
Beef, Dog, and Other Mythologies: Connotative Semiotics in Mahāyoga Tantra Ritual and Scripture¹

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Scholars have long debated how the antinomian elements in the Buddhist Tantras are to be interpreted. Some maintain that they are to be taken literally; others that they are figurative or “symbolic.” Both, however—in approaching these statements as examples of directly denotative natural language—miss the most essential aspect of the semiology of these traditions. This paper demonstrates that the Buddhist Mahāyoga Tantras employ a form of signification (theorized by Roland Barthes) called “connotative semiotics,” in which signs (a signifier–signified union) from natural language function as signifiers in a higher-order discourse. Employing these semiological tools enables criticism to recognize that what is fundamentally operative—in both ritual performance and scriptural narrative—is a grammar of purity and pollution in significant dialog with both earlier Buddhist Tantras and broader Indian religious norms. This suggests that such antinomianism—far from representing either “tribal” practices or rarified yogic codes—reflects concerns native to mainstream Indian religion.

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¹ This research was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Atlanta, GA, 22 November 2003, and at the University of Chicago Divinity School, 9 April 2003. The author would like to thank colleagues in both venues for helpful comments and criticism.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, June 2007, Vol. 75, No. 2, pp. 383–417
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfm006

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Advance Access publication on June 11, 2007

Those who take the short cut which leads directly from each signifier to the corresponding signified, who dispense with the long detour through the complete system of signifiers within which the relational value of each item is defined (which has nothing to do with an intuitively grasped “meaning”), are inevitably limited to an approximate discourse which, at best, only stumbles on to the most apparent significations...

Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*

tattvaṃ na paśyati hi so 'kṣaramātradarśī candraṃ didṛkṣur iva
cāṅgulim ikṣamāṇaḥ |

The one who sees only the literal, does not see reality—like one who wants to see the moon, gazing at the finger [pointing at it].
Candrakīrti, *Pradīpodyotana-nāma-ṭīkā*

QUESTIONS OF MEANING and, hence, of interpretation, are among the most prevalent in the history of religions, such that it has at times been described as, at its core, a “hermeneutical” discipline. This is perhaps most strikingly (but by no means uniquely) the case with literate religious traditions. Here, the scholar must grapple with the complex interpretative relationships between several phenomena: a text or texts considered sacred by the tradition, one or several meanings which may be (or may be believed to be) expressed by those texts, secondary orders of meaning generated by the intra- and intertextuality of the tradition and its neighbors, and—perhaps most difficult—the interrelationship of these verbal discourses with the comprehensive system of embodied personal and social praxis that constitutes the socio-religious system of which they are a part.

Although such questions are thus endemic to the history of religions as a field, the Buddhist Tantric traditions would seem to offer a distinctive case in which problems of interpretation stand to the fore in a way almost unheard-of in other areas. Though they have been the object of modern academic study for almost 200 years, one continues to confront much confusion and misinformation concerning even the most basic questions of scriptural understanding and religious praxis. Specialist scholars themselves are still divided on the most fundamental issues, such as “what is one to make of a tradition whose most revered scriptures seem to counsel its devotees to violate not only its own most basic moral precepts, but to violate all the most essential contemporaneous standards of human decency?”

The nineteenth century Sanskritist Rajendralal Mitra summed up most succinctly the interpretative quandary confronting the modern scholar of Tantra in his comment on the various antinomian statements found in the

Mahāyoga Tantra, the *Esoteric Community* (*Guhyasamāja*)—which he characterized as “at once the most revolting and horrible that human depravity could think of”—claiming that they “would, doubtless, be best treated as the ravings of madmen.” Yet, he also notes that this particular interpretative avenue—as attractive as it might appear at first—is closed to us insofar as this same text “is reckoned to be the sacred scripture of millions of intelligent human beings” (Mitra [1882] 1971: 257–260). Though much progress has been made in editing and studying the extensive literature of esoteric Buddhism in the 125 years since Mitra wrote those words, and modern scholarship now has a much clearer sense of the range and structure of Tantric doctrine and ritual practice, scholars still continue to struggle with the most basic question of Tantric interpretation: “what do all these outrageous statements *mean*?”

In what follows, I will reconsider this issue of Tantric interpretation. As a way of approaching the issue from a fresh perspective, I propose to set aside the no doubt more popular issue of Tantric sexuality, and consider instead the discourses surrounding the so-called “five meats” (*māṃsa*) and “five ambrosias” (*amṛta*) as they appear in Mahāyoga Tantra ritual and scripture, specifically that of the most renowned of the Mahāyoga Tantras, the aforementioned *Esoteric Community*. These two sets of five substances—beef, dog, elephant, horse, and human flesh and faeces, urine, blood, semen, and marrow²—feature rather prominently in the literature of the Mahāyoga Tantras, and bear great significance within their ritual performance. With this focus in mind, I will briefly review the most common positions taken in the interpretative debate among modern scholars of esoteric Buddhism. I will argue that the discourses of the Mahāyoga Tantras require a more nuanced interpretative approach than has hitherto been applied—one which recognizes the sometimes rather subtle modes of signification used therein. In particular, I will suggest that, to truly appreciate the semiology proper to Mahāyoga Tantra scripture and ritual, one must look beyond the level of plainly denotative (what I will also call “natural”) language to which scholars have generally limited their attention, and consider the ways in which its discourses function in a system of what Roland Barthes has called “mythic speech” or, more precisely,

² There seem to be divergent traditions concerning the fifth ambrosia. Most Tibetan traditions consider it to be marrow (*rkang mar*), though Elizabeth English considers it flesh, citing the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* (English 2002: 210 and note 193). This fifth ambrosia is named in none of the passages in the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* that refer to them: all either have merely “the five ambrosias” or some partial listing up to four (faeces, urine, semen, and blood), never mentioning the fifth. The *Bod-rgya Tshig-mdzod Chen-mo* [*Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*] gives the cryptic “adamantine dew” (*rdo rje'i zil pa*) as the fifth (Zhang 1984: 1362).

connotative semiotics. On the basis of the data of ritual performance and philological analysis, I will endeavor to demonstrate some of the ways in which, by considering the antinomian discourses of the Mahāyoga Tantras as constituting a connotative semiotical system, we may better be enabled to address the fundamental question of their meaning(s), in both scriptural and ritual contexts.³

TWO APPROACHES TO TANTRIC INTERPRETATION: LITERALISM AND FIGURATIVISM

In general, in addressing the question of Tantric interpretation, modern scholars have tended to focus exclusively on the first relationship I mentioned earlier: that of a sacred text and its meaning or meanings. In so doing, they have reduced the problem of interpretation to one of determining direct reference. Words are found in the texts; they denote various meanings; the question of interpretation is simply one of deciding precisely what it is that they denote. Approaches to this question in modern scholarship on esoteric Buddhism may usefully (if not with absolute precision) be classified into two major tendencies: some claim that the Tantras say exactly what they mean and, thus, that the question of interpretation is ultimately an artificial one, whereas others assert that the Tantras—as secretive, esoteric scriptures—express themselves via a kind of special code (“twilight language” or “intentional language”), which must be broken in order to understand what the real meaning is behind what seem, taken literally, to be antinomian statements or references to exotic meats or revolting bodily fluids. Thus, scholars have tended toward either literalism or what might be called “figurativism.”

³ My arguments are based upon, and my conclusions are (for the present) restricted to, the traditions of the Buddhist Mahāyoga Tantras. These Tantras (of which the *Guhyasamāja* is the most significant and has frequently been considered as among the earliest) represent the earliest stratum of Buddhist esoterism in which antinomian discourses make a significant appearance. Thus, as the earliest attestable antinomian sources in Buddhist Tantrism, they are a suitable source for interrogating the meaning and function of such antinomianism in these traditions. For the present, however, the claims I make are to be taken as applicable only to this delimited corpus, which derives historically from the eighth to ninth centuries—midway between the earlier Tantras such as the *Vairocanaḥisambodhi Tantra*, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, and the *Sarvatathāgatattattvasaṃgraha*, and the later (and perhaps more radically antinomian) Yoginī Tantras such as the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*. That is, though I am engaging previous scholarship that makes claims about “the Tantric tradition(s),” it is not my intention to defend such broadly based assertions. Indeed, I could not, since a significant part of the conclusion I advance is that the antinomianism of the Mahāyoga Tantras can only properly be understood when situated against the background of earlier (and divergent) esoteric dispensations, such as the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*.

Literalism

Scholars of the literalist tendency are largely untroubled by interpretative doubts or ambiguities; they claim that the Tantras were intended as straightforward, literal statements, and that this “literal meaning” must be taken as “original.” That is, they assert that the authors of the Tantras meant exactly and only what they said. According to this perspective, any question of meanings other than the merely literal may only be raised with regard to so-called “later commentators” who, it is averred, sought to bowdlerize these traditions—“explaining away” the literal meaning intended by the original (lay) authors in order to render them more palatable for a very different (monastic) audience.⁴

This is essentially the attitude one finds in the earliest modern writings on the Tantric traditions. It was clearly with a literal reading in mind that Eugène Burnouf (writing in 1844) made his now-famous statement (later repeatedly attributed to T. W. Rhys Davids) that “the pen refuses to transcribe doctrines as wretched in form, as they are odious and degraded in their foundations” (Burnouf 1844: 558). We have already seen much the same sentiment expressed by Rajendralal Mitra who further claims, following what he considered to be the literal meaning of the *Esoteric Community*, that “the most appropriate food for devotees while engaged in this worship is said to be the flesh of elephants, horses and dogs.” He also comments of the authors of the Tantra that “not satisfied with the order given in the last chapter to make offerings of excrementitious matter on the homa fire, the author goes to the length of recommending such substances as human food” (Mitra [1882] 1971: 258–260).

