genealogy of a discursive tradition like Buddhism or Christianity. But what is not thought out in Gornall’s work is that when power authorizes the language of authenticity within a tradition, it takes for granted a specific set of aptitudes constituting a lived life. So the relation between life, language, and authenticity is not something universally given to ‘recognition’ or ‘appreciation’ by everyone; the aptitudes by which something may become ‘intelligible’ (in terms of the effects they produce) as ‘authentic’ in a lived life are not freely communicable.

But this is precisely the assumption behind Gornall’s criticism of the secular Indian historians’ failure to appreciate the ‘intellectual significance’ of the Pali literature. Historians of South Asia, Gornall thinks, should find merit in the monastic texts, regardless of the dispositions of the specific audience the texts spoke to. Thus, the texts’ intellectual significance is made into a transcendent sign (as ‘literature’) instead of being a temporally constituted one. This problem, as we will see later, lies in Gornall’s indiscriminate appeal throughout to a score of anachronistic concepts like creativity without a consideration of their contested uses within a modern genealogy. But more precisely, what are we to make of his demand for the universal recognition of the supposed “extraordinary fact” (8) that the texts were not “conservative and culturally isolated” or “derivative and provincial”? Note that calling something “not conservative” already takes the distinction between conservative and not conservative to be something factually demonstrable. But even ostensibly universal forms of language like “I am a conservative” or “I am a moderate” heard endlessly on cable news shows in the United States suppose distinct abilities and limitations. The use of such language enables and disables forms of behavior in terms of, say, endorsement or opposition to a form of legislation, policy, or program, which can only be understood in the circumstance of a conversation. Of course, what the concepts authorize and limit carry enormous (sometimes debilitating) consequences of what can be thought and done. When CNN news anchors, for example, continuously ask politicians if the impeachment of a president (like Donald Trump) is “politically wise,” that use of the word ‘political’ already competes to circumscribe the domain of what is feasible. And it should be obvious that, enmeshed in highly fraught historical aptitudes and constraints, concepts like conservative/not conservative/liberal do not easily lend themselves to non-Western practices of languages, even modern Sinhala. This is not because they are not translatable into another language but because they animate forms of life with different dispositions. And creativity, as I discuss later, is another such concept. But Gornall persists in stating that even “when scholars have recognized the innovations of the Pali literature of the reform era, there has been the opposite tendency to view it as inauthentic” (8). He persists in this vein, not because it is probative, but because he can. The field has already been primed to privilege such queries to the point where they simply go unquestioned.

Gornall’s demand for us to recognize the texts’ authenticity is even more problematic because his logic smuggles the problem of multiculturalism into a pre-modern world. The politics of multiculturalism—for example, the debate about the Rushdie Affair in England—is shaped precisely by the problem of the ‘recognition’ of different ‘cultures’ with their supposed authentic histories. But multiculturalism does not signify an already prevailing multiplicity of cultures needing to be recognized. The idea of multicultures is marked by historical shifts in the meaning of culture—from ‘spiritual and aesthetic development’, ‘an inherited way of life’, and ‘activities
and creations of literary and artistic endeavor’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to culture as a ‘common way of life of a whole people’ in the twentieth century. The notion of culture in post-imperial race relations—preceded by the ‘problem of culture’ in colonialism—comes to be managed by the modern state in terms of ‘ politicizing’, that is, legalizing and aestheticizing cultural, ethnic, and religious differences. These legalized differences now demand (citizens’) recognition and even tolerance in the modern state (Asad 1993b). It is far-fetched to claim that this set of modern affairs applies to Gornall’s medieval Sri Lanka.

But what precisely is the harm in this one little anachronism? The politics of multicultural recognition promotes the cultural hegemony of the (white) majority. And what is hardly clear about multiculturalism is where (in which institutions) individual citizens can learn to cultivate their sensibilities about the “cultural differences” in the modern state (Asad 1993b: 268). As Asad (2003: 178) has argued—especially concerning the ongoing political demands for Muslims’ ‘assimilation’ in Europe where they can be statistically represented as ‘minorities’—what needs to be emphasized is not “how identities are negotiated and recognized (for example, through exploratory and constructive dialogue, as Charles Taylor [1992] has advocated). Rather, the focus should be on what it takes to live particular ways of life continuously, co-operatively, and unselfconsciously.” What follows from this suggestion is that “multiple ways of life (and not merely multiple identities)” (ibid.: 180) cannot easily be absorbed into the statistics of representation that animate the politics of recognition in the modern state. As Asad writes, the “temporalities of many tradition-rooted practices (that is, the time each embodied practice requires to complete and perfect itself, the past into which it reaches, that it reencounters, reimagines, and extends) cannot be translated into the homogeneous time of national politics. The body’s memories, feelings, and desires necessarily escape the rational/instrumental orientations of such politics” (ibid.: 179–180). My point is that Gornall’s desire to locate the authenticity of these medieval texts for us already maps a modern instrumentalist politics onto forms of Buddhist life. But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

**Autonomy**

The foundational problem of agency in Gornall’s work undergirds how the story of medieval Buddhism and politics is told. Gornall criticizes several historians, including R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, and claims that the prevailing view of religion and state in medieval Sri Lanka has been based on “an essentially functionalist approach … where the state is thought to have provided the necessary coercive power to protect the Sangha and, in return, the Sangha offered religious ideology and legitimation in support of the state” (11). While Gunawardana may be faulted for understanding that relation in terms of a ‘symbiosis’, even though he says that it is marked by antagonism at times, Gornall’s alternative is worse. For Gornall, “the relationship then between the Sangha and the royal court was no longer one of an antagonistic symbiosis but rather a hierarchy of compound kingship, in which, at least from the monastic perspective, the Buddha and monastic elites possessed temporal and spiritual rights superior to the ruling king and nobility” (13). Gornall is enamored with this idea of ‘compound kingship’ because of its ostensible connection to agency. Gornall reiterates Ronald Inden’s claim that that compound kingship refers to “the manifestation of divine and human wills relative to one another in a complex agent. Each of the political actors, then, in this scale of kingship, is a compound king and maintains a diminishing sphere of both temporal and spiritual power” (12).

Gornall’s (and Inden’s) fascination with the agency of divine and human wills prevents him from seeing that compound kingship becomes a theory that precedes relations of power. The
answer to the question who sees whom—that is, the Buddha or the monk—as a ‘king-like figure’ is to be located not in some mechanism of kingship but in shifting historical debates. Gornall says that ‘the monastic elite in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries increasingly styled itself as an independent royal court led by a king-like figure, the so-called ‘grandmaster’ (mahasami), with an administrative structure that resembled a political actor’ (13). The evidence in Gornall’s own text betrays this claim. Monks could, of course, wish to be seen as king-like. But kings themselves did not always do so, and no one would confuse monks for kings. For example, despised by monks, King Vikramabahu I (1111–1132) pillaged monasteries to fund his military campaigns against his enemies (25). Gornall is remarkably incurious about what this royal language is doing there, given that monks are not kings (cf. Walser 2018, especially chap. 10). The recurring problem is that Gornall takes monastic language at face value to represent objective facts in history. Gornall is prevented from seeing how power makes possible such questions about kingship by his repeated assertion of the independence and autonomy of the monks from the royal court. Not unlike other scholars of Buddhism (A. Blackburn 2001; Braun 2013; Turner 2014) who project monastic lives through the anachronistic prism of these modern concepts, Gornall fails to grasp that even his sense of autonomy and independence—hardly applicable to the medieval monastic world—necessarily presupposes a social relationship. Claims of independence are intelligible within—and not independent of—a relationship of power. But for Gornall, autonomy stands for the subject’s self-representation to—and distance from—another subject. Consider Gornall’s following statement on the matter: “Monastic elites presented themselves, rather than the king and his court, under the Buddha at the apex of Lanka’s long chain of lordship and believed that the superior rights enjoyed by the Buddha should extend first to them before the king” (13). But the monks’ so-called self-presentation already requires the background of a social relationship with the king and laity where the language of their “superior rights” is expected to have sensibility. This is, of course, not always guaranteed. But Gornall’s view of monastic independence would have us believe that the texts talking about monastic superior rights functioned as carriers of meaning to a readily receptive audience. It did carry meaning—just not what Gornall says it does. In Gornall’s hands, language becomes a medium of communication between a sender and a receiver that is transparent to the twenty-first-century observer without contextualization. The very idea of the monks’ independence and autonomy is a product of an arbitrary definition of the relation between agency, language, and texts.

This connection between agency and language structures the background against which Gornall situates the new genre of Pali literature, beginning with the effects of South Indian Colas invading Sri Lanka in 993 and relocating the center of administration from the old capital, Anuradhapura, to Polonnaruwa. As he often does, Gornall speculates that “Cola rule was also likely more harmful to monastic interests than any prior incursion on the island due to the fact that in the preceding centuries the monastic community had transformed into a powerful landowner” (22). And that “while it is unclear if the Colas forcibly deprived the Sangha of its land rights, the economic shift east would have drastically reduced its income centred on Anuradhapura and its hinterland” (23). Gornall says that the fall of the Colas—marked by civil wars over rivalries for the throne, partly intensified by new marriage alliances with the Indian kingdoms that were opposed to the Colas as well as the rise of a reformist group of forest monks at Dimbulagala—led to a fragmenting but “increasingly cosmopolitan” (26) court after the eleventh century. Gornall calls it ‘cosmopolitan’ not just because of the kings and the queens claiming the lineage of Ksatriya royalty from India, but also because of the rise of a “cosmopolitan vernacular” (27, citing Sheldon Pollock). Gornall means by this the “adoption of Sanskrit literary models” (29) and “localizing for the court’s audience on the island transregional, Sanskritic conceptions of kingship and power” (27).
Gornall concocts the indefensible idea of monastic independence from the medieval court out of the shaky presumption that the connection between language, communication, and agency is already given in the texts. Gornall claims that the reforms that took place one hundred years after the end of the Cola rule should make us rethink the medieval ‘Sangha-state model’ constructed by scholars like Bechert and others. So Gornall questions the idea that a king like Parakramabahu I (1157–1186) was the sole author of the monastic reforms, bringing about the unification and centralization of various sects into a single fraternity. Gornall claims that the “political reality” of the new reforms of Parakramabahu I, who came to power out of the “chaos” of the times marking the end of “traditional order,” should not be confused with the “ceremonial ideal” of past reforms (43). Even the very thought of a ‘ceremonial ideal’ to be separated from the ‘political reality’ should make a discerning reader pause. Instead, Gornall presses on: “We should be wary, then, of understanding the comparisons in monastic histories between his [Parakramabahu I] 1165 reforms and the third council (sangiti) held in the reign of the emperor Asoka too literally. For the Asokan model, in which a Buddhist emperor acts as the ‘crux of order in society’, was by 1165 an abstraction or ceremonial ideal with little correspondence to the general political reality of the era” (43). But at the same time, the different reasons for social change at different times are explained in terms of an apparently timeless Buddhist principle: “What, in particular, had changed on the island to allow the Sangha to finally achieve unity for the first time in well over 1,000 years? It is impossible to single out any one reason for this development, for, as Buddhaghosa wisely once wrote about causality, ‘conditions … give rise to phenomena … only when they are not independent of each other or deficient with respect to each other’ (19).

As for the onset of the new monastic reforms, Gornall notes that according to the royal edict, while Parakramabahu I “was enjoying the delight of kingship with a display of abundant virtues, he witnessed sons of noble families of the Buddhist persuasion on the road to hell” (43). Gornall goes on to say: “He then evokes in the edict a prophecy, which first emerges in fourth- or fifth-century commentaries, that the Buddhist tradition would survive five thousand years after the Buddha’s death and hoped that, as a result of his effort, the unified monastic community would not disappear prematurely” (43–44). By resorting to a remarkably flawed logic, Gornall comes to the conclusion that Parakramabahu I’s statement is not an example of a king monopolizing the monastic affairs. Even as he mentions how the Parakramabahu I edict was invoked by later kings like Parakramabahu II to connect “the perceived decline of the Buddhist tradition with the monastic neglect of the study of their sacred scriptures” (44), Gornall writes (ibid.; emphasis added):

The 1165 reforms and those like them that followed both in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia have been interpreted as evidence that the Sangha had been further integrated into the state. The schematic nature of much of this analysis, however, obscures what was a varied and highly complex phenomenon. Even if we limit ourselves to our ‘reform era’, there are marked differences, for instance, between the ‘imperial’ nature of the reforms of Parakramabahu I and II in 1165 and 1266 respectively. One might think of the 1165 reforms as imperial in nature, on the basis that it was the king himself who oversaw the events and who used his coercive power to expel troublesome factions from the order, that it is said he personally selected monks from the monastery of Dimbulagala, led by the elder Kassapa, to undertake the reforms and that monks were invited from regions bound by the territory of his kingdom. That said, there is also no evidence that Parakramabahu I played any role in formulating the rules promulgated in the edict or in supporting the appointment of monks to administrative positions. In fact, he appears to encourage the Sangha to regulate itself, stating, ‘devoting themselves diligently to the two tasks of scriptural study and contemplation, may the Sangha protect the sasana by the administration of admonitions (avavada) and decrees (sasana) [sic].’ In terms of motive,
Parakramabahu simply cites the pain he felt as a Buddhist emperor, a *cakravartin*, in seeing the religion in an impure state, though economic interest in reclaiming ownership of the land that formerly belonged to expelled monks may have been an underlying factor.

The past scholarly analysis of the ‘imperial’ nature of reforms as evidence of the state incursion into the sangha is called into question on the purportedly unimpeachable evidence that the king “appears [at least to Gornall] to encourage the Sangha to regulate itself.” According to Gornall’s reasoning, which can apparently rationalize almost anything, the king having “personally selected monks” to spearhead the reforms is not personal enough to make it imperial because of another completely contrived condition: “There is also no evidence that Parakramabahu I played any role in formulating the rules promulgated in the edict or in supporting the appointment of monks to administrative positions” (44; emphasis added). Nowhere is there even the faintest attempt to tell us why this condition must be met for Gornall’s definition of royal intervention. We are simply to accept it as self-evident. Given his ever-expansive definition, Gornall could say that even Parakramabahu’s having devised the rules and lived within the monastic precincts to personally oversee monks’ behavior—both day and night—would not constitute a royal intervention because the king was not a monk himself. What Gornall has presented to us is an unfalsifiable hypothesis. And since it does not lend itself to proof or disproof, it is either trivially true or simply false.

Gornall’s fabricated logic of monastic autonomy assumes monks to then self-regulate within an *immanent* domain without being subject to much intervention from an external force (a king) even in the midst of chaos. This distinction runs the gamut from politics to devotion in the texts: the “immanence of devotional religion” (190), contrasted with the transcendental, is about “immanent religious goals—transforming their lives within Samsara rather than obtaining nirvana” (6). The judgment about monastic autonomy contrasted with imperial power is predicated on the basis of an indiscriminate criterion of what it means for the king to *encourage*—and not *intervene in*—the monastic 1165 reforms. The neutral language imputed to the king (“he encouraged the sangha”) is presented as something somehow opposed to power itself. For Gornall, power must really be coercive in order to produce a powerful effect—hence his qualification that even though “one might think of the 1165 reforms as imperial in nature, on the basis that it was the king himself who oversaw the events and who used his coercive power to expel troublesome factions from the order [papabhiksun . . . apagata kota],” ultimately the king’s wish (“may the Sangha protect the *sasana* by the administration of admonitions and decrees”) is seen as dispassionate (44; first emphasis added). By extension, the language of admonition and instruction (*avavadanusasana*) meant to guide the disciplinary conduct of monks is also assumed to be naturally non-coercive.

Clearly, Gornall thinks that he knows what counts as forcible and non-forcible for monks. But this projection fails to appreciate how the distinction between coercive and non-coercive lies within, and not outside of, power itself. In other words, power produces this distinction and is not reducible to one side or the other. Yet we find Gornall repeatedly assuming that a subject who coerces must always have power over the subject being coerced. Even in modern uses of the Sinhalese language, one who coerces (*balakaranava*) someone to do something—for example, “*eya balakarapu nisa tamayi kare*” (I did it because he coerced me to do so)—is not thought to always have power (*balaya*). Such use supposes that the effect of coercion depends not on one possessing power over another but on an existing relationship in which one *can* coerce (persuade) another. That is, the relation between coercion and power (as a specific ability) is not always—and not easily—detachable.

Let us take another example of how some pre-modern kings, such as Kassapa V, spelled out the borderline between who could and who could not exercise coercion concerning the
monastic community. A tenth-century inscription details the royal regulations for the governance of the monastic life and properties, whose background, according to one reading, has to do with an incident involving royal officials giving away oxen belonging to a maintenance village of a monastery (Sundberg 2018: 355–381). As does Gornall concerning Parakramabahu I, the translator of the inscription (Don Martino De Zilva Wickremasinghe) also regrettably thinks that Kassapa’s inscription is an example of the ‘independence’ of the monastery. Gornall himself thinks of these regulations in transactional terms when he writes: “Kassapa V reminds the monks of his benevolence to them, formally reconfirms the villages owned by the monastery and establishes a number of other freedoms and protections, while also—perhaps in return for siding with the monastery—assigning new rules for monastic behaviour and practice” (27). But matters are not so simple. Suspecting the possibility of the monks’ displeasure with the regulations, the inscription says: “If there shall be a dispute in respect of the monk’s refusal … of gruel [which monks can do to show their disapproval of the laity], the princes shall be sent to reconcile [samahita kot] the monks and induce them to partake of the gruel, but no compulsion shall be exercised to make them accept it [balakarin hambu noganvanu]” (Wickremasinghe 1912: 55). Lest one mistake what is being said, the inscription says immediately thereafter: “If there be any one [official] who has done any one of these things without royal order [radol no yedmen], he shall be dismissed from the service” (ibid.; emphasis added). The question here, then, is not if the monasteries were independent but from whom they were independent. Thus, even to ask as Gornall does whether a pre-modern king coerced the monks to regulate themselves is already to render power and its effect external to the relationship in which we find it.\footnote{26}

The Foucauldian argument that power does not simply negate, dominate, or repress but produces kinds of capacity (e.g., freedom) need not be belabored here.\footnote{27} Consider, however, a number of rules in Parakramabahu I’s edict specifying the proper conduct and deportment (iriya\textit{v}) of monks—ranging from rising at dawn, studying and memorizing specific Pali and Sinhala texts, visiting a village, donning the robe, cleaning the teeth, conversing with the laity, and providing lodging for monks from other temples to seeking “sleep at midnight, engrossed in thoughts on the fourfold discriminations” (Wickremasinghe 1928: 279), along with many others. What standard can determine the border between coercive and non-coercive in the working of these rules for the formation of proper monastic abilities and dispositions? Put more broadly, how would one determine the difference between the practice of a rule and the ability it presupposes? These kinds of questions are already ruled out by Gornall’s prejudgment: the language of instruction as something non-coercive is simply judged to be neutral. Thus, in Gornall’s hand, the medieval monk becomes the secular agent who, as Asad (2003: 72–73) argues, acts in a “secular history of freedom free from all coercive control” where freedom implies an “ability to create” oneself. Asad continues: “The paradox inadequately appreciated here is that the self to be liberated from external control must be subjected to the control of a liberating self already and always free, aware, and in control of its own desires” (ibid.: 73).\footnote{28}

My point here is not that the 1165 monastic reform constitutes an imperial intervention. Rather, my contention is that the question of what it means for whom has to be found in a particular historical debate in which it comes to be authoritatively defined. Power cannot simply be viewed as coercive or non-coercive because it is power that makes legible the border between the two. The capacity to determine the effect of a rule or law—that is, whether the language of admonition and instruction is or is not something forcible—is situated within a relationship that makes possible a disposition toward it. Asad’s work (1993a), which Gornall unaccountably ignores, has discussed in detail the ways in which power authorizes the relation between rule and life in the medieval monastic practice. In the words of Agamben (2013: 60), who brings Wittgenstein to bear on his thinking about the medieval monastic community, a form of life
marks the “indistinction” between rule and life. Gornall’s view of the relation between language, rule, and subjectivity is emptied of power. Let me illustrate this point. The edict recounts how Parakramabahu I was reflecting on his reform initiative—to be in keeping with the previous tradition of great Indian kings like Asoka—and how he one day saw an assembly of monks at the monastery where he was observing the eight-fold precepts. This led the king, who “was anointed with the unction of paramount dominion over the whole land of Lanka,” to say: “This union of the Buddhist priesthood, which I have effected with great effort [mavisin mahotsayen sadhitavu me sanghasamagriya], may last unbroken for five thousand years” (Wickremasinghe 1928: 274).

But the king stating that he “effected with great effort” the union of the sangha does not make any difference in Gornall’s foregone conclusion. In a sentence tucked away in a footnote to the paragraph on how Parakramabahu I encouraged monks, suddenly and startlingly Gornall asks us to “compare this with [King] Nissankamalla, who specifically states that he protects the religion by means of admonitions (avavada)” (57n44; Gornall’s emphasis).

With or without his italicizing the subject, Gornall wants to unambiguously manufacture a difference between the two kings on the presumably unshakable ground that a different king, Nissankamalla (1187–1196), “specifically states that he protects the religion.” The direct relation between subject and utterance is taken to be the necessary condition for the disclosure of meaning. The intended meaning of a sentence is made to depend on a subject (i.e., agency) always “specifically” speaking it. Given this conception of language, meaning is assumed to be universally available. Again, what this view does not take into account is a social relationship where the relation between language and meaning is secured by power. Whether a statement constitutes an order or a wish—be it Henry II saying, “Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?”; President Trump telling the Ukrainian president, “I would like you to do us a favor though because our country has been through a lot and Ukraine knows a lot about it”; or a policeman shouting, “Hey, you there!”—depends not simply on the immediacy of the utterance but on the disposition as to what is said. The ‘real’ meaning of such statements can, of course, be debated—sometimes retrospectively—as it was during the impeachment hearings of Donald Trump in 2019.

Let me give another example of how Gornall continues to manufacture standards of what constitutes royal intervention. Unlike Parakramabahu I, Gornall says, Parakramabahu II (1236–1270) was involved in the appointment of monastic heads: “If we view royal involvement in the appointment of senior religious figures as characteristic of an imperial religion—as it has been, for example, in the study of ‘the imperial church systems’ in northern Europe—then the 1266 reforms could be seen as more imperial than 1165” (45). Before the reader can even register a sense of relief that this now constitutes the standard, Gornall immediately resorts to conjecture to tell us that the second king’s 1266 reforms still do not really add up to an imperial intervention: “And yet, we should also note that, unlike 1165, Parakramabahu II’s reforms were not clearly defined by his kingdom’s territory—he invited Cola monks, for instance, from outside of his kingdom as part of his reforms—and that as a relatively weak ruler his territorial control was slight and his jurisdictional reach must have been limited” (ibid.; emphasis added). Note the sleight of hand. Gornall now says that the arbitrary standard he imposed on Parakramabahu I (i.e., making monastic appointments) does not make any difference for Parakramabahu II (who did make monastic appointments) because the latter king was “a relatively weak ruler.” Note that Parakramabahu I, as mentioned above, is said to have had dominion over the whole island; thus, for a king to intervene in monastic affairs, he must not only make monastic appointments but also have unlimited jurisdictional reach. Gornall’s argument requires him to continue devising standards as he goes along in order to avoid outright and obvious contradiction. But he could have saved himself the trouble had he simply recognized that reform, stability, and
unity constitute a discourse, not a representable (i.e., discernible) reality (Abeysekara 2002). So Gornall says that “immediately prior to the reign of Parakramabahu I and the fifty years that followed it there was no discernible stability in the royal court as the island witnessed an endless stream of monarchs due to wars of succession” (47).

The Private

Gornall employs a highly questionable modern logic to further doubt “the ‘imperial’ model that a Sangha [was] left rudderless without a dependable monarch” (47) and point to what is said to be new about the relationships between monks and laity. As the unrelenting temptation for conjecture gives way to caution, Gornall writes that the forms of “fidelity and devotion between guru and pupil, reinforced by a structured educational system, must have placed the monastic community at a strategic advantage when compared with the now unstable kinship practices of the court” (48; emphasis added). The story is one of how “the Sangha throughout the period was negotiating an increasingly complex patronage network of petits nobles governing smaller political domains, including warlords, merchants, minor royals, monastic nobles and lay functionaries who had become progressively powerful through the maintenance of the Sangha's extensive wealth and lands” (ibid.). As with the relation between the guru and the pupil, we are told of a new kind of bond between warlords (senapati) and the sangha. It is new because the relationships between the sangha and the warlords and other such persons are said to be explicitly personal. The concept of personal relationships is accorded so much weight that it distinguishes the first millennium from the reform era of the second millennium: “This form of negotiation [of patronage] differed from the politics of the first millennium not only in terms of the diversity of patrons able to support the Sangha with largesse, in particular by building monasteries, but due to the explicitly personal relationships authors had with these individuals” (49). For Gornall, the monastic texts themselves symbolize these personal relationships (ibid.):

The works of Sangharakkhita and Vacissara, studied by Petra Kieffer-Pülz, are again a useful case study in this regard. Sangharakkhita, for instance, writes in the colophon of his grammatical commentary that he lived in a monastery built by a warlord named ‘Subha,’ who he praises as ‘endowed with qualities such as strength, wisdom and compassion.’ He then, in the second part of the colophon … goes on to eulogize the intellectual achievements of his teacher, Sariputta, and the political prowess of a monarch who we may identify with Vijayabahu III. Similarly, Vacissara in the colophon to his commentary on a Vinaya handbook praises five individuals who helped initiate his work, including three monks, two of whom were from Cola country in South India, a lay disciple and a merchant named ‘Bhanu.’

Gornall treats other examples of the colophons—even those dedicated to family members—as “symbolic evidence of the union between monk and village” (50). What he wants to stress, then, are increasingly private relationships marking “bonds of textual patronage” (49) in the absence of the continuing “patronage from a single, powerful royal court” (50). The individual relationships, we are told, mark “multiple centres of power” (51). Substituting speculation for evidence, Gornall writes: “The evidence we have suggests, however, that the fragmentation of power on the island, while viewed negatively by the monks themselves, may not actually have been as deleterious to Buddhist literary culture as imagined. In fact, the formation of multiple centres of power produced multiple sources of patronage and it is a testament to the acumen of the monastic elites that they quickly adapted to the local and personal politics of the age” (51; emphasis added). Language becomes a meta-sign that transcends itself. The “fragmentation of power
on the island,” which the monks themselves viewed negatively, is turned into a metaphysics of human agency and triumph forming a politics of personal relationships. This sense of “local and personal politics” privatizes social connections, even when they extend beyond the island’s shores (51–52; emphasis added):

The desire to establish new ties of patronage in an unstable, localized political situation also led, perhaps paradoxically, to monks travelling abroad and establishing ties with petits nobles outside of the island too. A good example of this is the Upasakajanalankara (‘Ornament of lay followers’), a Buddhist manual for the laity, composed by Ananda, a forest monk from Sri Lanka, likely at some point during the reign of Magha. We learn that he had left Sri Lanka to Pandya country during this period of upheaval and that he wrote his manual under the patronage of a certain Colaganga, who is referred to as a ‘feudatory chieftain of a forest tract’ (vannosamantabhumipa). Displaying sensitivity to local politics, Ananda adapts the form of his manual according to what he refers to as the wishes of his newly Buddhist (abhinavasadhujana) audience. Though it is clear his main motivation was to satisfy his immediate readers, Ananda maintained close ties with Sri Lanka and monks there had access to his work soon after it was composed. When some authors, then, still claimed to be writing in Pali for those from Sri Lanka and India—partly in imitation of the early commentators—we can hypothesize that they often primarily meant their local, cosmopolitan audience and that any further dissemination was a secondary consideration.