In general, it may be said that these scholars assume that the Tantric movement in Buddhism was the result of a desire to loosen the moral discipline enjoined by the tradition, to allow for what they consider a more natural enjoyment of life’s pleasures. As Monier-Williams (1889: 151) expressed it: “the eternal instincts of humanity...insisted on making themselves felt notwithstanding the unnatural restraint to which the Buddha had subjected them.” Mitra’s son, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, in the introduction to his edition of the *Esoteric Community*, says much the same, commending this scripture for having

⁴ This very presupposition—that the authors of the Tantric movement were laypeople—may be said to be inextricably linked to the literalist viewpoint. Were this axiom set aside (and I hope in a future essay to undermine precisely this common prejudice), the implicit narrative undergirding the entire literalist project is significantly—if not fatally—weakened.

“done Buddhism the service” of eliminating all its disciplinary measures. Though all sorts of luxuries were prohibited in the early days, he tells us,

in the Guhyasamāja everything is permitted. Not only flesh of the most harmless kind but all kinds of flesh-meat are permitted such as the flesh of elephants, horses, dogs, cows, nay, even of human beings (Bhattacharyya 1931: xii).

Nor is this approach limited to these early Orientalists. Such notable recent scholars of the Tantras as David Snellgrove and Ronald Davidson have made similar claims and have argued quite stridently against those who take such terms to mean anything other than what they literally denote.⁵

Figurativism

Not all scholars of esoteric Buddhism, however, have been satisfied with this approach. Others have drawn attention both to the important testimony of the surviving Tantric commentarial literature (many examples of which suggest readings other than the literal) and to noteworthy indications native to the Tantric “primary scriptures” (*mūla-tantra*) themselves which seem to indicate that these works were not intended to be understood entirely or exclusively literally. These scholars tend to describe the language of the Tantras as “metaphorical” or “symbolical.” A. K. Warder, for example, in his 1970 work *Indian Buddhism*, noted that “putting aside conjectures...the commentators are solidly in favor of the text[s] being metaphorical.” This much is suggested by the fact that many of the commentaries do not accept the literal meaning of the scriptures as the intended sense. In many treatises of this sort, seemingly antinomian terms or injunctions are said to refer

⁵ Snellgrove, for example, laments “a tendency nowadays, much promoted by Tibetan lamas who teach in the Western world, to treat references to sexual union and to forms of worship carried out with ‘impure substances’ (referred to usually as the ‘five nectars’) as symbolic” (1987: 160). Davidson similarly dismisses those who disagree with the literalist approach as “apologists” and devotes considerable attention to refuting the notion that the language of the Tantras could bear significance beyond the literal as—like early, Victorian scholarship on Buddhism—he presumes that the Tantric scriptures were composed out of the desire of Buddhist monks to have scriptural warrant for their lusts for “drinking wine and making love to nubile women.” This much is made clear in a discussion of the farce play, the *Mattavilāsaprahasana*, wherein (as Davidson tells it) a Buddhist monk character laments “that the elders were hiding the real scriptures wherein the Buddha extolled the benefits of drinking wine and making love to nubile women.” Davidson concludes, “if the seventh-century monk could not find the scriptures that he suspected his superiors had kept from him, by the eighth century siddhas had successfully located the holy texts through the act of composition” (2002: 242).

to inner yogic processes. In several passages, for instance, in Candrakīrti's *Pradīpodyotana* (a commentary on the *Esoteric Community Tantra*), expressions such as "eating" of "fæces and urine" are glossed as "pacifying" the "sense objects" and the "sense organs" (Chakravarti 1984: 47–48, 108, 164).

Further, responding directly to David Snellgrove's dismissal of the commentators' readings as representing a "later trend" than the root scriptures,⁶ Warder (1970: 499) avers that "since the [Hevajra] Tantra itself stresses the metaphorical meaning of its statements we cannot accept his opinion." This point has been made again more recently by Anthony Tribe, who noted that this so-called "symbolic interpretation" cannot be attributed solely to "later commentators" as the *Hevajra Tantra*, for example, includes its own non-literal exegesis *within itself*.⁷ After a "classical" Tantric statement that "you should kill living beings, speak lying words, take what is not given, consort with the women of others" (i.e. break four of the five basic Buddhist moral rules), the Tantra itself interprets this passage to mean that one "kills living beings" by "developing one-pointed cognition by destroying the life-breath of discursive thought;" that one lies by vowing to save all sentient beings; and so on.⁸ Such a move is, moreover, by no means novel in the history of Buddhist exegesis for, as Tribe comments, "the whole device—of saying something that appears to be shocking and then explaining what is really meant—is reminiscent of passages from the [exoteric Buddhist] Perfection of Wisdom sūtras" (Williams and Tribe 2000: 237).

On the basis of such observations, Broido (1988: 72–73) articulated a general methodological critique of modern Tantric studies, writing, "one of the reasons for the weakness of current western work on the Tantras is the almost complete neglect of the methods of interpretation which were used by the commentators and teachers who interpreted them. We may not have access to the methods used in oral instruction, but there is no good reason for this neglect of the methods used in the

⁶ And this is indeed an issue with regard to commentaries such as the just-mentioned *Pradīpodyotana*. Elsewhere (Wedemeyer 2007), I argue that the author of this commentary may have flourished in the late tenth or early eleventh centuries—long after the composition of the *Esoteric Community Tantra* itself.

⁷ This is all the more notable, perhaps, insofar as the *Hevajra Tantra* is generally considered to belong to the class of Yogini Tantra-s, not Mahāyoga Tantra-s. That is, it belongs to a stratum of Indian Buddhist literature somewhat later than those we will be considering shortly, one that bears stronger traces of a sustained Buddhist-Śaiva encounter and that is considered by many scholars to represent a *more* radical, antinomian platform than that found in the Mahāyoga scriptures.

⁸ It is worth noting that this explanation is strikingly similar to the exegesis of the *Esoteric Community* found in its explanatory tantra, the *Explanation of the Intention* (*Sandhyāvyaḥkāraṇa*), on which see, e.g. Wedemeyer 2002a: 184–187.

traditional commentaries.” Thus, in recent decades, more attention has been paid to these traditional methods of interpretation, with scholars such as Broido himself and Robert Thurman exploring the complex, polysemous modes of Tantric interpretation found in the commentarial and hermeneutical literature, such as the aforementioned *Pradīpoddyotana*, which sets forth a system of interpretation which allows for multiple, simultaneous readings of individual passages—including, but not limited to, the literal meaning. As this hermeneutical system was considered authoritative in a wide range of later Indian and Tibetan Tantric circles, research into Candrakīrti’s work has shed much valuable light on these historically influential principles of Tantric exegesis.⁹

A Third Approach: Connotation

Though the work of the figurativists has done much to advance discussion in the area of Tantric hermeneutics, it is not in fact the only or even the best way to approach the issue. Each of these two schools of Tantric interpretation has their strengths, and both have contributed mightily to our understanding of Tantric literature; yet each has limitations. For instance, although Broido and others are exactly correct to stress the necessity of documenting and analyzing the historical actuality of particular instances of Tantric exegesis as found in the surviving commentarial literature, we cannot assume that the surviving texts constitute a comprehensive catalog of all such interpretations. Indeed, it might be argued, a literal interpretation of the text does not need a commentary to defend it, so the fact that the only surviving commentaries interpret the text in non-literal ways appears neither surprising nor significant.¹⁰

However this may be, somewhat more to the point, I think, is the fact that many of the surviving commentaries *do* advocate literal readings of the texts. Indeed, literal sense (*yathārūta*) is one of the six exegetical alternatives outlined by Candrakīrti’s *magnum opus* on Tantric hermeneutics. The “sex and death” for which the Tantras are famous

⁹ See, for example, Steinkellner (1978), Broido (1988), Thurman (1988). Davidson (2002) makes some use of Candrakīrti’s work, but largely dismisses it out of hand.

¹⁰ On the other hand, Davidson’s suggestion (2002: 247) that the diversity of commentarial interpretations implies the literalness of the original signification is equally flawed. The fact of commentarial divergence does cast doubt on the notion of a pre-existent, secret interpretation hidden via a code. However, it is rather a logical leap to then assert that the original meaning must have been literal. Though little has been established concerning the sociology of scholastic commentary in Buddhist India, some degree of diversity is certainly to be expected, given the diversity of ideological commitments of their authors.

are by no means regularly and uniformly excised by the commentators. Although Davidson locates Candrakīrti among those he considers “puritanical” commentators, Candrakīrti’s commentary on the *Esoteric Community* includes numerous passages in which he details sexual rites in explicit and literal language—more so, even, than the primary scripture itself.¹¹ Thus, there is certainly a place for literal interpretation, even according to the “later commentators.” To assert that the Tantras were written comprehensively in code and were not to be understood literally at all is clearly untenable.

Even a somewhat attenuated form of literalism, however, is equally problematical. Besides the difficulties mentioned above, the very notion of “literal” is not nearly so simple and straightforward as it might be made to sound. For instance, in chapter 8 of the *Esoteric Community Tantra*, there is a half-verse which runs, roughly literally translated, “one should always smear fæces, urine, water, and so on, in order to worship the Victors.”¹² Here the “literal” meaning seems clear as day: it is typical Tantric disgustingness, obviously, claiming that one should offer worship to the gods through the smearing of foul substances. However, although that might seem “literal,” it is in fact itself already interpretative. What is meant in this passage by “fæces and urine” is, in fact, fæces and urine. However, unlike many occurrences of these terms in the Tantra, in this context what is meant (as confirmed by the commentaries in a gloss that in no way seems forced; see Chakravarti 1984: 75) is cow dung and cow urine. Such a “smearing” of fæces, urine, water, and the like is then (to an Indian eye) quite normal and not foul or disgusting in any way. In orthodox Indian ritual contexts one routinely smears cow dung, urine, and water to purify a ritual site: there is nothing revolting, transgressive (or “Tantric”) about it. Consequently, it would seem as if questions of literalism and figurativism in the Tantras would need to be resolved on a case-by-case basis, rather than by elaborating global theories of reference. Does this, then, solve our “problem” of Tantric interpretation?

¹¹ See, e.g., Chakravarti (1984: 225). Once again, it should be clear that the simplistic construct of “later commentators” bowdlerizing or “domesticating” the Tantras for monastic consumption is inadequate to the data at our disposal. For another example in which modern scholars have clung to this kind of construct concerning a monastic Tantric commentator, though it were manifestly contradicted by his available writings, see Wedemeyer (2002b).

¹² GST VIII.8: *viñ-mūtra-toyādi-vilepanaṃ vā kurvīta śaśvaj jina-pūja-hetoḥ* |; here I am following the (notably more antinomian) reading found in the *Pradīpoddhyotana Commentary*, rather than the edited text which reads “pure water(s), and the like” (*viśuddha-toyādi-*). In the Hindu Tantras “pure water” (*śuddha-toya*) is a synonym for “ambrosia” (*amṛta*), so the import may in fact be the same. See Brunner, *et al.* (2000: 135).

Having struggled with this question for some time, I was led to try to think more broadly about the nature of signification in this literature. What struck me about both of these approaches to this problem is that they both seemed to be based on the same assumption about the uses of discourse in the Tantras. In approaching the question of interpretation as a choice between literal and figurative (or even as a polysemous mixture of literal *and* figurative), earlier discussions of Tantric language have all proceeded from the assumption that the discourses found in the Mahāyoga Tantras are merely examples of directly denotative natural language. Starting from this premise, scholarship has naturally been led, as we have just seen, to devote itself to a realist (one might even say “positivist”) project of attempting to determine if the Tantras “really meant what they said.” That is, the fundamental terms of the debate have revolved exclusively around the question of what signified or signifieds correspond to the signifiers found in Tantric discourses. When it says “beef,” for instance, does that mean (real) beef or something else? The questions which have guided research in this area have all been posed accordingly.

It is by no means clear, however, that the authors of the Tantras intended to use language in the straightforward, prosaic way that this framing of the question suggests. It is instructive to bear in mind that the context within which the scriptures and rituals of the Buddhist Mahāyoga Tantras were developed was one of great literary sophistication. If we accept the current eighth-century consensus date, this is right around the time of Daṇḍin, whose literary *tour de force*, the *Dviśandhāna*, takes polysemous word-play to the point where he can narrate the stories of both of the great epics of India—the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*—simultaneously.¹³ The theory and practice of poetical ornamentation (*alaṃkāra*) in literary composition had also been brought to a high degree of art and sophistication by this time. The seventh-century dramatist-poet Māgha had already demonstrated the marvels of “single-syllable” and “two-syllable” stanzas, that is, verses in which only one or two consonants are used in each verse—as well as the use of a variety of complicated palindromic and acrostic techniques.¹⁴

Recent work by David Seyfort Ruegg, furthermore, has indicated that—not only were several techniques of intentional language known to and used by early first-millennium Buddhists—they were theorized as such in (roughly) fourth-century works such as the

¹³ This example is also cited by Davidson (2002: 121), though to somewhat different effect.

¹⁴ See e.g. Basham ([1954] 1959: 423–424).

Mahāyānasūtrālamkārabhāṣya, the *Mahāyānasamgraha*, and the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*. He notes that this makes them “historically among the oldest attested forms of the Indian theories of indirect meaning” (Seyfort Ruegg 1989: 300). To take only one of his examples—that most relevant to the uses of discourse in the Mahāyoga Tantras—consider the following (non-Tantric) verse: “Having killed mother and father as well as the king and two learned Brahmans, and having beaten the kingdom along with [its] attendants, a man is called pure.” As the tradition makes clear, this injunction was meant to be interpreted: a fact signaled by its hyperbolic (yet culturally precise) transgressiveness. “Mother, father” and so on, which one is to kill, refer to obstacles such as desire, which are to be overcome by the practitioner. These works bear witness to what was clearly a Buddhist penchant to use language in other ways than merely denoting literal meanings in a direct, simple, and discursively naïve way—a penchant which was so widespread even by the fourth century that this type of usage was abstracted, named, and theoretically described in no less than three treatises on textual interpretation. In this exoteric context, it may be noted, no one questions the use of such literary devices, but there has been great reluctance to admit that such may have been the case with the Tantras. In fact, I argue, there are very good reasons to believe that the discourses we find in the Mahāyoga Tantras are both highly ironic and semiotically sophisticated and that one of the primary modes of signification used in the Mahāyoga Tantra system is, in fact, not that of natural language, but rather of a higher-order semiological system called connotative semiotics.

WHAT IS CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTICS?

What, then, one may well ask, is “connotative semiotics?” The notion of connotative semiotics was first advanced by the Danish linguist, Louis Hjelmslev, and was later elaborated by the French semiologist Roland Barthes.¹⁵ Connotative semiotics—what Barthes also called “mythology” or “mythic speech”—is a second-order system of signification. It presupposes the conventions of natural language, and uses them to indicate complex ideas, obliquely yet strongly. The basis of the model is the structure of the linguistic sign first set out in Ferdinand de

¹⁵ In the context of this essay, it may not be superfluous to indicate that this same L. Hjelmslev was not insensitive to the importance of “Oriental Studies,” as suggested by his authorship of the Foreword to (and financial support of the publication of) the collected letters of the Orientalist Rasmus Rask. See Hjelmslev (1941).

1. Signifier	2. Signified
3. Sign	

FIGURE 1. STRUCTURE OF THE LINGUISTIC SIGN ACCORDING TO F. DE SAUSSURE.

Saussure's *Cours de Linguistique Générale* (Saussure 1949). In this model, a linguistic sign can be analyzed into an arbitrary signifier (usually one or more phonemes or graphemes) and a signified (a sense being indicated). The union of these two is what is known as the "sign"—a complex, dual phenomenon comprising both the plane of expression (the signifier) and the plane of content (the signified). This can be put in tabular format as shown in figure 1.

In ordinary, prosaic, directly referential language—the kind which, it has been assumed, is employed in Tantric scripture and ritual—this is all one has. Signification takes place directly and, generally, unambiguously: I speak of a "table," and you know exactly what I mean. However, this is by no means the only level on which human beings express themselves—particularly when they take to expressing more complex meanings of their common culture or to signifying ideological (or otherwise highly motivated) ideas that for one reason or other do not lend themselves to straightforward denotation. Transcending these first-order systems of direct signification, or denotation, then, are two higher-order systems.

The first of these is that used to speak *about* language and the structure of signs—what has been called "meta-language." This type of second-order discourse is used by linguists such as de Saussure to describe the functioning of signs. (It is, in fact, the mode of discourse that predominates in this very paper.) In this case, the complete sign from ordinary language becomes a signified in the meta-language, with terms such as "sign," "signifier," and "signified" serving as the signifiers. This mode of discourse is schematized in figure 2.

Much more subtle, however, is the other permutation of the second-order system, connotative semiotics. It is also, arguably, a pervasive mode of human communication. Unlike meta-language which,

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified
META-LANGUAGE	I. SIGNIFIER	3. Sign II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN	

FIGURE 2. STRUCTURE OF META-LANGUAGE.

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified
	3. Sign	
	I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTICS	III. SIGN	

FIGURE 3. STRUCTURE OF CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTICS (ADAPTED FROM BARTHES 1972:115).

although accessible to the untutored, is largely the province of professional linguists, connotative semiotics is (while no doubt also susceptible to professionalization) a mode well attested as frequently used by ordinary speakers. In this mode, a complete sign from the natural language serves not as a signified, but as a signifier in the higher-order system, as indicated in figure 3.

Barthes famously gives two examples of this mode of signification in *Mythologies*: that of a phrase serving as a grammatical example in a textbook and that of a picture of a saluting French soldier on the cover of *Paris Match*. Each example highlights an important aspect of connotative semiotics, so we should examine each in turn.

The first example Barthes gives is of the phrase *quia ego nominor leo*, occurring in a Latin textbook as an example of the grammatical rule of subject–predicate agreement.¹⁶ Here, it is important that the signifier be a real sign produced out of natural language—a meaningful statement rich with its own significance—and not merely an arbitrary signifier within the natural language. This first level of signification has already been expressed in the denotative enunciation of the rule that subject and predicate should agree. What is wanted in this case is a concrete example, which (to be effective) can only be such a sign. Here, what is being signified is not the meaning of the phrase (“because my name is lion”), but the grammatical rule it instantiates. Surely, this is a very different use of language than the merely literal, yet one which we encounter in a variety of forms nearly every day, with nary an eyebrow raised. This usage may be schematized as in figure 4A, illustrating further the mode of discourse given in figure 3.