The question is, how does Gornall’s unity of the sangha sit with his “local and personal politics”? Gornall’s idea of personal relationships between the monks and the laity clashes with his preordained autonomy. What escapes Gornall can be boiled down to a relatively basic point: uses of language and powers are not obviated just because they are found in what appear to be private relationships. A colophon seemingly dedicated to an individual is hardly “symbolic evidence” of a private relationship with specially coded language between two (monastic or lay) parties. We need not digress into a discussion of Wittgenstein’s (2009) criticism of ‘private language’ to understand that a colophon in a text is already located in a social relationship that presupposes an audience larger than one. But the distinct virtues extolled by the texts, which Gornall himself mentions—in terms of praise for the laity “endowed with qualities such as strength, wisdom and compassion” (49); praise for a monk “filled with faith, [who] reveres the Buddha at each and every step, burns asunder all evil enemies with the fires of a continuous and unbroken asceticism, and is like a gold cup containing the lion’s perfume” (ibid.); or praise for a monk’s training in Pali grammar—require common “Buddhist” capital to properly decode. They already take for granted the existence of a Buddhist community where the ability to act and feel in certain ways constitutes a coherent form of life that the author may then speak to.

But Gornall, as I noted above, conflates coherence with autonomy. Coherence is not synonymous with ‘multiple centers of power’ or some ‘cosmopolitan vernacular’, and this is another iteration of ‘hybridity’, ‘heterogeneity’, or ‘multiple modernities’ attractive to scholars (Acri 2015; Harding et al. 2020; McMahan 2008, 2015; Shields 2017; Sirisena 2017). The monk Ananda who composed the manual “Ornament of lay followers” in Pandya was not waxing poetic about cosmopolitan values. Nor does the royalty claiming the Ksatriya lineage constitute instances of “localizing” a cosmopolitan politics on the island, as suggested by Gornall (27, 29, 55). The idea of localizing concepts takes the nationalist, neoliberal distinctions between local and global/foreign to be natural. It also takes the meaning of language to be symbolically disclosable removed from its use. But whereas the meaning of language lies in its use, the localization of something called ‘cosmopolitan’ becomes at best superfluous. ‘Local’ is not a pre-existing place but an ideological discourse that identifies a form of practice as local in contrast to something called global, carrying
specific political implications (Abeysekara 2018b; Asad 1993a; Mohan and Stokke 2000). Sri Lanka’s medieval court did not all speak Sinhala. But the language of intelligibility among the non-Sinhala-speaking was not simply ‘Sanskritized’ Pali. It is power that authorizes the language of what something means. Put differently, the language of the Ksatriya was not simply cosmopolitan—or local, for that matter—because its use by monks, kings, and queens already granted the competency of not a universal, but a Buddhist audience, which is a sensibility whose effects are not assured but are rendered possible by modes of ‘regular’ discourse. Hence, kings like ‘Mahinda IV, for instance, regularly claimed in his inscriptions to be ‘descended from the royal line of King Okkaka, who abounds in a multitude of illustrious, boundless and transcendental virtues’ and that he ‘had made other Ksatriya families of the entire Jambudvipa (India) his vassals’’ (27; emphasis added). Again, Gornall does not ask, why is it that kings had to “regularly” do so?

**Aestheticization of Creativity**

In the remainder of the article, I want to raise some specific questions about what is at stake in Gornall’s linchpin notion of creativity, which is central to his story of the consequences of the rise of the new Pali texts. In more ways than one, Gornall’s conceptualization of this notion hangs on the taken-for-granted but, more importantly, transparent relation between language, agency, and power. Beginning with the account of Moggallana’s post-1165 Moggalanavyakarana (Grammar of Moggallana), Gornall time after time attempts the futile task of finding creativity in texts, commentaries, anthologies, and inscriptions.

Some of his pronouncements are worth mentioning: “Scholar-monks composed new Pali texts in the reform era as a creative response to perceived religious decline” (19); “And yet it is also in the inscriptions of the foreign queens of the era that we find some of the most creative religious politics ever produced on the island” (28); “Reform-era commentators, however, often innovatively employ each of these techniques in a systematic fashion for single passages and even single words” (95); “The application of these techniques in Vimalabuddhi’s work represents a great innovation in Buddhist intellectual history” (ibid.); “We find, in general, increasingly systematic forms of exegesis, in particular, in the handbook commentary tradition, based on an innovative application of commentarial models that, we can hypothesize, had first circulated in the Sanskrit tradition” (110–111); “The most striking formal innovation during the period, however, was the creation of anthologies of Buddhist doctrine and practice” (120); “Siddhattha’s work, then, provides us with a unique insight into the ways in which monastic elites were using their Pali textual tradition in practice and how new techniques of compilation enabled them to innovate in representing the religious outlook of their canon and its commentaries” (120); “By shifting the framework in which the Pali textual tradition is analysed, Siddhattha, with the aim of conserving the tradition of the Mahavihara, is able to innovate in the way he represents the essence of his tradition and can provide a creative reading of this material to accommodate the interests of his contemporary monastic community” (128); “As one of the new anthologies composed during the reform era, the Sarasangaha displays a number of innovative philological techniques to extract and organize the semantic essence of the Pali scriptural tradition” (137); “It is his [the author of Subodhalankara, Sangharakkhita] re-centring of Pali poetics around notions of morality, civility and propriety that represents his most innovative contribution to Buddhist intellectual culture” (163); “Sri Lanka’s reform era requires us to rethink a number of assumptions about the history of Buddhism, in particular about the agency of Buddhist scholar-monks in premodern politics and social life, about Pali literature as a dynamic and creative, rather than static and conservative, form of knowledge” (213; emphasis added).
Lest the reader somehow miss the volley of assertions about creativity, Gornall presents even the “chaotic political environment,” such as the one in which Ananda wrote, to be “the creative influence of the reform era” (121; emphasis added). The story is very much molded within a modern narrative of the ‘vindication’ of human subjectivity and agency, where even the conditions of slavery become the backdrop for the creative fashioning of selves (see D. Scott 2004). Indeed, Gornall casts texts themselves as “potent agents” and not “tools of court power” (170): “these texts [of poetry, like Dathavamsa chronicling the history of the Buddha’s tooth relic] became agents themselves in enhancing the affective power of the relics they described” (ibid.). The relation between texts and authors—that is, the relation between language and communication—is said to be governed by a “philological determinism”; that the monks were determined to “actively change” the conditions of decline “by better preserving their scriptures and, in particular, by improving their understanding of them through further exegetical work” (63) becomes observable via not just a sign but a billboard of creativity. For Gornall, creativity is already in the texts: “This project of organizational philology was united by the shared reform goal of protecting and framing their scriptures within new, systematic forms of scholastic enquiry. This process, we will see, was not purely descriptive but also creative in that these new approaches changed the very way scholar-monks thought about their scriptural tradition, its language and authority” (56; emphasis added). Gornall expects us to believe that the connection between ‘descriptive’ and ‘creative’ is inherent to the texts: “We can better appreciate the creativity inherent in the practice of compilation” (128). But it is a connection that Gornall forces into the texts. Like other scholars in Buddhist studies, Gornall treats texts as awaiting interpretation by modern academics.35

The upshot is that creativity is made to constitute the texts’ teleological horizon. Disconnected from power, ‘inherent’ creativity becomes identifiable irrespective of who reads or listens to the text at different times. Take Gornall’s claim that “reform-era grammarians differed from their predecessors not only in their aims but also in their radical rejection of tradition, dispensing with the older Kaccayana grammar and adopting and better adapting new models of grammatical analysis from other Sanskrit grammars” (69). Note again that Gornall makes this claim despite also asserting “there is no doubt that [the reform-era monks and] commentators were generally conservative in that they respected tradition and were ever fearful of being viewed as schismatics” (89). But that does not dissuade Gornall from wanting to “move beyond such rhetoric” (ibid.)—to skirt around language and reveal the concealed creativity for all of us to see. Creativity is translated into a sovereign sign representing what monks themselves feared and sought to avoid, that is, “their radical rejection of tradition” (69).

Gornall can make these claims only by circumventing power’s connection to authority. Moggallana’s grammar, we are told, consisted of many innovative moves, shifting from an “exegetical” to an analytical approach “to represent the boundless, expressive capacity of the Pali language as a whole” (77). Moggallana’s grammar, by Gornall’s own admission, introduced “more unusual linguistic observations”—unusual to the extent that a couple of centuries later, the famous scholar monk “Sri Rahula used his Sanskrit archive to provide historical explanations” (72) for them! Gornall notes that the sense in which Moggallana used terms (like vanna), for example, “is not attested in the Pali canon and would likely be unfamiliar to the average monastic reader” (73; emphasis added). And Moggallana himself considered that his language would not be familiar to his monastic readers:

Moggallana was the first grammarian to produce a faultless piece of technical writing of this style in Pali and he acknowledges in the opening to his commentary that not everyone in the Sangha would be familiar with it. When commenting on the very first rule of his grammar he
writes that ‘this statement might be meaningless—some kind of speech of a mad man or such like’. He introduces this possibility only to demur, of course, and adds: “or it may be meaningful like the [Buddha’s] statement: “mind is the forerunner of all things”. Grammatical aphorisms are meaningful, he states, because the meaning of each aphorism should be sought in its paraphrase or vutti. (75; emphasis added)

My aim is not to question if Moggallana’s grammar inaugurated a new tradition. But the fact that Sri Rahula, who lived in the fifteenth century, found it necessary to explain the work of thirteenth-century Moggallana—coupled with Moggallana’s caution against his own work—should have made Gornall question the idea of creativity as a ready-made sign. The problem is that although Gornall sporadically bandies about terms such as tradition, power, and authority, the relation between them is nowhere carefully thought out. Thinking about how tradition and its temporality work requires one to pose a question that Gornall never entertains: for whom was it all creative? Here, again, we find Gornall strikingly incurious. Pre-empting that question of power, he expects conjecture to pass for evidence of the new monastic grammar’s reach to the “many”: “As an access discipline for any monk wishing to ascend the monastic hierarchy and study Pali scriptures, grammar must have served for many as one of the first ways they engaged in any scholarly fashion with their sacred texts” (76–77; emphasis added).

That Moggallana’s work was mediated within a tradition of ‘explanations’, including commentaries and sub-commentaries, not just by his students but also by later figures such as Sri Rahula should entirely dispense with Gornall’s theory of creativity. The temporal meditation of a tradition within a genealogy already grants its contested inheritance. Like any tradition, Moggallana’s grammar is a ‘discursive tradition’ (Asad 2015b). Creativity is not a permanent feature of a text, because how one understands what is creative is not simply a matter of the cognitive. Rather, seeing something as creativity is an effect of power, that is, it is a specific ability that enables one to not only see but also be affected by what one sees as creative. And such abilities are not universally inherent to everyone. Again, this is why Sri Rahula found it necessary to explain Moggallana’s work to his readers in a different context. The effects of power are not states of mind to be reproduced randomly, without taking into account particular social conditions. Even in his discussions of commentaries, where he alludes to monastic debates about points of doctrine, and in his discussions of the anthologies, handbooks, and handbook commentaries (geared for the monastic schools or pirivenas), Gornall rarely tells us how the texts were put to use in the social life of institutions, organized by programs and techniques of teaching and training monks. Part of the problem is that the social life of the texts, which is not easy to abstract from the texts themselves, is further obfuscated by Gornall’s characteristically forced readings.

At certain points, Gornall pawns off his readings on his doppelganger, the “careful reader” of the texts, for example: “Since they are unmarked only a careful reader would be able to distinguish the canonical quotations from the non-canonical” (77; emphasis added). But who precisely is this careful reader? Take his comments on the Subodhalankara (Lucid Poetics) by Sangharakkhita, a student of Moggallana, who was a grand master appointed by King Vijayabahu III (1232–1236). Composed in the mid-thirteenth century and ‘inspired’ by South Indian Sanskrit poet Dandin (680–720)—the author of the Kavyadarsa (Mirror of Literature)—the Subodhalankara, according to Gornall, “formally sanctioned sensual, devotional poetry to the Buddha as a religious practice and it set itself the aim of disseminating this knowledge throughout the Sangha” (146). It was not the first work of devotional poetry, as there were already Sinhala works; but the Subodhalankara offered the “theoretical model for the composition and appreciation of Pali devotional poetry” (148). Even in Gornall’s own effort to explain it, the text is complicated to say the least. The text uses Sanskrit literary models but denounces Sanskrit as
impure and praises “pure Magadha” (Pali); it tries to balance not only the valorization of poetic eloquence while addressing those disinterested in poetry (Sangharakkhita’s “nirvana-orientated opponents”), but also so-called aesthetic experiences and morality in the face of “worldly norms and conventions” (156).

But Gornall does not ask why such conflicting moves by the text must be located in a discursive tradition. For example, in contrast to Daniel H. H. Ingalls and Sheldon Pollock, who questioned how Buddhist monks could compose sensual Sanskrit poetic works such as the Sub-hasitaratnakosa (Treasury of Well-Turned Verse), Gornall sets out to demonstrate what makes the sensual poetics of the Subodhalankara really Buddhist. But this exercise reproduces the same conceptual problem as it does for scholars like Pollock. Take Gornall’s comments on a “verse used to illustrate the poetic merit of delicate sounds (sukhumalata)” in praise of the Buddha (148):

These peacock-like devotees/fanning the feathers of their wings/and crying in appreciation/frolic in frenzied madness/at [the sight of] the cloudlike sage.

Gornall then puts his interpretive touch on it (ibid.; emphasis added):

Sangharakkhita uses the light, pitter-pattering alliteration of the verse here to evoke the image of rain and cleverly exploits the Sanskrit trope of excited peacocks awaiting the rains as a metaphor for the enthralment felt by Buddhist devotees at the sight of their master. The metaphor skillfully encompasses all objects in the comparandum. The Buddha is a raincloud, the devotees are peacocks, the devotees’ utterances of approbation are the peacocks’ cries and their feather fans (a sign of royalty) are their wings. Why the peacocks celebrate the rains, furthermore, is not made explicit and is left open to suggestion. A skilled reader, however, knows that peacocks rejoice at the sight of the rain clouds as the rains mark the beginning of their mating season. The unstated extension of the metaphor is that Buddhist devotees celebrate the coming of the Buddha as he signals their impending liberation.

Gornall’s “careful reader” is supposed to correctly decode what all the “skillfully” exploited tropes, images, metaphors, and signs signify in the verse. Let us concede Gornall the point that at least the metaphors—including the “Sanskrit trope” and the connection between the “poetic figure” and praises for the Buddha—are all “explicit” to the reader. But Gornall does not stop there. For him, what is not even explicit can also be read: “Why the peacocks celebrate the rains, furthermore, is not made explicit and is left open to suggestion. A skilled reader, however, knows that peacocks rejoice at the sight of the rain clouds as the rains mark the beginning of their mating season.” We are not told how and where the reader can acquire such skill of reading the text and why the skill is necessarily temporal. In Gornall’s hand, the entire text becomes a vast sign where even “the unstated extension of the metaphor” can be read. Ultimately, Gornall’s skilled reader can not only grasp the unstated extension of the metaphors but also be affected by what lies behind the unstated itself: creativity in the text, which is its essence of authenticity. Creativity becomes a hidden tenth rasa itself, an aesthetic experience always available to that reader, transcending the text.

This logic of reading is belied by at least three discourses that constitute the genealogical tradition of the Subodhalankara. First, for the author, Sangharakkhita, the work of the Subodhalankara proved hardly decisive in itself because he went on to compose a commentary on it! Starting with the author, then, the medieval text already enters a tradition of mediation. Second, a Sinhala commentary written later enters a terrain of an existing debate about the Subodhalankara as the former, in Gornall’s own words, “rectifies Sangharakkhita’s indecisive treatment” of the topics, for example, against “the criticism of those who it describes as ‘greedy’ (luddha) for nirvana” (155; emphasis added). And some decades later, the practice of poetry came under
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attack from no less than a royal edict: the Dambadeniya edict “advises that ‘despicable arts such as poetry and drama should neither be studied nor taught to others’” (ibid.). What’s more, the composition of these edicts was overseen by the very monk who composed the poetic text. Third, there is Gornall’s own ‘skilled’ strategy of reading: conjecture.

To make a broad point, I note a few instances of conjectural punctuations in his reading of the text: “We should likely infer from the open-ended ‘etc.’ that Sangharakkhita also includes here the literary Prakrits and other languages of classical India” (153); “We can speculate, furthermore, that by quoting the Dhvanyaloka here he indicates that the old schematic formalism of the alankara tradition had been supplanted to an extent with Kashmiri theories of suggestion (dhvani) that subordinated formal figuration and which were viewed as new and sophisticated” (ibid.); “It seems possible, in this respect, that these new theories allowed monks to reconsider the nature of good poetry separate from the morally suspect, ornamental formalism of earlier Sanskrit poetics” (ibid.); “We can account for the centrality of propriety in the Subodhalankara by hypothesizing that Sangharakkhita was likely a close reader of Ksemendra’s work” (157); “We can infer that because the performance was inspired by meditation on the Buddha, any error that is produced is, in some respects, negligible since the audience is enraptured by the artist, who acts as a medium between the transcendent Buddha and the world” (161); “It seems that, for Sangharakkhita, so long as devotional poetry to the Buddha inspires the audience then it is good poetry, regardless of possible contradictions” (ibid.); “It is possible that Sangharakkhita’s willingness to engage in worldly matters reflected the fact, as he seems to declare in two of his works, that he pursued the bodhisattva path” (155).

I am not suggesting that conjecture is a timelessly defective mode of reading a text. But at Gornall’s command, conjecture does not simply construct plausible connections that are absent in the narrative of the text. Rather, conjecture is put to the service of confirming his prejudgment of creativity in the text. How the so-called careful reader sees that creativity is to be mediated by Gornall’s hypothetical connections—not only between the text and other texts and contexts, such as “Sangharakkhita was likely a close reader of Ksemendra’s work,” but also between the words and their supposed meanings that Gornall arbitrarily imposes on them, for example: “Sangharakkhita’s depiction of those who study poetic figuration as essentially moral beings in opposition to the bestial inerudite anticipates the main innovation of his work, namely the centrality with which he places the poetic virtue of ‘propriety’ (ocitya) in literary practice” (156).

Let me make my point more precise by showing how Gornall’s reading of history manages to expunge the relation between power and knowledge from the monastic lives (149):

Heramba Chatterjee has surveyed the thirty-seven ornaments of sense in Sangharakkhita’s work and has shown that nearly all are adopted from Dandin’s Kavyadarsa. As well as following Dandin’s definitions of poetic figures, Sangharakkhita often adopts the examples he gives for each of these figures too. This occasionally means he takes one of Dandin’s amorous illustrations and with some minor changes, such as a well-placed vocative ‘O Buddha,’ turns it into a poem of devotion and piety. Take, for example, his minor amendment to Dandin’s illustration of a simile through negation (patisedhopama), that is, a simile where a comparison between two objects is refuted in order to heighten the intended point of comparison. Dandin in his example likens a lover’s face to the moon, whereas Sangharakkhita changes the subject of the comparison to the Buddha’s face.

Let us concede that the (monastic) readers of the Subodhalankara were all aware that Sangharakkhita made a reference in his texts to Dandin as a source of influence for his poetry. Let us also concede that even modern readers are aware of “the thirty-seven ornaments of sense” that Sangharakkhita “adopted” from Dandin, as detailed by Heramba Chatterjee in 1960. But can there be
a leap from that concession to Gornall’s assumption about readers being able to recognize the Subodhalankara’s creative moves—such as Sangharakkhita adopting Dandin’s simile about the lover’s face and adapting it as the Buddha’s face? My point here is that Gornall’s history of how the medieval monks adopted and adapted historical ideas can appear even vaguely conceivable only if one—as Gornall does—untenably rules out the ways in which power authorizes it. The relation between influence, adoption, and adaptation is not natural to the history of the text.\(^\text{40}\) The ability to know that a given source of influence ceases to be influence—that is, transforms itself into innovation—is part of a historical relationship of power. That ability depends on a trained disposition whereby one is persuaded (sometimes retrospectively) that influence constitutes innovation. Gornall labors to marshal evidence of connections between the Subodhalankara and other texts like Kavyadarsa as if they are already part of a catalogue of elements all adding up to a representable history of creativity in the reform era. But, ironically, that very labor to point them out negates the presumed creativity inhering in the text. At the very least, Gornall should ask himself why is it that he himself has to point out all this in the first place!\(^\text{41}\)

There is another point. In all of Gornall’s accentuation of creativity, what we have is an arrogated presumption about the connection between knowledge and emotion, or “aesthetic moods” (151). As with his view of emotion in poetic texts, creativity becomes an object of knowledge. Not only are “ornate, literary works” treated as agents in that they are “a means of inculcating in themselves and others karmically transformative devotional feelings” (147; emphasis added). Particular “objects of devotion” (123) themselves are also treated as “agents inculcating pasada [serene joy] among devotees” (132; emphasis added).\(^\text{42}\) Creativity becomes a rasa, an aesthetic mood to be gained from the knowledge of the text because that knowledge is separated from power. This is why Gornall tries throughout to extricate creativity (adaptation) from influence (adoption). With no connection to power, a norm is presented as a historical fact. Here Gornall finds himself in the company of many other scholars who are preoccupied with locating creative innovation in the history of South and Southeast Asian religions.\(^\text{43}\)

### A Note on a Genealogy of Creativity

To make some observations concerning the emergence of creativity in a distinct space of modernity, let me begin with how the concept is used in modern Sri Lanka. This use, of course, contrasts with Gornall’s normative sense of the concept, which also stands in jarring contrast with the medieval context. Let us look at one specific example. At one point, Gornall translates the Pali word patibhana in the Subodhalankara (verse 1, chapter 5) as ‘creative eloquence’.\(^\text{44}\) The PTS Pali-English dictionary translates the word as ‘understanding’, ‘illumination’, ‘readiness or confidence of speech’, and so forth. My copy of the Subodhalankara translates it into Sinhala as pratibhana nanaya (Gunananda 2009: 419). How does this Sinhala translation compare with Gornall’s?

The Subodhalankara is used at certain monastic institutions in Sri Lanka, but largely in upper-level courses where monks learn the Pali grammar to construct verses. Several monks noted the text’s sole use for teaching grammar by stressing that it is not used to teach Buddhism (bududahama). For them, learning Pali grammar is not an especially ‘sacred’ activity but is part of the monastic education. Needless to say, the modern use of the text is embedded in a genealogy that remains in tension with Gornall’s story.

I consulted several Sri Lankan Pali scholar monks—one of whom knows English—to ask how else they would translate the term and if Gornall’s ‘creative eloquence’ would make sense to them. The monks used a number of terms as possible translations—daksakama (competence), nuvanatibava (knowledgeableness), prakasakirime hakiyava (ability to pronounce), vaha
terum ganna puluvankama (quickly understanding), puhunukama (being well trained), vata-hima (grasp), avabodhaya (knowledge), yamaka artanvitava prakasakirime hakiyava (capacity to explain something meaningfully), among others. None of these terms, at least for me, immediately registered the sense of creativity. But when I mentioned Gornall’s translation of the term to the monk who knows English, he said that it could be correct. What happened next was interesting. The monk began to find synonyms for the English word ‘creativity’ and singled out the terms nirmanaya kirima, which could be translated as ‘creating’.45 But when I asked him if monks would go around making statements in Sinhala like “eya gata nirmanaya karanava” (he creates verses), the monk chuckled and said no, because that way of putting it sounded stilted in “ordinary speech” (samanya katakarana vidiyata).46 “It is better to say,” the monk added, “that someone is kavi hadanda or kavi kiyanna dakshayi [has the skill to do/tell poetry].” As we will see, even in English, saying that someone ‘created’ something constitutes a very different conceptual move than saying that someone is ‘creative’. The Hostess factory creates Hostess Twinkies by the truckload, but we wouldn’t then remark on how creative the factory is. The point is not that the English word ‘creativity’ has no equivalent even in modern uses and translations of Sinhala or Pali. How one finds the word depends on who is talking to whom in a specific situation. The translation of language is inseparable from the historical effects that are authorized by power in a genealogy because effects are part of distinct historical relationships, which are lived and not duplicated ahistorically.47 What is equivalent or non-equivalent in translation is never universally obtained. Translation (or untranslatability) of language is meaningful within a form of life shaped by a particular set of activities.48 So it is with the regular monastic translation of Pali words into Sinhala in distinct forms of practice—bana preaching or teaching Pali. It is within such activities that distinct effects are produced, and they are not simply universally replicable.

Gornall’s reading of creativity into the medieval monastic texts stands above and outside of a form of life. Gornall never asks the basic questions: Who saw, said, and did what when they saw someone or something as ‘creative’? Who reacted in what ways to what was said and done? The concept of creativity, with its own genealogy of shifting meanings, is displaced into different forms of life deprived of the necessary conditions that would make possible its use. The concept has a particular modern history connected with Romanticism and beyond. Even though some see its emergence in prior centuries, the concept of the ‘creative’, with its link to ‘imagination’, begins to make its way into social life in the mid-eighteenth century. And the word ‘creativity’ itself emerges after 1875 (Kristeller 1983). As Camilla Nelson (2010, 2016) has argued, whereas imagination and knowledge were seen to be separate before then (e.g., Bacon considered imagination to be a ‘messenger’), in a mid-eighteenth-century “reversal, imagination, once regarded as a poor cousin to reason—at best, passive, and at worst, a dangerous faculty that led to madness or delusion—becomes the primary faculty of the human mind” (Nelson 2010: 64).49 Nelson further remarks (ibid.: 65):

In English, Kant’s influence manifested itself in poetry before entering into philosophy. In particular, in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge imagination is seen to take the leap beyond the subject through the act of artistic creation. With Coleridge, the imagination ceases to be ‘a lazy Looker-on on an external world’ and is endowed with a synthetic or ‘magical’ power. He describes this new apprehension of imagination as a power of knowledge that is a repetition in the subject’s mind of the auto-poetic power of God’s creation. Or, in Coleridge’s own words, the imagination is ‘the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception’ and ‘a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM’… for Coleridge the perceiving mind is seen to be active in giving shape and meaning to what is outside it, so that our knowledge of what is outside us is also the knowledge of ourselves. Hence, Coleridge
calls this new creative power both a self-manifestation and self-discovery because we see ourselves through the structure of our own minds.

Nelson also argues (ibid.: 65–66; emphasis added; see Townsend 2019):

*It is following Kant and the Romantics that creative imagination comes to be seen as the ‘true source of genius’ and the ‘basis of originality’, words which themselves gain a new meaning. Genius is distinguished from mere talent, and redefined as a quality of mind that makes rules instead of following them, and the art object comes to be understood as the embodiment of original aesthetic ideals that are the product of the artist’s creative imagination, not mere reflections, imitations, or perfections of truths found elsewhere.*

Note that the sense of artistic creativity and genius is part of a history of a reworked notion of ‘inspiration’. As Asad (2003: 43) explains: “Given that inspiration was no longer to be thought of as direct divine communication, romantic poets identified it in a way that could be accepted by skeptics and believers alike.” And so, “for Coleridge, himself deeply read in German Biblical Criticism, prophets were not men who sought to predict the future but creative poets.”