The second example Barthes gives derives from his experience seeing a picture on the cover of *Paris Match* of a French soldier of African heritage saluting the tricolor. Here, the basic signifier is a photograph, which depicts the soldier just described. However, this

¹⁶ Bourdieu (1990: 32) attributes this same example to Valérie, not Barthes, so I am not certain whether it may properly and originally be attributable to the latter, rather than the former.

A

Language	1. <i>quia ego nominor leo</i>	2. "because my name is lion"
CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTICS	3. Sign [the meaningful phrase]	
	I. SIGNIFIER	II. PREDICATE AGREEMENT
	III. "I AM A GRAMMATICAL EXAMPLE"	

B

Language	1. Photograph	2. "Saluting soldier"
CONNOTATIVE SEMIOTICS	3. Saluting soldier	
	I. SALUTING SOLDIER (QUA PATRIOTIC COLONIAL)	II. FRENCH IMPERIALITY
	III. "THE FRENCH EMPIRE? IT'S JUST A FACT!"	

FIGURE 4A. BARTHES' FIRST EXAMPLE.

FIGURE 4B. BARTHES' SECOND EXAMPLE.

"literal" analysis does not capture the signification taking place on the cover of that magazine. It is not "just a picture of a soldier" meant to communicate his appearance "innocently" to those readers with a special interest in soldiers and their appearance. As Barthes indicates, the presence of that *particular* kind of soldier displaying *just that* kind of patriotism itself (as a signifier) expresses a higher-order content—a content which, in fact, may be said to be the (if not schematically or temporally, nonetheless hermeneutically) *primary* signification of the image. The signified expressed by this image—the patriotic colonial—is, as Barthes insightfully indicates, "French Imperiality." The sign thus constituted serves ideologically to naturalize the French colonial presence in West Africa: the viewer is semiotically seduced into a world of meaning wherein the French empire is "just a fact" (figure 4B).

On the basis of these two examples, Barthes says of connotative semiotics that it "is a type of speech defined by its intention (*I am a grammatical example*) much more than its literal sense (*my name is lion*)." But he adds that "in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, made absent by this literal sense (*The French Empire? It's just a fact: look at this good negro who salutes like one of our own boys*). This constituent ambiguity of mythical speech," he says, "has two consequences for the signification, which henceforth appears both like a notification and like a statement of fact" (Barthes 1972: 124).

This constituent ambiguity of connotative semiotics—that is, that its signification is defined primarily by its intention, yet this intention is obscured or mystified in the process of signification by the manifest content of the natural language sign—is of central importance to how I

understand this mode of signification to be operative in Mahāyoga Tantra ritual. It is precisely this ambiguity which, I argue, makes connotative semiotics a powerful tool in ritual performances of the kind undertaken by its practitioners.

WHAT IS MAHĀYOGA TANTRA RITUAL?

Just what, then, one may well ask, does such ritual entail? What do Mahāyoga Tantra ritualists *do*? First and foremost, when one speaks of Mahāyoga Tantra ritual, one speaks of the *sādhana*, literally an “accomplishing” or “effecting.”¹⁷ As Yael Bentor very clearly demonstrates in her work on Indian and Tibetan rites of consecration (Bentor 1996), the *sādhana* constitutes the single basic ritual template for all Mahāyoga (and Yoganiruttara) Buddhist rituals. Whether they be fire ceremonies (*homa*), offerings of ritual cakes (*bali*), rites of prosperity or curing (*pauṣṭika*- or *śāntika-karma*), consecrations of statues or the like (*pratiṣṭhā*), all are not only based upon but actually nested within the overarching and primary ritual pattern of the *sādhana*. The *sādhana* rite is also called the self-creation or, perhaps one might say, self-resurrection (*ātmoṭpatti*). We learn of its structure and nature from several sources, but among the various traditions of the Esoteric Community, among the most authoritative are the self-creation rites attributed to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti.¹⁸ It is these sources upon which I will base my presentation here.

The central aim of this self-creation yoga is for the practitioner to do away with the perception of herself as ordinary, as well as the pride

¹⁷ I recognize that the following presentation is somewhat synchronic and that some might dispute the centrality of *sādhana* in early Buddhist esoterism. Nonetheless, (a) *sādhana* does seem to be central to the Mahāyoga traditions such as the Guhyasamāja from the outset, and (b) since a proper diachronic study of the development of ritual forms in late-first-millennium Indian Buddhist esoterism has yet to be effected, such cavils would seem to be premature. Furthermore, even when our understanding of the ritual forms has been so nuanced, it is not likely to substantially affect the overall argument advanced here.

¹⁸ These are the **Sūtra-melāpaka* of Nāgārjuna and the *Vajrasattva-sādhana* of Candrakīrti. In the apparent absence of a surviving Sanskrit witness, I have consulted the former solely through a Tibetan translation by Dharmasribhadra and Rin-chen bZang-po: *rNal 'byor chen po'i rgyud dpal gsang ba 'dus pa'i bskyed pa'i rim pa bsgom pa'i thabs mdo dang bsras pa zhes bya ba* (**Śri-guhyasamāja-mahāyogatantratropattikrama-sādhana-sūtramelāpaka-nāma*), sDe-dge bsTan-'gyur, rGyud-'grel, vol. ngi, ff. 11a²-15b¹ (Tōh. 1797). The latter I have consulted both in a Tibetan translation by Tathāgatarakṣita and kLog-skya gZhon-nu-dpal, as edited by Dipamkārarakṣita and Bari Lotsāwa (*rDo rje sems dpa'i sgrub thabs zhes bya ba*: Peking bsTan-'gyur, rGyud-'grel, vol. gi, ff. 168b³-178a²) as well as in an unpublished Sanskrit manuscript found in the Rāhula Sāṅkrtyāyana collection of the Bihar Research Society (Bandurski no. Xc 14/30, ff. 13b-19a).

On the vexed issue of the identity and dating of these authors, see Wedemeyer (2007).

which is believed to be associated with that perception, and to replace it with a perception of herself as a divine, enlightened being, with the sense of proud empowerment and universal efficacy that characterizes such a being. Such a profound transformation is not an undertaking that can be accomplished just so; rather, it is a highly ramified process, which involves meditatively dying from the previous, unenlightened embodiment, and ritually taking rebirth with a new, perfected identity.

The ritual texts ascribed to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti describe the following main stages of the rite: determining the site where the ritual should be performed; focusing on great compassion as the motivation; meditating on a protective perimeter; focusing on voidness as a way of eliminating ordinary perception and its pride; creating the cosmic foundation for the maṇḍala world; constructing the divine palace and its maṇḍala environs; entering into the maṇḍala of ultimate reality (i.e. death) and arising therefrom in the form of the Buddha Vajradhara; performing a series of yogic exercises to bless one's newborn enlightened body, speech, and mind; again entering into ultimate reality/death; arising in a new embodiment to benefit others; and performing various enlightened activities.¹⁹ This is the basic schema of the rite and, as noted, the fundamental structure of Mahāyoga Tantra ritual. The various ritual activities besides self-creation (consecration, destruction, etc.) all gain their efficacy by being enacted by an enlightened being; and it is through the self-resurrection as a deity in the *sādhana* as just described that the practitioner assumes this omnipotent ritual identity.

The first three stages are quite straightforward and fall within the general patterns of Indian and Buddhist ritual practice: finding a suitable spot (lovely and somewhat off-the-beaten-track), setting the correct motivation of universal compassion as required of a Mahāyāna practitioner, and delimiting the site with a proper protective boundary (analogous to the rite of *sīmābandha* in the ancient Buddhist ordination rite).²⁰ The practitioner then focuses on the fact that all things (including herself) are void of an intrinsically real status—which serves in this context as the epistemological precondition for such a rite of radical re-enactment of the cosmogony. She then imaginatively creates a divine environment for this recreated personality to inhabit: the *maṇḍala*, with

¹⁹ These stages are most explicitly systematized in: Nāgārjuna, **Sūtramelāpaka*, Pek. bsTan-'gyur, rGyud-'grel, vol. gi, f. 17a¹⁻⁶. The structure of the rite as presented by Candrakīrti, though it varies in some minor details, is essentially identical.

²⁰ Actually, it might be said to be more than merely "analogous"—the identical term (*sīmābandha*) is used, e.g. in Candrakīrti's *sādhana* rite, as part of the larger rite of the "protection circle" (*raṅśācakra*). In the Sanskrit manuscript this may be found at f. 14b⁵. The Tibetan translation may be found at: f. 170a⁷.

its glorious palace suitable as the residence of a fully enlightened divinity. The yoginī then “enters the maṇḍala of ultimate reality,” i.e. dies, from her ordinary personality, and arises in a thoroughly accomplished, perfected form whose mind is suffused with the great compassion and wisdom of voidness cultivated previously. A variety of yogas involving the arraying and recitation of mantras and manipulation of vital airs are then prescribed to reinforce and consecrate this identity; and she enjoys the type of beatific body known as the *sambhogakāya*, a special lucid embodiment in which she interacts with other enlightened beings. She then dissolves this rarified form again into the clarity of death—thereby reentering the so-called *dharmakāya*, an enlightened form in which one is pantheistically identical with the entire universe—and, having heard the pleas of enlightened angels to take birth once again in order to benefit others, she arises in a concrete bodily form visible to all (called a *nirmāṇakāya*) and performs enlightened activities.