The relation between creative inspiration and genius gets entangled in other modern histories such as the histories of the “secularization of pain” (ibid.: 48). As Asad puts it: “The myth of punishment for original sin was translated by the latter [vitalist school] into the myth of punishment for transgressions against the laws of nature (for example, following a wrong diet or failing to exercise)” (ibid.: 47). It is also part of the histories of the translation of the shamanic practices: the shamanic claims about healing powers, seen to elude the natural world but provoking wonder, had to be explained away. In the eighteenth century, “another aspect of the shaman figure was being taken much more seriously: the shaman as poet, myth–recounter, and performing artist” (ibid.: 49–50). And as the shaman was an artist, the artist himself now came to be seen as a shaman: “That he [Mozart] was often likened to Orpheus by his audiences was, says Flaherty, part of the mythologization of the great artist, of his healing and ‘civilizing’ powers acquired through inspiration” (ibid.: 50). The upshot of the remarks, then, is that “if biblical prophets and apostles—as well as shamans in ‘the primitive world’—were now to be seen as performing, in mythic mode, a poetic function, then modern geniuses could reach into themselves and express spiritual truths by employing the same method” (ibid.: 52).

The career of the concept was hardly confined to the world of poets. Creativity took on a much more generalized sense as it came into use in the United States between 1926 and 1953; and around the same time, the Anglo-American version appeared in the European languages. In the United States, “the term was accompanied by a dramatic shift in the contents of the discourse, so that creativity ceases to be understood as the preserve of genius, but is located in all kinds of people and human endeavours” (Nelson 2010: 68). Since the 1930s, the discourse has been part of numerous movements, institutions, and programs in the US including the Federal Art Program under Roosevelt’s New Deal, the creative writing movement of the Progressive Education Movement, and other creative studies initiatives (ibid.: 68–69). But creative genius was not always thought to be the property of all people: “In a debate on anti-lynching legislation in the US Senate in 1938, the senator from Mississippi Theodore Bilbo echoed *Mein Kampf* in asserting that merely ‘one drop of Negro blood placed in the veins of the purest Caucasian destroys the inventive genius of his mind and strikes palsied his creative faculties’” (Runciman 2013). The change in the concept’s meaning through such a genealogy necessitated a change in the abilities required to recognize what is ‘creative’. These abilities were part of distinct ways of living, doing, and feeling in distinct times—but this fact is concealed by the scholars’ historically transcendent concept of creativity. These scholars can always ‘identify’ creativity tucked away in any ancient or
modern text. The concept of creativity becomes their proverbial hammer, and every text starts to look like a nail.

**Final Remarks: Encountering Power**

Surely the history of how the concept of creativity has come to be used in the studies of Buddhism—and South and Southeast Asian religion—must be included within its broader genealogy. Gornall’s *Rewriting Buddhism* exemplifies the unquestioned presumptions embedded within the use of the concept of creativity to make claims about South Asian agency and autonomy. The ways in which creativity is made synonymous with agency in many studies of South Asian religion since at least 1995 marks a distinct reversal from earlier scholarly positions. Ronald Inden’s *Imagining India* (1990), mentioned earlier in this article, sought to tell a story of Indian agency allegedly suppressed by Orientalist Indological discourse. For him, the concept of agency was supposed to be different from the notion of ‘creative imagination’. According to Inden (ibid.: 127; emphasis added):

> The Romantic, idealist voice enthusiastically construed Hindu thought as emanating not from a reason of spirit but from a ‘creative imagination’ or ‘fantasy’ of the senses. The essence of Hinduism was a form of thinking that was not simply the absence of the ‘conceptual’, but rather the presence and predominance in it of the ‘symbolical’. It was not that the Hindu does not think rationally. It was, rather, that he thinks in icons or images. Since this is a form of thinking which Western, scientific man has largely outgrown or pushed into its subconscious, its presence and development in the East is of great importance, for it may provide the mind of Western man which is, for the Romantics, as one-sided as that of the Easterner, with direct access to that part of himself that he has ‘lost’. Hence, the Romantics and idealists and their Jungian descendants in no way disagree that Hinduism is a religion constituted by a mentality of extremes that is in essence imaginative. Indeed, it is precisely this ‘central feature’ of Hinduism that has made it of such interest to them.

If Inden’s ‘agency’ was meant to save Indians from being considered merely as ‘creative’, then the scholarly respite did not last long. Inden ended up merely replacing the problem of ‘creative imagination’ with the problem of ‘agency’. And subsequently, scholars of Buddhism and Asian religions thereafter simply conflated the two, assuming a natural synonymy between agency and creativity. What is ironic is that in attributing creative imagination to non-Western subjects, post-colonial scholars did not just reproduce a colonial problem but also reintroduced what Inden thought was a “form of thinking which Western, scientific man has largely outgrown or pushed into its subconscious” (ibid.: 127). The problem of the concept of creativity even escaped those who wrote about modern ‘Buddhist Romanticism’ in relation to the history of the Romantic and idealist notions of creativity. In these historians, at least, we would expect a certain amount of self-awareness, but alas, even they were not deterred from claiming that the “modernization of nonwestern societies” was a “creative, heterogeneous adaptation” of Western modernity (McMahan 2008: 14).

This is precisely the problematic claim advanced by David McMahan (2008) in his *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, which has all too often been uncritically cited in the literature. As McMahan writes: “The modernization of nonwestern societies has seldom been a mere capitulation or accommodation of western iterations of modernity but rather has combined creative, heterogeneous adaptation of certain aspects of modernity with selective resistance to others” (ibid.: 14). Thus, the creativity that defines Buddhist modernity is assumed to distinguish it
from European modernity. And within this history of creativity in which Buddhist figures draw on Western thinkers, creativity is turned into something that recreates itself in ‘hybrid’ forms, not just in non-Western societies but also in the West itself. Hence, McMahan tells us that a modern Asian interpreter of Zen like D. T. Suzuki “is clearly drawing from psychoanalytic theory, and perhaps from the Romantics, when he declares, like Schelling as well as Jung, that the unconscious is the seat of creativity” (ibid.: 131), developing “a hybridized Buddhist-Romantic concept of creativity and spontaneity” (ibid.: 123). But McMahan also tells us that Western Buddhists, like Anagarika Govinda, developed “Romanticism-inflected Buddhism” (ibid.: 135).

The all-too-familiar story of hybridity here is a story of ‘multiple modernities’ in Asia, which, ironically, is not a ‘capitulation’ to Western modernity but the global extension of creativity itself (cf. Abeysekara 2018b). Ultimately, such Western and non-Western differences can all be identified under the rubric of the ‘creative’ and the ‘productive’. McMahan writes: “Finally, we see in these artists that just because the idea of a special Buddhist creativity is a hybridized and novel construction of the modern period does not mean it cannot be productive” (ibid.: 147). So by merely displacing it onto a history of modern Buddhism, the very problem of creativity, which its history of Romanticism is assumed to reveal, is resolved. The very possibility of identifying creativity and its hybrid forms is thought to be simply given independent of power.

Whereas for McMahan, as for Gornall and others, the concept of creativity—even in its hybrid incarnations—becomes always readily visible everywhere, for other scholars it is visible even when it is, in fact, invisible or ‘disguised’. Consider an example from a remarkable work by Janet Gyatso (2015). *Being Human in a Buddhist World* is a history of the medical literature and ‘empiricist’ (Gyatso’s word) knowledge in Tibet, but it is also about the question of the relation between medical knowledge and Buddhism. From the outset, Gyatso’s view of that relation in terms of “adaptation of particular pieces of that received heritage” (ibid.: 15) is grounded in a questionable assumption about the concept of Buddhism itself. For Gyatso, “Buddhism conceived more broadly, beyond its soteriological dimensions and now intentionally defined for our historiography, was the dominant civilizational force in the world in which Tibetan medicine flourished, and which contributed in foundational ways to medicine’s distinctive profile there” (ibid.; emphasis added). The assumption that something essential called Buddhism had to be “conceived more broadly, beyond its soteriological dimensions” is not only to convert Buddhism’s supposed extension of itself into the possibility of its own creativity; it is also to read creativity into the medical literature, whose relation to Buddhism can then be judged.

One can find this problem again in Gyatso’s (2015) reading of a set of seventeenth-century medical paintings produced by the former regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Sanga Gyatso—who is subsequently designated as ‘the Desi’ (Governor)—and a team he assembled. The Desi’s paintings, which are said to be a visual aid to a commentary on the twelfth-century text *Four Treatises*, “portray in meticulous detail the anatomy, *materia medica*, diagnostics, therapeutics, pathologies, and healthy and deleterious forces that determine the human condition” (ibid.: 23). Initially, Janet Gyatso grants that “endeavoring to ‘read’ this artifact raises a host of methodological issues. Not the least is the problem of how to discern cultural significance in a field where knowledge about everyday life is still scanty. The challenge becomes all the more daunting when trying to read visual images, where broad cultural expertise is required to appreciate their manifold *implicit messages*” (ibid.: 23–24; emphasis added). But her own concern falls by the wayside beginning with the first paragraph, where Gyatso launches into a reading of the “implicit messages” in the artifact (ibid.: 25; emphasis added):

*There is an immediate and palpable delight in looking at the medical paintings. One is struck at once by the beauty and vivid color of the large anatomical figures, as well as the pleasing order*
and neat rows of smaller vignettes. *Each of the plates in the set evinces a sense of serene control* and comprehensiveness. *There is an exquisite precision* and often intricate detail, even in the vignettes in their rows. *Their individual distinctiveness is all the more striking* for its contrast with these images’ commonality of position within the ordered parade of registers.

Gyatso here simply aestheticizes the paintings. What she ascribes to the paintings—“There is an immediate and palpable delight,” for example—could in no way be inherent to them. The paintings themselves could not possibly anticipate being read in the universal sense that Gyatso expects her English readers to view them in. The suggestion that “there is an immediate and palpable delight in looking at the medical paintings” assumes that what is “immediate and palpable” will be immediate and palpable to all humans, which is clearly absurd.

This cannot simply be dismissed as a stylistic problem because the logic of this reading is central to Gyatso’s attempt to uncover creativity in the paintings, that is, something ‘unprecedented’ about the production itself. The Desi himself is quoted by Gyatso (2015: 44) as having said that “there has been no tradition of making a manual like this.” At first, Gyatso says that “whether or not the set truly was unprecedented,” the claim itself is “telling” (ibid.: 45). But instead of pausing to think about the relation between power and discourse, in proceeding to interpret the paintings, Gyatso seeks to turn the Desi’s claim into a verifiable, empirical fact in order to authenticate it. Gyatso does this first by making her own distinction between the Buddhist tradition in Tibet and the new tradition that the Desi’s painting supposedly inaugurates. This distinction, as we will see, turns into a troubling distinction between Buddhism proper and the ‘empiricist’ tradition of the paintings—that is, between Buddhist life and the ‘everyday’. Gyatso reasons (ibid.; emphasis added):

To speak of newness is not something to which Tibetan scholars regularly lay claim. And while sometimes the label “unprecedented” can be applied lyrically to something deemed extraordinary, the Desi clearly uses the term in this context to indicate a new and ground-breaking means of representing knowledge. Such a claim is itself significant in a society where authority of tradition and lineage, and the inspiration of the masters of the past, determine the value of virtually everything, from academic institutions and elite literature to folk culture. Of course, Tibetan writers and artists did innovate, but they usually disguised their originality. The Desi himself is often quite diffident about his own creativity, even in passages directly contiguous with those just cited, where he proffers that he has asserted nothing new in the *Blue Beryl* and has depended entirely on authoritative tradition. As we will see in the next chapter, the recognition of the value of new knowledge—and an accompanying ambivalence about that—is a defining feature in the medical episteme in the Desi’s day. *For now, something special is afoot in his unabashed touting of a new invention.*

Gyatso tries to justify the newness of both the Desi’s claim about the paintings and the paintings themselves by demarcating a ‘difference’ between Buddhism and the medical tradition. The supposed fact of that essential difference rests on the assertion not only that earlier Buddhist claims to originality were ‘disguised’ but also that “it would seem that religion is far from the heart of the set, which is rather about a larger world in which Buddhist and other religious practices are an integral—but just one—part” (ibid.: 37; emphasis added). Surprisingly, Gyatso sees the supposed hybrid blending between the everyday world and “the occasional Buddhist and other religious figures and practices in the rest of the set” (ibid.: 35) in the following way: “What is most striking is the degree to which we see, in Japanese historian Barbara Ruch’s words, ‘sacred and profane in wholly comfortable continuity’” (ibid.: 36; emphasis added). This is surprising not simply because Gyatso uncritically accepts the problematic binary ‘sacred and profane’, but
because she, like McMahan and other scholars, never asks how this supposed hybrid becomes identifiable ("most striking") or to whom it becomes identifiable in the first place. For Gyatso, such a mixture of sacred and profane seems "most striking" simply because her standard of what constitutes Buddhism is arbitrary and contrived. Taking axiomatically the centrality of certain binarisms to her Buddhism, Gyatso (2015: 37; emphasis added) is struck that these are "absent" within the Desi’s works: “Largely absent in these images, both textual and visual, is the kind of hierarchy so regularly seen in Buddhist writing, between the ‘worldly’ and the ‘world-transcending’, for example, or between conventional and absolute truth.” Gyatso’s standard (even if we could map the loka/lokuttara distinction onto the samvrtisat/paramarthasat distinction as she seems to assume) would render large numbers of Buddhist texts that have nothing to do with such distinctions only peripherally Buddhist. As if such a distinction were not sufficient for setting her bar for what constitutes Buddhism rather high, Gyatso tries to naturalize another distinction by way of naturalizing her awareness of the differences between the depictions of the images in Buddhist tradition and those in the paintings. Unlike in the Buddhist tradition, Gyatso says, the images in the paintings—of doctors, patients, monks, even deities—are not specific depictions; they are generic depictions of “just some man, some woman” (ibid.: 51) because questions of disease and health affect all humans, including monks. She writes (ibid.: 53; emphasis added):

We need not go further with this survey of other Tibetan art that might have contributed to the distinctive appearance and semiotics of the Desi’s medical paintings. None of the elements constituting this character is absolutely new, but taken together and in light of their unmatched scope, they bring to the fore what was indeed unprecedented about the set. Not only are these plates virtually unique for painting medical topics, they far surpass in number and variety all other illustration of everyday, local subjects, and also the everyday message and import of those subjects, where even the occasional allusions to religious practice or deities have only to do with their impact on human health.

What Gyatso tries to naturalize as a difference is hardly an essential border between the text and the external. The difference she finds is predicated on a preconceived notion of what constitutes sameness. In her view, the set contains its own hybridity (“Tibetan art that might have contributed to the distinctive appearance” and “none of the elements constituting this character is absolutely new”), but in the end that hybridity constitutes its own unity of unprecedentedness (“But taken together and in light of their unmatched scope, they bring to the fore what was indeed unprecedented about the set”). Even if it may bear a resemblance to Tibetan art, the set is “unique” not just because of the topics covered but also because of the “scope,” “number,” and “variety” of the subjects (“Not only are these plates virtually unique for painting medical topics, they far surpass in number and variety all other illustration of everyday, local subjects”).

My point here is that the difference that Gyatso identifies—even in terms of ‘scope’ and ‘number’—is not an objective difference. Sameness and difference cannot be properties of singular objects; rather, they only become meaningful utterances from the perspective of some viewer (i.e., power/capacity). But for Gyatso, that sense of difference is vested with a truth value transcending her subject position. The difference of the paintings, that is, their uniqueness and innovation, in her reading ultimately morphs into the truth of the paintings. But she is at times interested in the truth of the truth itself. For example, Gyatso (2015: 55) says that even though the illustrations of things like plants are generic, they are “realistic—or at least aimed to be.” But she finds it necessary to add, “While there can be little doubt that the Desi and his team obtained some real examples from which to draw, we are not sure how much of the set was actually executed with live models in sight” (ibid.: 56). Thus, Gyatso has to qualify the Desi’s own
statement about what is real with a disclaimer about whether or not the so-called real samples were modeled on real live samples. Gyatso’s concern seems superfluous at best, given her own admission that “to be sure, we do not see here the full use of the dissected corpse as cornucopia for anatomical knowledge, as in European medicine at a similar point in time. But the corpse did serve as a model for the Desi’s artists” (ibid.: 55). And indeed, if anything, the paintings constitute a debate about which depictions are ‘real’. Hence, as she herself writes: “Thus does he [the Desi] underline the idiosyncrasies of any particular moment or disposition of the body, and warns that the normative system of iconometric measurements (yul thig) should not be expected to describe precisely what one sees in actuality, given the variety of factors that distinguish a given case” (ibid.; emphasis added).

My argument is that what may seem like an isolated problem in Gyatso’s reading is a larger problem of her failure to understand the relation between statement/discourse (e.g., paintings), knowledge, and power. Foucault (2014: 20) once remarked that what is important is to know “not under what conditions a statement is true” but what the statement does. Yet despite invoking Foucault’s concept of episteme, Gyatso seeks to forge a direct correlation between statement and knowledge/truth. She wants to understand discourse—for example, the paintings’ depictions of subjects—in terms of questions of what they empirically include and exclude. In noting the set’s representations of various social agendas, Gyatso (2015: 54; emphasis added) writes: “All this proves that we cannot uncritically take its depictions as a fully reliable mirror image of Tibetan society in the Desi’s day. There are important ways that the set does present itself as such, but as historians we need to look at the significance of that, rather than taking it at face value. Generic depiction always involves a choice in terms of what is deemed typical, how that is framed, and what is included and what is left out.” But the question of what a statement includes or leaves out is not simply an empirical question of why a statement may not be a “fully reliable mirror image” of something. Rather, to follow Foucault here, it is about what a statement does. And that question involves a statement’s relation to power—that is, it is not just about who can make such a statement but who is affected or persuaded by it as well. These questions suppose the temporality of dispositions, which are not codifiable. I suspect Gyatso is aware of such questions, but those questions are overshadowed by her choice to see and reveal almost everything in the paintings in light of her conviction (decided in advance) about their unprecedentedness. In the service of her reading, the text’s uniqueness in all of its extensions—beauty, scope, number, variety, and so forth—just offers itself up to her, and presumably our, gaze.

As a way of concluding this article with a broader point about the problem of scholars reading creativity into texts, let me allude to one other example of the liberty Gyatso (2015) takes with the paintings. In examining an image of a man doing sadhana practices, she wants to clearly identify what is once again “striking” and new in it: “But what is striking about the medical image of this practice is the generality of that prescription. The man pictured in front of his altar is doing a generic visualization, not of any deity in particular. This can be seen by a close look at the tangka of the deity pictured within the vignette, the one that the man is propitiating” (ibid.: 70; emphasis added). Note how Gyatso sees a portrait within a portrait. She sees all of this in the portrait within a portrait based simply on “a close look.” And she also reproduces separately a slightly enlarged but fuzzy picture of the deity itself in an attempt to reveal what it is really about. But this “close look” precludes all questions of power and authority about how one sees such an image. Anticipating such a criticism, Gyatso (2015: 71) says, “I may be making a lot of a very small detail, but it is hard to find a vague rendering of a buddha or sacred deity elsewhere in Tibetan painting.” Note two crucial things. First, Gyatso assumes that comparing one thing to something else to obtain a sense of similarity or difference between them is something given and not an act of power, a temporal ability. Yet, oddly, she is comparing the clarity of a painting
within a painting with the universe of Tibetan paintings, not the universe of paintings within paintings. (And with her comparison and contrast, Gyatso must also assume that all Tibetan tangka paintings contain portraits within portraits as well.) Second, Gyatso’s “close look” at “a vague rendering” of an image is taken to constitute something innate that differentiates itself from a previous tradition of paintings. Again, as in other instances, what Gyatso often describes as “most striking” is an example of how she substitutes her “close look” at the paintings for their supposed self-appearance to any reader. It is Gyatso’s close look that supposedly finds such a difference and not one that already resides in the vague image.

In his seminars conducted in the 1960s, as he had done in Being and Time and in many other works, Martin Heidegger discussed how the Greeks and the modern philosophers saw things in the world. Noting how “between Aristotle and Kant there lies an abyss” as far as “how are what presences and what shows itself from itself (appears) united,” Heidegger ([1976] 2003: 36) put it quite succinctly: “For the Greeks, things appear. For Kant, things appear to me.” Heidegger’s ([1924] 2009) concern with how the things in the world show and presence themselves, especially relative to the Greeks, was tied to his concern with how the world is encountered (in its totality). But encounter is always an encounter with power, a concept that does not figure prominently in Heidegger’s thinking, not in the ways it does for Nietzsche and Foucault in its connection to genealogy.

It is precisely this relation between power and encounter in a genealogy—which supposes a form of life—that is bypassed in scholarly assumptions about the relation between the self-appearance of the texts and their creativity in history. The scholars’ overarching concern with creativity and agency, then, is not merely an effort to point to some imaginative aspect of a historical work. And it does not just point to an act of production and creation of something, nor does it merely refer to a specific ‘native’ discourse about what is ‘creative’ (e.g., vīsesā). Rather, the presumptions about the self-appearance of creativity already separate ‘it’ (that is, the question of what is ‘creative’) from a form of life where any possibility of its encounter in specific moments of time is connected to a distinct capacity. But for the scholar, creativity simply appears visible (‘striking’) independent of how power may make possible questions and debates about what is and is not creative within the genealogy of a tradition. Thus, even if a scholar may find an example of a specific (‘native’) discourse analogous to what is called creativity, it is of course no evidence of a link within a chain of history where a form of power—or capacity—that constitutes a form of life can simply become an object of general identification. Contrary to what scholars all too often assume, creativity and agency are not products of ‘evidence’ but products of the imperial gaze (the ‘close look’) of the scholar. It is the imperial gaze of scholars that mistakes the grammar of modern English readers with the supposed universal grammar (intelligibility) of a concept.

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NOTES

1. Note that no diacritics are used with Sinhala, Pali, or Sanskrit words in the article except in the references. On how power has evaded Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist studies, see Abeysekara (2019a) and Walser (2018), respectively. An example of the failure to understand power by Steven Collins, a major scholar, merits special mention. In his posthumously published Wisdom as a Way of Life, following a discussion of the practices of self and textual meditation prescriptions in fifth-century Buddhaghosa’s Path of Purification, Collins (2020) says that they should not be confused with “phenomenology” on the presumably unshakable ground that “I find it implausible to think that any Buddhist monk or nun, or indeed anyone else, could maintain this attitude throughout all the hours of the day” (ibid.: 151). This sort of claim is based on the contrast he makes between a “real” and “textual-inspirational ideal” (ibid.: 40). Thus, he writes, “If one wants to read texts mythologically, of course, such (as is often said) unthinkable celebrities like the Buddha are capable of anything. But obviously these attainments can only be rationally understood to be dispositional; that is, an enlightened person would be capable of excellence in all these ways if and when he or she wanted to be” (ibid.: 152; emphasis added). It is unclear why Collins wants to separate the rational understanding from the mythological reading of texts by Buddhists, given that the ‘mythical’ can be a rational disposition. But things become more problematic as Collins points to “modernist changes in the aims of ‘meditation’” (ibid.: 153). He writes: “But something vital has been lost in modernist Buddhism’s appropriation of these traditional exercises: the anchoring of all these exercises and analyses in Buddhist transcendental truth. The ultimate aim of modernist Buddhist spiritual exercises is no longer enlightenment, release from rebirth, but advances in here-and-now experiences of lessened stress, increased happiness, and so on” (ibid.: 155; emphasis added). As examples, Collins provides two excerpts from S. N. Goenka’s Vipassana Research Institute and the International Meditation Center in Wat Ramoeng Thailand, which state that meditation is a “personal experience” and that, irrespective of their religion, anyone can do it. Collins sees a connection between the modernist Buddhist appropriations of Vipassana and those by the Westerners: “It is well known that many of the earliest and contemporary Vipassana teachers have been Jewish [Sylvia Boorstein is named], and there are a much greater proportion of Jews in their congregations than the percentage of Jews in the United States. I don’t know anyone who knows why this is, but I doubt that many of them abandon Judaism” (ibid.: 156–157). Collins grants, “Achieving real peace of mind, living at peace within ourselves … who could quarrel with these as the aims of any practice? And who could deny that, if these aims are achieved, then in a certain nonphilosophical sense, these practices are spiritual exercises and regimen(s) truth (about oneself)?” (ibid.: 157). But ultimately Collins takes these modern claims not as particular abilities with which people talk about a Buddhist practice in historical circumstances, but as unmistakable evidence of the borderline between what is and is not Buddhism. In a display of the most egregious misunderstanding of genealogy and power and a certain kind of privilege that sanctions him to ward off all existing warnings, Collins imperiously pronounces: “But they [the modern practices] are not Buddhist aims in any specific, historical, or genealogical sense” (ibid.). Had he troubled himself to read Talal Asad, Collins might have learned that the question of power and genealogy makes impossible this sort of judgment about tradition, temporality, and modern self-formation. It does warrant asking how Collins, a self-proclaimed judicious scholar not given to being “politically correct” (ibid.: 74), uncritically imbibed the flawed ideas of so many largely white scholars and managed to ignore Asad. Incidentally, in his afterword to Collins’s book, Charles Hallisey (2020: 222n33) is wrong to associate the former’s idea—“the perduring ‘coherence and stability of the Pali
imaginaire’” that depends on a notion of the *longue durée*—with Asad’s “discursive tradition.” For a critique of Collins’s *longue durée* and his biased reliance on certain scholars, see Abeysekara (2018b).

2. Michael Dutton (2005: 89) once asked, “Why is it impossible to imagine, much less write, a work like Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* in Asian area studies?” An apt question in this case is, why has there not been written a work like Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion* in (Theravada) Buddhist studies? Some (e.g., Walser 2018) have begun to think about this lacuna in Mahayana studies.

3. This is also the case with Mahayana Buddhist studies. In his *Prisoners of Shangri-La* Donald Lopez (1998: 11) sees the Western representations obscuring Tibetan agency: “to allow Tibet to circulate in a system of fantastic opposites … is to deny Tibet its history, to exclude it from a real world of which it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their agency in the creation of a contested quotidian reality.” For similar attempts to recover the agency of Japanese Buddhists, see Josephson (2012).

4. A catalyst for this mission in Buddhist studies was Hallisey’s (1995) widely cited article, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravada Buddhism.” Inspired by figures like Hallisey, other scholars (e.g., King 1999) folded this mission of agency into their accounts of Orientalism and religion.

5. The South Asian studies scholars’ turn to agency marks a turn to ‘empiricism.’ In a splendid work, Piliavsky (2020) details the trajectory of how ‘hierarchy’ (as described in Dumont’s work) and authority in general came to be denounced in the frenzied valorizing of agency, empowerment, and self-responsibility in South Asian studies. This trajectory dovetails with a trend in the social sciences for ‘flattening’ the social, as advanced by figures like Deleuze and Guattari, Latour, and others. Piliavsky holds that “the flattening of social theory was propelled by a broader turn within social sciences away from structuralism and its associated intellectual practices. This turn assumed various forms, but its shared premise was the rejection of what was thinkable in human life in favor of what was visible or experiential—a turn, in other words, to empiricism” (ibid.: 8). This trajectory would also intersect with the neoliberal discourses of egalitarianism and equivalence.