According to the instructions found in the rite ascribed to Nāgārjuna, it is in this final state of realization and compassionate dir-emption that “one performs the activities of eating [things] such as the five ambrosias and so on.”²¹ It is here, then—situated in the context of the culmination of the esoteric ritual of self-creation—that I suggest one look to try to understand the “meaning” of the five meats and the five ambrosias for the Mahāyoga traditions.

MEATS AND AMBROSIAS: A DELIBERATE SEMIOSIS?

In order to grasp the semiosis implicit in the consumption of the “meats and ambrosias” at the climactic moment of the central ritual of the Mahāyoga Tantras, it is important to understand what these substances signify in the overarching discourse of contemporaneous mainstream Indian culture. Bhattacharyya’s suggestion that these meats were delicious luxuries much desired by the repressed Buddhist *ecclesia* could not be further from the mark. I do not believe we are justified in maintaining that they appear in the Tantras merely because they are tasty and the monks were seeking scriptural legitimation for an exotic barbecue.²² They appear, rather, because they *signify the violation of ritual purity*. All five of these meats are distinctive within first-millennium Indian culture as, for lack of

²¹ *bdud rtsi lnga la sogs pa'i zas kyi bya ba dag kyang bya'o* | : Nāgārjuna, **Sūtramelapaka*, Pek. bsTan-'gyur, rGyud-'grel, vol. gi, f. 16b⁶. It ought to be noted, for full disclosure, that Candrakīrti's rite does not mention the five meats or ambrosias.

²² Indeed, the presence of faeces and semen on the menu might have already suggested to the attentive reader that this is no ordinary weenie-roast!

a better word, “taboo” meats. In the compendia of the *dharmaśāstra*-s, which (among other things) set out in detail the rules governing the preservation of ritual purity in Indian society, these foods are among those generally classified as *svabhāva-duṣṭa*, “polluted (and, thus, polluting) by their very nature” (see, e.g. Kane [1941] 1974: 771–786).

That these restrictions were not merely academic notions, limited to the textbooks on dharma, but functioning social strictures,²³ is demonstrated by the account of the Chinese Buddhist monk Hsuan Tsang, who says, in his seventh-century account of his visit to India, that Indians “are forbidden to eat the flesh of the *ox*, the ass, the *elephant*, the *horse*, the pig, the *dog*, the fox, the wolf, the lion, the monkey, and all the hairy kind. Those who eat them are despised and scorned, and are universally reprobated.”²⁴ Though he does not specifically mention human flesh here, we may safely take it for granted (given what else we know of first-millennium Indian society) that this was also considered ritually impure.²⁵

Much the same can be said of the five ambrosias. All five are bodily fluids, and thus polluting according to orthodox brahminical standards operative at the time. It is on account of their daily contact with such substances that physicians in ancient India were considered impure and excluded from the orthodox rites (Zysk 1991: 21–27). Such bodily excretions may also be said to fall into the polluting category of the *sahr̥llekha* that which is impure because it is “disgusting to the mind” (Kane [1941] 1974: 771).

In short, contact with the five meats and the five ambrosias so absolutely violates the most central purity strictures in Indian society that reference to them in Mahāyoga ritual and scripture could only have constituted a deliberate semiosis. They signify that which is disgusting and polluting. In fact, an explicit awareness of this is revealed in

²³ This is an important point; for contemporary scholarship on the *dharmaśāstra*-s does not believe these works to have functioned as first-order “law codes” to be applied in society, but rather more as second-order works intended to inculcate students in the proper modes of speaking *about* such social strictures. Thus, they cannot in themselves be taken as evidence of social practice without corroborating evidence.

²⁴ Beal ([1884] 1983: 89) [italics mine]. Note that the use of “ox” here may be taken to mean “cow.” The character in question is *niu*, which can mean either cow or ox. Earlier in Beal’s translation (70), he renders *niu* as “cow.” Thanks to Tyson Yost for assistance with the Chinese of this passage.

Similarly, in the early eleventh century, Alberuni reports that it is forbidden in India to kill (and, thus, eat) cows, horses, and elephants (Sachau 1910, II: 151). He does not mention either dogs or humans, but these are cases so well known in Indian culture and so clearly proscribed in Islamic dietary laws, as perhaps not to require substantiation.

²⁵ Kane ([1941] 1974: 781) mentions that Devala (cited in Gr. R.) forbids all five of the meats (in a much longer list). Also, since human flesh is well known to have been “taboo” in contemporaneous Chinese culture, Hsuan Tsang’s failure to mention it is not noteworthy.

the text of the *Esoteric Community Tantra* itself: in chapter 14, the Tantra specifically refers to faeces and urine as “foul-smelling and disgusting” (*pūtīgandha-jugupsitam*: GST XIV.51; Matsunaga 1978: 68). Similar examples from esoteric Buddhist literature in Sanskrit could be multiplied almost indefinitely. The theme of the revolting (*jugupsa*) is a consistent trope in Mahāyoga literature. It is clear that, in employing such terms, the authors intended to be disgusting.²⁶

Thus, perhaps somewhat ironically, it seems to have been the much-maligned early Orientalist scholars who—though reading the Tantras through the lenses of their own cultural presuppositions, and not those of first millennium India—were able to “read” (if not understand) the Tantras correctly. To the early Indologists, the Tantras were full of the filthy and degrading, the foul and offensive. As I think should be very clear, a reader in first millennium India would have thought much the same. Nor, it is important to add, was this accidental—the disgusting nature of these substances was explicitly noted. The Tantric literature does not therefore, as some would have it, reflect the naïve importation of “marginal” tribal magical techniques that just happened to be repulsive to the cultural mainstream. Rather, the authors of the Tantras were speaking precisely the “mainstream” cultural language of Indian society and “pushing its buttons” in such a systematic fashion that it could only have been deliberate.²⁷

Further evidence for this may be derived from observing the two verbs which are consistently used in scriptural contexts related to the five meats and ambrosias: eating and offering. On my reading, every instance in which the five meats and ambrosias are mentioned in the

²⁶ Consider the testimony of the *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa* of Āryadeva (Wedemeyer 2007), who refers to the meats and ambrosias as “pledge [substances] to be consumed, [which are] forbidden [to be eaten] in the world” (*lokaḡarhitam bhakṣaṇīya-samayam*). The term that I here render “forbidden in the world,” *loka-garhita*, could also be rendered “reviled by folk”; notably this term is also used by Candrakīrti when speaking of charnel grounds (*śmaśāna*—also a preeminent site of ritual pollution—see Chakravarti 1984: 104). In this regard, one might also consider the usage of *jugupsa* (“revolting”) in *Advayasiddhi* (verse 21 about revulsion for low castes; see Shendge 1964: 19), *Jñānasiddhi* I.16 (on acts revolting to others; see Bhattacharyya 1929: 32), and *Pradīpodyotana* (on avoiding revulsion in ritual cunnilingus; see Chakravarti 1984: 213).

²⁷ Much the same could be said of the example of Virūpa’s drinking, the “religious” explanation of which is taken by Davidson (2002: 258–262) as an example of later “domestication for monastic consumption.” A saint drinking alcohol speaks much the same message of purity and pollution as a yogin consuming beef and semen—it bespeaks (as we shall discuss later) a transcendent attainment of non-dual gnosis. The drinking is as essential to the semiosis as is the “religious” interpretation: were the drinking omitted, nothing would remain but a standard exoteric saint; were there only the drinking, Virūpa would be nothing but a libertine. Different contexts might reveal differences of emphasis, but the integrated sign of a “drinking saint” is an essential and irreducible part of the discourse.

Esoteric Community places them in one of these two contexts. Of the twenty-nine references to meats and ambrosias in this scripture, twenty-one of them occur explicitly as the objects of acts of eating or offering or some variant thereof. Fourteen of these instances involve actions of eating or consumption;²⁸ while two further examples can be inferred to be so.²⁹ Seven occur in relation to acts of offering;³⁰ and one more is plausibly associated with this act in the commentary.³¹ Of the five remaining, three do not refer to the five meats and nectars under discussion,³² leaving only two out of the twenty-nine that are not explicitly associated in the primary text with eating or offering; and a strong case, based on context and commentary, can be made to consider these two as also associated with consumption.³³ Hence, of the twenty-nine instances, all twenty-six relevant references to the meats

²⁸ Ten occur as objects of the verb $\sqrt{bhakṣ}$ ("to eat": VI.23, VIII.26, XV.17–18, XV.36–48, XVI.37, XVII.9, XVII.10, XVII.11, XVII.47, XVII.60), three with $\sqrt{āhāra} + \sqrt{kr}$ ("to take [as] food": V.5, VI.21, VI.22), and one with $\sqrt{mukhe pra} + \sqrt{kṣip}$ ("to put in [one's] mouth": XII.5).

²⁹ These references (XII.41–44 and XII.47) refer to the meats and ambrosias as *samaya*, "pledge [substances]"—a term closely associated with ritual consumption throughout this literature.

³⁰ Two occur as objects of the verb $\sqrt{pūj}$ ("to worship": VIII.24 and XVI.13), one as the object of $\sqrt{ni} + \sqrt{vid}$ ("to offer, give": IV.21), three with $\sqrt{dā}$ or $\sqrt{balim} \sqrt{dā}$ ("to give" or "to give an oblation": XVI.7, XVI.24–25, and XVII.32), and one in the instrumental with $\sqrt{āhutiṃ} \sqrt{prati} + \sqrt{pad}$ ("to render an oblation": XVI.33–35).

³¹ XV.75–79: verse 77 reads "It [the image of an enemy] should be made of beef, horse meat, dog meat [and] various [things] in a three-cornered maṇḍala; [then] even adamant will certainly be destroyed" (*gomāmsahayamāmsena śvānamāmsena citriṇā | trikoṇamaṇḍale kāryaṃ dhruvaṃ vajro 'pi naśyati ||*). The *Pradīpodyotana Commentary* reads "Beef and so on [means]: having drawn a three-cornered, i.e. fire, maṇḍala out of funereal ashes in a charnel ground, kindling a fire with *kaṭuka* kindling, having made an image of the enemy out of beef and so on, preceded by the invocation and reciting as before, cutting and cutting, one should sacrifice [it] in the fire" (*gomāmsetyādi | citibhasmanā trikoṇam āgneyamaṇḍalam śmaśāne saṃlikhya tasmin kaṭukendhanenāgnim samādihāya gomāmsādīnā śatroḥ pratikṛtiṃ kṛtvā āvāhanapūrvakaṃ pūrvavat japan chitvā chitvāgnau juhūyāt*); PU, p. 173). The context of the passage as a whole, as well as the fact of the act being done in a "three-cornered maṇḍala" (the stereotypical form of the fire maṇḍala, as the commentary indicates), leads me to believe that this comment accurately indicates the meaning of the verse from the root scripture. Thus, we may safely take this to be another occurrence of the meats in conjunction with a verb of offering (in this case \sqrt{hu} , "to sacrifice").

³² Two of these (VIII.8 and XV.3) are examples of the smearing of cow dung mentioned earlier (again, the commentary and the context converge in indicating this reading); the other is a reference to *pañcāmṛta*, which the commentary glosses as the "five transcendent lords" (*pañca-tathāgata*)—in this context, reading *amṛta* as "immortal" (i.e. a divinity), rather than "ambrosia." Again here I believe we can safely follow the commentarial gloss, as the action to which it is connected in this passage (*pātana*, "descending") is commonly found throughout this literature in reference to the five *tathāgatas* (as visualized in a yogic process); it occurs nowhere else in reference to the five ambrosias.

³³ The examples are effectively adjacent (GST XVI.39 and XVI.42), so could even be considered one example; though, so as to err on the side of conservatism, I have counted them as two. In the former, the expression "faeces, urine [and] meat" (*viṣṇūtramāmsa-*) occurs with a derivative of the verb "to do" (\sqrt{kr}) ifc.; the commentary (Chakravartī 1984: 194) notes "the usage of [the word] 'action' (*krtya*) comprehends [the sense] 'eating and drinking the in[edible and] un[potable].' (*krtyagrahaṇenābhakṣyapeyādīgrahaṇam |*). The latter instance merely states that one should place

and ambrosias in the *Esoteric Community Tantra* associate them with actions of oral consumption and/or offering to divinities.

What, then, does this entail with regard to our understanding of their semiology within the esoteric traditions they represent? I think it is safe to say that these two activities—eating and worshipping/offering—are the quintessential moments of importance to orthodox, Dharmic purity strictures: they are prime occasions of danger, wherein one runs the risk of ritual pollution. In intercourse with the divine, much emphasis is placed on the notion that proper protocols be observed, lest one's status decrease—given the gods' transcendent purity, the postulant must be appropriately fastidious. Similarly, in the act of eating, wherein one accepts foreign bodies into one's own—and, thus, one's bodily constitution is potentially compromised—a concern for purity strictures is paramount in the Indian religious context. Thus, by interpolating these sets of polluting substances into the two archetypal liminal acts of the purity calculus, this literature seeks to hammer home the fact that what is at issue in these contexts is ritual purity. Fundamentally, this is a discourse about purity and pollution (notably, an overtly pervasive theme in the later Buddhist Tantras)—not the special, intrinsic qualities of particular meats and bodily fluids.

THE “MEANING” OF THIS SEMIOSIS IN ITS RITUAL CONTEXT

What does it mean, then, for a practitioner of the Mahāyoga Tantras, having gone through the process of self-creation as an enlightened Buddhist divinity, to eat from a skull a foul soup of polluting meats and bodily fluids? In this semiosis (as can be seen schematized in figure 5), this complete sign from the natural language of mainstream Indian culture—the signifier “beef, etc.” in semiological union with its signified “ritual pollution”—acts as a signifier in the process of ritual consumption considered as a discourse. The signified in this semiosis is the attainment of the enlightened state of non-dual gnosis, called in some sources³⁴ “communion” (*yuganaddha*)—the ultimate goal of the Mahāyoga Tantra practitioner.

the five meats and ambrosias in equal portions in a vessel. The commentary specifies that they should be made into portions or pills and eaten daily: the verb used, again, is *√bhakṣ* (“to eat”).

³⁴ Notably the works of the Noble Tradition of the Esoteric Community, including—but not limited to—Nāgārjuna's *Pañcakrama*, Āryadeva's *Caryāmelāpakapradīpa*, and Candrakīrti's *Pradīpodyotana*. See Mimaki and Tomabechi (1994), Wedemeyer (2007), and Chakravarti (1984).

Mainstream Indian Culture	1. Beef	2. Pollution	
	3. Polluting Beef		
MAHĀYOGA TANTRA	I. (EATING) POLLUTING BEEF		II. NON-DUAL GNOSIS
	III. "I HAVE ATTAINED INTEGRATION (YUGANADDHA)" ("IT'S JUST A FACT!")		

FIGURE 5. SUGGESTED SEMIOLOGY OF ANTINOMIAN DISCOURSE IN THE MAHĀYOGA TANTRAS.

This state of communion is described thus in the final chapter of Nāgārjuna's influential work on the practice of the Esoteric Community, the *Five Stages (Pañcakrama)*:

Defilement and purification—
knowing them from the perspective of ultimate reality

The one who knows [them as] one thing
Knows [the] communion [stage].³⁵

In particular, for our purposes, Nāgārjuna goes on to mention the following dualistic concepts which are likewise transcended by the accomplished practitioner.

As oneself, so an enemy...
As one's mother, so a whore,...
As urine, so wine.
As food, so shit.
As sweet-smelling camphor, so the stench from the ritually-impure
As words of praise, so revolting words...
As pleasure, so pain.³⁶

Thus, by dramatically (and I use this term advisedly) demonstrating their transcendence of conventional dualistic categories of purity and pollution in the concluding portion of the rite of self-creation, the

³⁵ *Pañcakrama* V.3: saṃkleśaṃ vyavadānaṃ ca jñātvā tu paramārthataḥ | ekibhāvaṃ tu yo vetti sa vetti yuganaddhakam || (Mimaki and Tomabechi 1994: 49).

³⁶ *Pañcakrama* V: 30–34a; yathātmani tathā śatrau...| yathā mātā tathā veśya...||...yathā mūtraṃ tathā madyaṃ yathā bhaktaṃ yathā śakṛt || yathā sugandhī karpūram tathā gandham amedhyajam | yathā stutikaraṃ vākyaṃ tathā vākyaṃ jugupsitam ||...|| yathā saukyaṃ tathā duḥkhaṃ.

practitioners of the Mahāyoga Tantras signify ritually that their attainment of the enlightened state—which, it is worth remembering, is both the starting point and the ending point of Buddhist Tantric practice—is, in fact, a *fait accompli*. In this way, the consumption of the five meats and ambrosias in the rituals of the Mahāyoga Tantras constitutes an example of connotative semiotics.

What, however, does this really mean for our understanding of text and ritual? If we return now momentarily to the examples given by Barthes, we will recall that there were two important points which he stressed with regard to the effect of connotative semiotics. For one, he said, it is speech which is guided primarily by its *intention*. That is, the phrase serving as a grammatical example “means” less its sense in natural language that it signifies its intention to serve as an example of a grammatical rule. This is the first point. Second, this intention, which is the key element of its signification, is *occluded* in the process of signification. “Its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent* by this literal sense.”

One can see how this is a very effective technique in the kinds of manipulative discourses of advertising and ideology that Barthes took as his primary objects of study. Viewers of the 1950s issue of *Paris Match* on which our Afro-French soldier stood saluting, who may well have been experiencing a crisis of confidence regarding the French empire in Africa, were meant to come away reassured—it is this intention which is primary in the signification. Yet, that intention is in no way explicit; it is occluded: as Barthes reads the image: “the French Empire? It’s just a fact: look at this good negro who salutes like one of our own boys.” The viewer is reassured of the strength of French imperialism via a profound, and seemingly ideologically innocent *coup d’œil*, in a way impossible to achieve through the rhetorical persuasion of, say, an op-ed piece on the viability of the situation in French West Africa. Yet this higher level of signification is shrouded by the primary act of signification, ensuring deniability: it’s just a nice picture of a soldier, after all.