6. This is not to say that the concept of agency is not attractive to non-white scholars (e.g., Sivasundaram 2013, 2020; Wickramasinghe 2015).

7. A genealogy of the turn to agency in Buddhist studies can be found in Abeysekara (2011, 2018a, 2019a, 2020).

8. Asad (1993a, 1996) has critiqued the conceptions of agency as deployed by anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins, Sherry Ortner, Jean and John Comaroff, among others. And for a critique of the relation between agency and resistance in post-colonial literature, see David Scott (2004). Thomas Borchert (2017: 140) sees Buddhists under China’s communist rule in this way: “The agency of China’s minorities is certainly constrained, but there is some ability to act.” John Nemec’s (2020) tone-deaf essay is an example of the privilege of a field that licenses indifference to the critiques of the concept. In trying to make a case for a ‘volitional’ definition of religion that “articulates a particular model of free agency, of choice” based on examples from South India, Nemec writes: “Religion so understood intimates that religious agents fashioned and articulated systems that called on individuals and societies to elaborate—to choose to identify and engage—particular structures” (ibid.: 667). The least of Nemec’s problems is failing to grasp Asad’s basic point about power and genealogy.

9. On some aspects of NGO interventions following the tsunami, see Sophie Blackburn (2018). Kate Crosby (2008: 59) wrote an article claiming to look at “religious interpretations of the tsunami” whereby Sri Lankan Buddhist monks “sought to find religious meaning in the catastrophe.” But these religious interpretations become Crosby’s interpretations. Based on her theory of how “Theravada Buddhism posited a theory” of *karma*, Crosby casts the supposed monastic responses to the catastrophe in terms of the language of agency and responsibility. Crosby arbitrarily decides how the modern Buddhists’ ideas of agency accord with an ancient text that she calls “the locus classicus for Theravada lay practice”: “The acceptance of an unknown agency in the past then transfers to acceptance of conscious agency and responsibility in the present and for the future. By choosing appropriate behaviour, the survivor can influence his/her future experience. This interpretation is in accordance with the interpretation of kamma as ethical activity found in the *Singalovadasutta*, the locus classicus for Theravada lay practice” (ibid.: 68).

10. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations to Gornall are from *Rewriting Buddhism*. 

11. The question of agency operated differently in modern histories. Scott Gordon (2002: 5) has shown how the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “tradition of individualism exists alongside a counter-tradition that resists ‘autonomy’ and defers agency from the individual to an external nature.” As he puts it, “for many writers ‘being fashioned,’ ‘being acted upon by another,’ offers reassurance rather than anxiety, relief rather than despair: our obsession with self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and independence privileges a series of values that these writers actively reject” (ibid.: 6). For another account of the tension between agency and its subjection to discipline in the liberal tradition of John Locke, see Baltes (2016). For the place of agency in the world of “self-organization” in the eighteenth century and the working of self without “self-interest” in emergent capitalism, see Sheehan and Wahrman (2015) and Hirschman (1977), respectively.

12. For more on imitation and innovation, see Raustiala and Sprigman (2012). There are, of course, other instances where the question of imitation has worked with different implications: the European invasion and conquest of the New World, especially in ‘kidnapping language’ (Greenblatt 1991); the colonial ‘partial’ reform of Indian subjectivity (Bhabha 1994); and the racial politics of the eighteenth century (Wilson 2003). For a review of the concept’s connection to numerous ‘mimetic practices,’ see Lempert (2014).

13. For a different reading of the Benedictine community, see Asad (1993a).

14. See Asad (2015b), especially his comments on Hannah Arendt.


16. The question of power was central to practices of authenticating shrines, relics, and miracles in medieval Christianity (Asad 1993a).

17. One can think of a number of newly minted words like sanraksana (protective), sampradayika (customary), gatanugatika (conventional), viplavava (revolutionary), and antagami (extreme), and even the occasional use of the English word ‘radical’ in Sinhala conversations in modern Sri Lanka. However, this usage does not correspond to the contested sensibilities of the concepts ‘conservative’ and ‘radical’ in the modern West (see also my comments on translation in the article).

18. The following by Justin McDaniel (2017) is not atypical of the white privilege that permits scholars not to engage in criticism even as they engage in some loftier ‘criticism’ of criticism. If they studiously eschew a certain critique of the field, it is simply because they can. And it is because the prevailing scholarly prejudice does not affect McDaniel personally that he feels no compunction in saying: “In my writing, I try to stay positive. I find academic score-settling, scholarly chest puffing and most hard-fought theoretical arguments to be self-serving and increasingly arbitrary in a world with so many political, social and economic problems. I attempt to argue for, instead of arguing against” (ibid.: 17).

19. Iyko Day (2016) discusses other stakes in the recognition of minorities within the history of racialized labor and multiculturalism.

20. Asad (1993b) is making this point in relation to the modern states’ aspirations to a ‘common identity’. The uncertainty of where one acquires common civic virtues is ever more openly discussed in the wake of the attack on the US Capitol in 2021. In 2020, Yahoo had shut down its article comments section on the promise to evaluate its community of readers that it cannot easily supervise: “Our goal is to create a safe and engaging place for users to connect over interests and passions. In order to improve our community experience, we are temporarily suspending article commenting.” For a discussion on the emergence of the idea of community in neoliberalism, see Rose (1999). On other aspects of modern formations of liberal subjectivity, see Beistegui (2018). I am not persuaded, however, by Beistegui’s suggestions for the self-transformation of our subjectivities.

21. Mahmood (2003: 859) has argued that the formation of the self’s desires and aspirations within a discursive tradition is different from the communitarian acknowledgment of the “socially embedded quality of the individual.” Mahmood shows that according to the communitarian logic by figures like
Charles Taylor, “the interiority of the subject remains a valorized space to which one turns in order to realize one’s interests and to distinguish those fears and aspirations that are one’s own from those that are socially imposed” (ibid.: 858).

22. For a critique of the problem of the ‘immanent’ as deployed by figures like Charles Taylor (2007), see Asad (2012).

23. The edict presents Parakaramabhahu I to be following the language of Emperor Asoka who “crushed out the sinful bhikkhus [papabhiksun nirmathana kota], suppressed the heretics, purged the religion of its impurities” (Wickremasinghe 1928: 275).

24. Skinner’s work (e.g., 1998) has discussed at length the history of the early European debate about coercion and liberty.

25. Gornall’s distinction between coercive and non-coercive in turn rests on the problematic view of power as a property of the elites. The medieval author-monks are ceaselessly identified as elites: “monastic elites presented themselves, rather than the king and his court, under the Buddha at the apex of Lanka’s long chain of lordship” (13); “the Buddha and monastic elites possessed temporal and spiritual rights superior to the ruling king and nobility” (ibid.); “the Sangha’s administrative autonomy meant that a stable core of elites could withstand such political chaos” (47). But the elite power, we are told, is not singular. Power is deemed a competing exercise among elites themselves: “The tendency to frame literary works such as the Dathavamsa as reflective of a single interpretative community or dominant class—what we can call ‘court culture’—could easily lead us to overlook the complicated political situation of the poem, which represents in actuality a monastic intervention in a triadoule between local powerholders, namely monastic elites, a warlord, and the royal court” (171). In Gornall’s view, a power relationship is not something whereby the subject is affected, but something within which the subject acts with fully formed agency (cf. Foucault 2014). Thus, for Gornall, the concept of elite represents an essential self, owned not just by kings but by monks and warlords as well. This is a reiteration of the faulty idea that elite power was not ‘total’, which is widespread in the narratives of modern Buddhism, colonialism, ‘multiple modernities’, and ‘multiple secularisms’ (Abeysekara 2011, 2018b; Mahmood 2016; D. Scott 2004). Gornall’s freewheeling use of the idea should have been tempered by even the scantest attention to its contested use in the present time. Donald Trump and his political opponents attacking each other as ‘elites’ hardly points to a settled use of the concept. Surely a genealogy of the concept of elite remains to be written, including its use in subaltern studies. Robbins’s (1994) article is a squandered occasion to subject the notion of elitism in subaltern studies to a critique. For an analysis of conceptualizations of colonial and post-colonial difference in subaltern studies, see D. Scott (1999b).

26. This idea of “self-regulation” has a modern genealogy. For a fascinating discussion of how it was part of the colonial “reforms” of the problem of “priestcraft” in Hinduism, see J. Scott (2016).

27. According to Foucault (2002: 342), “slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape.”

28. For an interesting take on how such selfhood works in the modern practices of clairvoyance and mesmerism, see Ogden (2018).

29. As readers will recognize, I am using Althusser’s (2014) phrase differently.

30. Brian Hatcher (2020) tries to question the limitations of the category of reform. He argues that “precisely to avoid repeating or ratifying those dominant narratives about modern Hinduism, I have chosen to treat the Swaminarayan Sampraday and the Brahmo Samaj as religious polities rather than as religious reform movements. The category of the modern religious reform movement is too closely structured in terms of judgments about true and false religion; it presupposes a guiding narrative about modernity that makes it difficult for us to think anew about developments taking place during the early colonial moment” (ibid.: 3). But, ironically, Hatcher reproduces the problem of the very idea of reform by reading creativity into such polities.

31. For two excellent studies on the violent implications of the colonial and post-colonial subsuming of religion and law under the categories of public and private, see Agrama (2012) and Mahmood (2016). For privacy’s place in the eighteenth-century practices of self-concealment, see Spacks (2003), especially the chapter titled “Private Conversations.”

32. For a critique, see Abeysekara (2019a), Asad (1993b), Mahmood (2016), and D. Scott (2004).
33. Like many works too numerous to cite, which should not have been followed, Hallisey’s (1994) foundational essay “In Defense of Rather Fragile and Local Achievement” leaves the concept of ‘the local’ completely unproblematized as he calls twelfth-century Sri Lankan writer Gurulugomi a ‘philosopher’. Hallisey writes: “Thus it appears necessary for anyone theorizing—especially theorizing in a way that is intended to be universal, disengaged, and an absolute conception of the world—to acknowledge the achievement of local perspectives in the process of education and consequently to accept the necessity of defending these local perspectives which at the same time appear rather fragile and imperfect before the competition of theoretical reflection” (ibid.: 145).

34. Some can only think about the question of Pali cosmopolitanism in pre-modern Sri Lanka as a corrective to a bias in the monastic understanding of tradition. Frasch (2017: 67–68) writes: “A persistent bias that has dominated both the self-perception of the Theravadins (and the view of many scholars of Theravada Buddhism) is that their lineage and textual tradition can be referred back to Gautama Buddha himself, and that they succeeded to preserve his teachings with so much accuracy to make it the most reliable of all Buddhist canonical collections. A collateral of this view is the belief that Pali—now seen as a language rather than as a set of texts—was similar or at least closely related to the language in which the Buddha had preached.” The correlation of the monks’ so-called prejudiced perception of tradition with that of scholars is not Frasch’s only mistake here. His liberal sensibility about the difference between belief and knowledge (about what Pali language really is) precludes us from understanding how the relation between language and texts is critical to a living tradition. The tradition of Theravada cannot be reduced to an ahistorical misperception on the part of Buddhists because assertions about what constitutes Theravada are part of a contested discourse about what it is not (e.g., Mahayana) (Abeysekara 2002; Salgado 2013). That is, the authority of Theravada does not exist in a vacuum but is animated by a discursive space in which the question of Theravada becomes open for discussion.

35. In trying to explain the connections between Indian and Sri Lankan medieval texts—that is, “why Buddhists [in Sri Lanka] became so interested in the kavyadarsa” by focusing on “what is Buddhist about it”—Hallisey says: “I would say that the large-scale Buddhist framework … can be triggered for us by reminding ourselves of the lines in the kavyadarsa that say that ‘language makes the world exist, and also language is the lamp that illuminates what is in the world.’ Those familiar with different ways of talking about the two [‘conventional’ and ‘ultimate’] truths in Buddhism will realize that those two ways of talking about language [in the kavyadarsa], which are hard to put together, fit extremely well into a Buddhist framework” (in Meegaskumbura and Hallisey 2015). Here, as elsewhere, Hallisey can decide on “what is Buddhist” and fit into a “Buddhist framework” what he himself says is “hard to put together” only by distracting the reader from the fact that the sovereign decision being made here is his own. I have no doubt that “the large-scale Buddhist framework … can be triggered for us” (i.e., for Hallisey and the predominantly white scholars he surrounds himself with—none of whom, I suspect, are medieval Sri Lankan Buddhists), but I am left wondering why we should care what is triggered for Hallisey. Shouldn’t we be more concerned with what ‘triggered’ the Buddhists that Hallisey is supposed to be describing? And I hardly need to point out that there is really no evidence (or none that he feels necessary to share with us) that any of the medieval Buddhists thought that discussions of the two truths were relevant here. The decision that an Indian text fits into a Buddhist framework is Hallisey’s. To paraphrase Nietzsche, Hallisey and most other contemporary scholars of Buddhism are quite content to place all of history into the balance again for their sake so that a thousand such ‘secrets’ of the past can crawl out of their hiding places into the sunshine. Hallisey can speak of a Buddhist framework emptied of power only by not asking how the distinct capacities determine what fits into which framework in historical times.