This type of signification is also present in advertising. Here the intention is obvious and clearly primary: to sell the product. And it is this intention which it is also vital to keep occluded insofar as possible. If the rational mind is alerted to the signification, it loses much of its power—it is “demystified.” Connotative semiotics are thus rampant in the world of commercials: products do not signify themselves, they signify ideas or pleasurable states. The SUV one sees climbing effortlessly into the garage of the Himalayan monastery does not signify itself: it signifies freedom, peace, and power. The boy who begs his

mother for the one Christmas present he really must have—a Cross-your-heart[®] bra—has clearly been reading the images he sees on television. Clever boy that he is—skilled at reading commercial discourse through hours spent before the tube—he is unconcerned with the direct denotative signification of the brassiere with which he is confronted, but is completely taken up with its connotative significance of total comfort and security.

Similarly, in the ritual context of the *sādhana*—calling as it does for the practitioner to renounce her rational, discursive knowledge of her own ordinary and limited personality—connotative semiotics are employed as a more direct, mystifying mode of signification than ordinary rhetorical persuasion. This latter had, in fact, been tried before in Buddhist pædagogical history. There is an extensive corpus of exoteric scriptures and philosophical literature devoted to advancing the notion that all beings are intrinsically enlightened by nature, that all are possessed of the *tathāgatagarbha*. This is by no means the most effective way of convincing someone of that fact, however. There is simply too much evidence to the contrary available to the rational mind; just as, if one were to try to rationally convince a young boy of his need for a brassiere, one would be sorely pressed. However, in the ritual context of the self-creation rite, in which the practitioner blissfully eats conventionally defiling substances with impunity, having adopted the attitude “of the overlord of the maṇḍala” (*maṇḍalādhipati*), there is no need for further convincing. The suggestion is accomplished in a *coup d’œil*—as (Vajra-)Barthes might say “the enlightened stage of communion? It’s just a fact: look as I savor this soup of beef, dog, semen, and fæces!”

Elsewhere in his writings, in discussing an exhibition of “shock photos,” Barthes gives further indications of the important signifying function of connotative semiotics. Speaking of photos which deal with “the shocking,” he notes that “it is not enough for the photographer to *signify* the horrible, for us to experience it” (Barthes 1979: 71). What I believe he is getting at here is the fact that there is a *distancing* effect to the structure of natural language. Recall the admonishment of a thousand writing teachers, to show, not say: it is not enough for one to inform another that something is “horrible” for that person to have a truly visceral, empathetic experience of its horror. If the intention is to share a taste of the horror and not merely to convince another that A or B falls into a certain abstract category of experience called “horror,” one cannot use merely denotative discourse. Connotation is essential: it allows communication to be guided by an ulterior intention (to shock), and yet for that intention to be occluded (so as not to make the experience overly contrived). Otherwise, if signifiers chosen are drawn solely

from natural, denotative discourse, says Barthes, they “have no effect on us; the interest we take in them does not exceed the interval of an instantaneous reading: it does not resound, does not disturb, our reception closes too soon over a pure sign” (Barthes 1979: 72).

It is this understanding of the contrast between the prosaic discourse of denotation and the poetical discourse of connotative semiotics which I believe has been leveraged in the structure of the Mahāyoga Tantra rituals. Thus, though such direct signification is found in the Mahāyoga Tantra rite of self-creation—the practitioner does recite the mantra *om śūnyatā-jñāna-vajra-svabhāvātmake ’ham* “Om I am the very adamant nature of the gnosis of voidness”—yet in order to ensure the maximal experiential impact of the performance of self-resurrection, the auto-suggestion of inhabiting a divine identity, the authors of the rite have also chosen to employ the more visceral, more instantaneous mode of connotative semiosis. It is here, in this semiotic process, I believe, that some of the “mystery” of the Tantras may be found.³⁷

Seen in the light of this dynamic, then, the original question of the meaning of the five meats and five ambrosias in Mahāyoga Tantra scripture and ritual would seem to call for some reconsideration. The question of whether these words—cow meat, dog meat, elephant meat, horse meat, human flesh and faeces, urine, blood, semen, marrow—signify real beef, urine, and so on, I would suggest, is close to irrelevant. In the context of the self-creation rite we have analyzed earlier, what is important is their signifying function, their ability to instantiate ritual pollution as a lived fact. What is essential to the signification of the rite are the five meats and five ambrosias as signs, insofar as they function as signifiers in the higher-order system. In the natural language out of which that sign is borrowed, the actual signifier is, as de Saussure insists, arbitrary.³⁸ Thus, I would argue, the question which has troubled modern scholarship—is it “shit” or not?—is beside the point.³⁹

³⁷ It may be noted that a similar feature has been observed of the “performative” aspect of ritual or ritual-like activities wherein, as Catherine Bell has noted, “one is not being told or shown something so much as one is led to experience something.” See Bell (1997: 160).

³⁸ Similarly, in connotative semiotics, although the choice is delimited in some measure by the range of available signs in any given cultural moment, the specific choice of signifier among this spectrum of suitable possibilities is nonetheless arbitrary.

³⁹ In fact, much the same seems to have been indicated by authors of the *Esoteric Community Tantra* itself—even in its earliest stratum (chapters 1–12). In chapter 12, after enumerating a set of five yogic accomplishments that correspond to eating each of the five meats, the text blithely notes that “if all these kinds of meat cannot be obtained, while meditating, one should conceive [of them] as really existent” (GST XII.44: *alābhe sarvamāmsānām dhyātvā sattvaṃ vikalpayet*). Elsewhere also, in chapter 6, the text recommends that one “imagine” eating human flesh.

The concrete reality of flesh as a denoted signified is extraneous; what matters is its significance within the community of speakers of the Tantric yogin/i.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

In sum, to frame the question of Tantric interpretation in terms of what its signifiers denote in natural language is—in this case, at least—fundamentally to misconstrue the semiosis involved in the ritual act of consuming defiling substances. Given what we have seen, both classical positions on Tantric hermeneutics—the literalist and figurativist accounts—seem to me to be untenable. Both in choosing the signs to be used in ritual performances and in the composition of their scriptures, the authors of the Mahāyoga Tantras had clear intentions. Disgruntled, as it would appear, by the gradual encroachment of brahminical concepts of purity and pollution (caste, astrological auspiciousness, etc.) into Buddhist ritual and social contexts via the earlier esoteric dispensations (e.g. the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*⁴¹), the leading lights of the Mahāyoga movements sought to elevate a gnosis of non-duality as the central Buddhist goal. The rituals and scriptures we have explored above reflect this central concern.

⁴⁰ This does not, however, necessarily mean that these substances were not actually consumed. I would argue that—though I suspect that actual consumption was rare in practice by any but virtuosi—the possibility of such consumption must be available (at least as a limit case) for the system of semiosis to work. Though the “real world” may be irrelevant in many cases of human signification, in general it nonetheless functions as the necessary horizon of possible experiences and signification. Consuming impure substances ritually would seem to be of this latter kind—the notion that one could (and might) actually do it is important for the full impact of the semiosis of revulsion to occur.

⁴¹ The frequently repeated injunctions in Mahāyoga Tantra materials against taking account of astrological phenomena, such as lunar mansions (*nakṣatra*), lunar days (*tithi*), etc., in ritual practice would seem to be a response to earlier esoteric scriptures that enjoin practitioners, on the contrary, to schedule their ritual activities in accordance with such considerations. For passages in the older strata that enjoin attentiveness to astrology, see, e.g., *Mahāvairocanottaratantra* I. 14, II.5, III.2, IV.2 (English translation may be found in Hodge 2003) or *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, of which chapters 18–21, 24, and 32 deal at some length with issues of astrological auspiciousness, planets (*graha*), lunar mansions (*nakṣatra*), etc., with regard to ritual practice (see Sāstrī 1920–1925; cf. Wallis 2002: esp. 99, 114, and 175–177). Examples of Mahāyoga responses may be found in, e.g. *Cittaviśuddhiprakaraṇa* vv. 71–76 (see Patel 1949: 5–6; cf. Wedemeyer 1999: 371), *Advayasiddhi* v. 1 (see Shendge 1964: 15). Were additional confirmation needed, Matthew Kapstein (2001: 279 n. 13) has also noted of the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* that purity “is clearly one of its predominant concerns.”

Given the sophistication of the Buddhist literary context out of which the Mahāyoga Tantras evidently arose,⁴² I think we can only conclude that the notion that the literal meaning must be presumed to be original and primary can only be based on an unspoken assumption that Tantrism is “primitive”—an assumption with a long history in Orientalist scholarship, yet one that would seem to be based on a failure to read the sources fully critically.⁴³ On the other hand, to suggest instead that the discourses of taboo meats and foul fluids constitute merely a code, hiding a secret transmission of esoteric yogic techniques, is to miss the historical resonance of these discourses in the contexts of both ritual performance and contemporaneous culture. In approaching the question of Tantric interpretation in such a way, scholars of the “figurativist” tendency have paid little attention to aspects of Tantric discourse besides the denotative. Even if the signifiers “fæces” and “urine” refer to the sense organs and their objects (as Candrakīrti claims), this signification is still well within the parameters of natural language. That is, the “code” model merely replaces the signified in the sign-relation with a variant element, such that one forms nothing more than a simple sign composed, for example, of the signifier “beef” and the signified “the form aggregate” (*rūpa-skandha*). This does not, I argue, capture the essence of the mode of communication employed in the esoteric discourses, though I admit it is one suggested by some trends in the commentarial literature.