36. Recently, in his interview with technology ethicist Tristan Harris, the comedian Bill Maher bemoaned the lack of an informed citizenry in the United States: “American people are too stupid to be governed. They have no bullshit detector. They believe a lot of quirky stuff on the left, and on the right they believe QAnon. And I mean there is no bullshit detector, and there is no knowledge of the past. You can’t scare them by saying, ‘Trump is becoming a totalitarian.’ ‘What’s that?’ ‘You know like East Germany.’ ‘What’s that?’ ‘During the Cold War.’ ‘What’s that?’ That is what we are dealing with. Technology wouldn’t be so scary if people had a better brain to deal with it” (“Real Time with Bill Maher,”
7 November 2020). But, of course, the knowledge of history in itself does not always guarantee how one is affected by that knowledge. As widely reported, Katie Miller—the wife of Stephen Miller, the architect of the Trump policy of family separation at the border—said: “My family and colleagues told me that when I have kids I will think about the separations differently. I don't think so. DHS sent me to the border to see the separations myself to try to make me more compassionate, but it didn’t work.”

37. In a move that reproduces more than just an Orientalist distinction between texts, elites, and native life, Ruiz-Falqués (2013; emphasis added) remarks: “I'm—more or less—a philologist. Thus, I don't believe interdisciplinarity is something additional. It is part of the discipline, since you can't do philology without history, etc. The problem I have with other disciplines, sometimes, is that they try to answer philological questions without philology and I think that's not possible. One needs to read the texts. For instance, I read some time ago about the idea of canon in Pali. Some anthropologists have been disputing the fixed idea of canon meaning the Tipitaka as we know it. They claim that in some libraries in villages in Thailand you don't find the whole orthodox canon but just parts of it, and then other texts that are not usually called canonical (some call them apocryphal). Now, all this information is really interesting, but it has nothing to do with the idea of canon in Pali scholarship in Pali, and I don't know why some scholars are against accepting the fact that some ideas are fabricated by an elite and still that's how they are. What the villagers do is not important at all.” In order for this absurd assumption about elites and texts to be even probable, one would have to completely cancel out the questions of power in which texts are encountered: that monks themselves were not “villagers,” that they were not connected to a life outside a monastery, that they only wrote for and spoke to themselves, and so on. And if one were to follow this line of farcical reasoning, one could also easily say that the entire canon of Buddhist texts was itself the work of elite monks having nothing to do with non-elite Buddhists.

38. I do not have space in this article, but the idea that that devotional literature marks something salient in medieval Sri Lanka needs to be contested. Gornall here is advancing an idea invented by Charles Hallisey and takes 'devotion' itself as a self-evident quality readily identifiable as such by Buddhists and Western scholars alike.

39. Gornall (2015) himself alludes to this in “Mad Peacock Devotees and the Cloudlike Buddha,” a YouTube presentation: “At this period there are some people who do not want Buddhists in Sri Lanka to write poetry. So we find in the katikavatas references to the fact that writing poetry is bad. That is problematic in and of itself because Sangharakkhita oversaw the composition of those katikavatas. The word [used in this context] is sloka, and whether that refers to kavaya (poetry), I am not too sure. So there is an opposition there. And so this isn’t something which a Buddhist monk could pick up and start doing without having to justify himself.” But all this does not prevent him from proceeding to pronounce imperiously: “And this is where I come in, and I am reading it, and I fully admit that is what I think Sangharakkhita is doing in front of a rather negative audience. And at the beginning of his work, he says 'there are people who do not want me to write this, but I am going to write it'… Ultimately it [the text] is an index of your [the author’s] moral and social character … I understand that you may think I am kind of taking a leap, but that is what I do with historical information.”

40. Some readers may recall how this talk of ‘adaptation’ is part of an Orientalist discourse on Buddhism (Masuzawa 2005).

41. There is no shortage of scholars who see the history of Buddhist texts as one of ‘creative adaptation’ in practice. Benjamin Schonthal (2021: 287) says that like most academic textbooks, Buddhists themselves attribute “the regulation of monastic life to a particular part of the Buddhist canon: the Vinaya Pitaka, or ‘Basket of Discipline.’” But Schonthal thinks that this “normative” Buddhist claim is “misleading.” He wants to correct it because “axioms of religious doctrine, however, are not always good descriptions of religious practice. What is normatively correct within religious or legal traditions can sometimes be empirically misleading” (ibid.: 288). For Schonthal, what Buddhists themselves lack is supposedly the insight of academic scholars like Charles Hallisey. Schonthal writes: “While Buddhists frequently praise the Vinaya Pitaka as the ultimate source of legal authority, one can find throughout Buddhist history abundant evidence of monastic communities who did not use the Vinaya as the only (or even the major) source for regulating monastic behavior. Reflecting on this fact, Charles
Hallisey notably observed that ‘Theravādins found the Vinaya both too little and too much’: too little in that its technical language ‘required elucidation and clarification’ and too much in that its size and scope proved ‘unwieldy’ [sic] for would-be users” (ibid.; emphasis added). Thus, Schonthal does not see disagreements with a tradition (e.g., frequent monastic praise and opposing interpretations of Vinaya) as particular historical disputes constituting a genealogy, but rather as reflections of a larger chain of monastic creativity. So the history of the monastic life itself is what Buddhists themselves have failed to describe accurately. That is, beyond their ‘axioms of doctrine’ lie their creative adaptations of texts, surprisingly veiled from the monks themselves. The monks have mistaken creativity for normativity. For Schonthal, just as for Gornall, monks’ own creativity must now be pointed out to them by the scholar. Thus, in the hands of the scholar, tradition already suffers from being ‘too little’ or ‘too much’, and this problem can only be rectified by reading creativity into that tradition.

42. Gornall is drawing on Rotman (2003, 2009) whose work is entirely about ascribing agency to Buddhist texts. For a critique of this idea of subjects being ‘inculcated’ with feelings as if they are receptacles, see Asad (1993a: 139–147; 2015a).

43. Here is a small sample of learned works that continue to be beset with this problem: Anne Blackburn (2001, 2010); Braun (2013); Bronkhorst (2019); Bronner (2014); Collins (2020); Ganeri 2011; Gyatso (2015); Hallisey (2010); Hatcher (2020); Langenberg (2018); McDaniel (2008, 2011); McGovern (2019); McMahan (2008); Novetzke (2016); Pollock (2006); Scheible (2016); Shulman (2012); Srinivas (2018); Truschke (2016); Turner et al. (2020).

44. Gornall’s translation of the verse states that “[this chapter] has been composed by a poet possessed of creative eloquence (patibhana), who relies on worldly discourse (lokavohara), and who feels the exhilaration of utter propriety” (156).

45. Malalasekera’s English-Sinhala dictionary translates the word ‘creates’ as nirmanaya karanava, and it is one of the modern ‘Sanskritized terms’ used by scholarly writers (Sandagomi Coperahewa, pers. comm.).

46. Another word for ‘ordinary’ is vyavahara, whose Pali version (lokavohara, translated as ‘worldly discourse’) is in the verse cited by Gornall (2015). But Gornall does not think critically about what such use involves.

47. This point about how power and authority work in a genealogy—that is, how power authorizes specific historical effects—is wholly missed by one reviewer of this article. The reviewer suggested that I ignore “Indian philosophical tradition,” where “creative genius, pratibha, is present in those poets and playwrights who discover new figures which induce rasa in unprecedented ways, as explained by Abhinavagupta in his tenth- or eleventh-century commentary on the Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana: ‘Genius (pratibha) is an intelligence capable of creating new things. The special genius here is one which is capable of composing pure and beautiful poetry because of the inspiration of rasa’ (Abhinavagupta’s commentary on Karika 1.5).” Thus, for the reviewer, as for Gornall, not only is pratibha readily translatable into modern ‘genius’, but it is an ability that can be universally identified. According to the reviewer, it is so universal that “every person has the capacity to experience aesthetic relish.” But the basic question that the reviewer, like Gornall, fails to ask is, if “every person” has such creative genius to experience rasa, why does a given historical text—a commentary—at a specific time have to point it out? This is precisely my point about genealogy—it is impossible (for scholars) to produce a universal definition of what creativity is based on what some specific texts say at specific times. Texts are historical debates, which suppose distinct historical relationships of power. And the abilities discussed in the texts are intrinsic to those relationships, which are lived and cannot be replicated throughout history. So texts are not universally objective empirical realities. Yet this is exactly how scholars treat texts when they try to identify what is and is not “creative” in “Indian philosophical tradition.”

48. Asad notes a similar point about translation. In discussing the question of the translation and untranslatability of the Qur‘an, Asad (2018) argues: “My argument is not that it is impossible for, say, a Turkish Muslim to experience a sense of awe and reverence when reading a Turkish translation of the Qur‘an; my suggestion is that reciting the Qur‘an in the original especially in a liturgical context is thought to be a particular (physical-emotional-cognitive) attitude, that its nontranslatability has a
special significance intrinsic to this sense. It is not the Arabic language that is sacred but the enunciation of divine virtues in the presence of what is believed to be a transcendent, creative power. That is to say, it is the act of worship (not the Qur'anic text) that is nontranslatable, whose full sense is not given in a dictionary (even a dictionary that provides an explanation of seventh-century Arabic in modern Arabic) but one that requires cultivation’ (ibid.: 60). For other important attempts to think about the problem of translation in Asian religious traditions, see Mandair (2009).

49. Nelson’s (2010, 2016) work is a critique of how a number of scholars ‘repurpose’ and universalize the concept without critically examining its genealogy.

50. Such figures as Shaftesbury came to attack ‘inspiration’ as something inessential to the freedom of creativity when the notion of ‘sublime’ was making entry into the philosophical vocabulary (Milnes 1997).

51. The genealogy of this troubling concept of creativity includes even modern-day banking that led to the collapse of the world economy in 2008. As documented by the four-hour Frontline film titled Money, Power, and Wall Street (Kirk 2012), the financial crisis of 2008 was largely a product of the invention of a new practice of ‘creative banking’ by a handful of recent college graduates. This creative banking was based on a stem of ‘credit default swaps’ that bypassed the previous (still largely unregulated) practice of lending.

52. In an ill-advised article, political theorist Lois McNay (2016: 49) says that Saba Mahmood’s critique of the liberal claims about agency and subjectivity are “exaggerated” because “cultures are not self-enclosed, internally unified totalities that are fundamentally alien to each other, but are hybrid, mutually permeable entities that have features in common as well as deep differences. It is such commonalities that provide the potential grounds for cross-cultural critique.” McNay fails to grasp that hybridity and commonality themselves are not natural facts but forms of power that do not lend themselves to universal identification. For a critique of hybridity, see Asad (1993b).

53. The trope of two truths that scholars like Gyatso and Hallisey deem essential to Buddhism has an Orientalist history. On how the Jesuits’ representations of these two truths—in terms of external and internal, esoteric and exoteric—made their way into Diderot’s Encyclopédie of the 1750s, see App (2010).

54. One commentator on Gyatso’s book, Mark Jordan (2016), noted how the concept of realism, as Ernst Gombrich’s Art and Illusion has shown, is a historical one.

55. Even when they supposedly refer to such discourses (as do the authors of the Sanskrit kavya who claim their work to be special and new), scholars such as Bronner (2016) mistake them for evidence of innovation instead of seeing them as competing historical contentions that delimit distinct forms of power.

56. In an interesting work, David Marriott (2018: 255) tries to understand Fanon’s concept of “invention” as a “non-sovereign politics.” For Marriott, invention is a kind of “leap … to find oneself in this moment of creative indecision or danger, that is to say suspended over an abyss where law is no longer acknowledged or recognizable” (ibid.: 257). Marriott compares Fanon’s idea of the leap to C. L. R. James’s analysis of Hegel’s Logic, which shows how the “true significance’ of Hegel’s dialectic, by which spirit both grounds itself and is itself this movement, entails a necessary leap” (ibid.: 261). Marriott claims that James takes the concept of the ‘leap’ from Lenin’s Philosophical Notebooks “to think the discontinuities, disruptions, and anomalies between invention and politics (as traditionally understood)” (ibid.). Now Fanon once wrote (in Black Skin, White Masks) that “the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence” (cited in ibid.: 238). Marriott says that invention for Fanon is “a radical untimeliness, entails a leap, and this leap cannot be anticipated, nor can it be prepared for, nor can it be traced back to a prior historical moment to be interrogated as such” (ibid.). Even as he notes that Fanon understood that a “continuous, sustained action, constantly being reinforced” is critical to the very war of liberation (ibid.: 256), what Marriott ignores is the modern genealogy of invention and creativity, thereby failing to ask the question about how invention can only be “recognized” as “invention” within a certain tradition. Thus, it is unclear how “the irresistible character—or the Trieb—of invention will be recognized and stated by the subject itself as the infinite limit of its own self-affection” without a discursive embodied tradition (ibid.: 243). This idea of tradition is critical given Marriott’s claim that Fanon’s subject—contrary to David Scott’s opinion—is not an essentialized native subject, but “a kind of vertiginous subject, a subject destroyed and hypnotized
by the extreme literal violence of the war that he or she nonetheless embodies” (ibid.: 23–24; second emphasis added). This kind of “vertiginous” subjectivity embodied by a subject can exist within a tradition because a tradition is not teleological, even as it aspires to coherence. This is where Marriott could have benefited from reading Talal Asad. And if “Fanon [who] has in fact constantly been writing about unconscious desire, without making any teleological predications” (ibid.: 23) is himself situated within a tradition is a question for another day.

57. In The Language of Gods in the World of Men, Sheldon Pollock (2006: 31) asks: “In accounting for cultural and political change in South Asia over the first millennium and a half of the Common Era, what role is to be attributed to human agency and choice?” Pollock goes on to claim: “There is far too much evidence of agency in general and cultural-political choice in particular—visible in the often substantial time lag between inaugural inscription and the commencement of literary vernacularization” (ibid.: 483). He declares that “agency is massively in evidence elsewhere in South Asian vernacularization” (ibid.: 392).

58. For problems with this kind of ethnographic representations of subjectivity, see Asad (1994).

59. Here I have in mind Wittgenstein’s idea of the grammar of concepts. For a brilliant attempt to think about religion with Wittgenstein, see Asad (2020).

REFERENCES


On Rewriting Buddhism