I suspect that much of the reason for the neglect of connotative modes of signification on the part of scholars of Tantrism has to do with the fact that these higher-order systems are seen to operate most clearly in ritual—a notoriously neglected area for much of modern religious (and, perhaps in particular, Buddhist) studies. Little attempt

⁴² See above, pp. 10–11. Notably, according to Bhāmaha’s *Kāvya-lamkāra* (Sastry 1970: 16–19), the Tantras of this sort also flaunt the conventions of good poetic literature, by employing cryptic expressions (*gūḍha-śabda*) and offensive words. Bhāmaha actually uses “fæces” (*viṭ*) as an example of terms that are “offensive to the ear” (*śruti-duṣṭa*; note the apparent consonance of this term with the Dharmaśāstric term applied to the five meats, *svabhāva-duṣṭa*, “polluting by its very nature”). Thus, the Mahāyoga semiosis may perhaps also have served to place its scriptures in implicit (agonistic) dialog as well with contemporaneous conventions of fine literature. Cf. also Seyfort Ruegg (1989: 317–322).

⁴³ It must be noted, however—lest clever critics accuse me of suggesting that the authors of the Mahāyoga Tantras were “adumbrating Barthes”—that it is not crucial to my argument that the use of connotative semiotics have been self-consciously employed. As is clear from the work of Barthes and others, this type of signification is nearly ubiquitous in human communication, and—like other grammars of signification—are learned and used without the need for theoretical elaboration.

has been made to situate the discourses of the Tantric scriptures within their proper ritual contexts, though there survives a wealth of Indian Buddhist literature on precisely this subject. This is all the more paradoxical as—for most of the history of the modern study of the Tantras—it has been a scholarly mantra that the Tantras are primarily ritual (i.e. practical, not theoretical) texts.

By way of conclusion, I would like to comment briefly on an important narrative element internal to the *Esoteric Community Tantra* itself, which I feel very strongly corroborates the view that its discourse is not meant to be taken as a direct, simple act of denotative signification, but that—in scripture as well as in ritual—it is the experience of non-dual gnosis which is the primary object signified. In a key passage that appears in chapter 5—a passage which has attracted a great deal of attention from modern scholars in that it is one of the most consistently and blatantly “Tantric” in the entire text—the Lord Buddha Vajradhara teaches the assembled buddhas and bodhisattvas that those who commit great sins, such as the deadly sins said to yield immediate retribution in hell (*anantārya*), “will be successful in this buddha vehicle, the great ocean of the Universal Vehicle (*mahāyāna*)” (Matsunaga 1978: 15). Further, he teaches that those who violate the most basic Buddhist precepts—who take life, lie, steal, and are sex-maniacs—and even, notably, those who eat feces and urine, are considered by him to be “worthy practitioners.” And, as if to cap it all off, he tells the assembly that those who commit incest with mother, sister, or daughter will “attain vast success,” while the one who makes love to the Buddha’s own mother will attain buddhahood. At the conclusion of this pithy teaching, the bodhisattvas in attendance are said to have been “amazed and astonished.” Why, they ask, is this bad speech (*durbhāṣita*) being spoken in the midst of the enlightened assembly? To this query, the buddhas in attendance reply that they should not speak so: that this is the pure teaching of all the buddhas. Upon hearing this reply, the bodhisattvas are so overwhelmed that they actually pass out, whereupon the Lord has to rouse them by the light rays of the meditative samādhi called (notably) the “space-like non-dual vajra” (*ākāśa-samatādvaya-vajra*).

This narrative is noteworthy in several ways; and a full unpacking of its implications has much to contribute to our understanding of the literary techniques of the Buddhist Tantras. First and foremost, it very clearly expresses a self-consciousness of the fact that the teaching given by Vajradhara in this very passage in the *Guhyasamāja Tantra* is blatantly heretical. However, it is far too simple to consider this merely a device for giving scriptural sanction to deviant

practices.⁴⁴ For this (as with similar passages elsewhere in the literature) does not merely suggest the sanction of one or the other unorthodox religious praxis. Rather, in this sermon, the Buddha Vajradhara systematically hits virtually *every* subversive note in the Buddhist scale of religious values. Like the meats and ambrosias, this is in no way a semiotically innocent list: the practices advocated by Vajradhara represent the precise inversion of mainstream Buddhist ethical norms. The bodhisattvas, not surprisingly, are shocked and scandalized by this teaching, calling it “bad speech” (*durbhāṣita*). This term is especially significant, as it alludes to the Buddhist hermeneutical rule of thumb that all that is well spoken or good speech (*subhāṣita*) is the revealed word of the Buddha.⁴⁵ Equally resonant here, however, is the fact that this term refers not merely to that which is poorly spoken in some abstract sense, but rather constitutes a distinct category of transgression of the Buddhist Discipline (*vinaya*; Prebish 1975: 24). Thus, the bodhisattvas’ assessment of the teaching is that it is not Buddha-speech (*subhāṣita*) but rather heresy (*durbhāṣita*); and when their enlightened classmates insist that this is, in fact, the “pure teaching of the buddhas,” their imaginations are beggared—they simply cannot process the fact that the “pure” teaching of the buddhas and the “defiled” teachings of the heretics are non-dual seen from the perspective of an enlightened being who has attained “communion”—and they black out. In the end, the reader is told, the bodhisattvas are enabled to “come around”—to digest the cognitive dissonance of this teaching, to tolerate the signification enunciated by the Buddha Vajradhara, enough so as to regain consciousness—only when they are touched by the “light” of the gnosis of non-duality. On my reading, once again, in scripture as in ritual, the transgressive elements of the Mahāyoga Tantras reveal themselves to be motivated discourses, whose primary semiotical interest is to stress the esoteric message of the non-duality of pure and impure, sacred and profane, immanent and transcendent.

There are several points worth stressing in this regard. First, I hope to have demonstrated the utility of the model of connotative semiotics

⁴⁴ This reading is suggested by the treatment Davidson gives to the similar narrative found in chapter 1 of the *Esoteric Community*, which he describes (Davidson 2002: 253) as “a strategy to introduce new practices”—as if merely encapsulating an idea in a scriptural genre and indicating its novelty by means of astonishment episodes were enough to validate such a radical departure from mainstream doctrine among the Buddhist faithful. This seems to me grossly to oversimplify the complex cultural negotiations to which these documents bear witness.

⁴⁵ Compare the *Adhyāśayasamcodanasūtra* (cited in Śāntideva, *Śikṣāsamuccaya*): “Whatever, Maitreya, is well-spoken (*su-bhāṣita*), all that is spoken by the Buddha (*buddha-bhāṣita*)” (*yat kiñcin maitreya subhāṣitaṃ sarvaṃ tad buddhabhāṣitaṃ*); See Vaidya (1961: 12).

in the interpretation of those cultural formations we are in the habit of calling “religious.” Barthes’ analytical model provides a very helpful lens on the uses of discourse in human society, which are rarely confined to literal denotation. This is true, evidently, not merely of the contemporary advertising and pop culture with which Barthes was concerned, but for “classical traditions” as well. Further, although some recent scholarship of a literalist tendency has decried any attempt at non-literal readings as characteristic of a “semanticization” of Tantric ritual action by “later” scholastic commentators, and considered accordingly as *ex post facto* and extrinsic to a putative originary context, I hope to have demonstrated that this semiotical aspect of the ritual act of consuming polluting substances is intrinsic to and inextricable from its earliest attested Buddhist form.

Further, though it may seem a trivial observation to scholars of Hindu Tantrism that such ritual should involve a calculus of purity and pollution, I would aver that this is unfortunately not the case with much scholarship on Buddhist esoterism. Most of this scholarship has focused overmuch on Buddhist Tantras of the Mahāyoga and later strata taken in isolation and, among these, on the soteriological aspects of these traditions. Accordingly, they have not been attentive to the extent to which they situate themselves against the purity concerns of the earlier Buddhist Tantras and broader currents in Indian society—an aspect of these traditions that is counter-intuitive to those who approach them as “Buddhist.” The Mahāyoga Tantras, however—their rituals and scriptures—quite manifestly continue a trend already begun in earlier strata of Buddhist culture, both revising it and amplifying it for novel historical situations in the later centuries of the first millennium. And it is this essential semiological connection to the broader discursive context—the “complete system of signifiers” referenced in our epigram of Bourdieu—that allows us to avoid another misleading notion: that the Buddhist Mahāyoga Tantras are concerned merely with “transgression *as such*.” As I think should be clear, the simple notion of a “transgressive sacrality” is inadequate to the materials analyzed here. The transgressions of this tradition are pointed and specific: they take their meanings from the cultural context within which they were deployed.

It has been noted in another context that a certain scholarly approach to the study of myths mistook them for explanations *of* natural phenomena, leading to the conclusion that they reflect a “magical” or “pre-logical” form of thought. Against this approach, it has been argued that “myths may think *with* natural objects or categories; they are almost never *about* natural objects or categories...the seasons may serve as a

medium for thinking about periodicity, regularity, order, distinction, transformation and place” (Smith 1990: 128–129). Likewise, I would like to suggest that the currently prevalent, literalist approach to the interpretation of the rhetoric of the Buddhist esoteric literature has made a similar error in assuming that these discourses are *about* meats, fluids, despised castes, etc. Rather, I would argue, late-first-millennium esoteric Buddhist scripture and ritual employ these signifiers to think *with*—as a medium for thinking about (and acting with reference to) ritual purity, freedom, and gnosis.

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