

NAVIGATING *SŪR'S OCEAN* WITH IRIGARAY'S LOGBOOKS
EROTIC SUBJECTS IN *BHAKTI* TEXT

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Here I wish to uncover the erotics of (inter)subjectivity present in one of the most important Hindu mystical poetic corpuses, *Sūr Dās' Ocean*, and place it in conversation with Luce Irigaray's work on the role of desire and sexuality in the proper formation of the (feminine) self. To an even greater extent, I shall also attempt to elucidate certain aspects of Irigaray's philosophy in light of the Hindu text. Since gender is an important element of the Hindu *bhakti* poetry of Sūr, as it is for Irigaray, I imply, through the lens of his favorite *bodily* substance, tears, that his theology was a mystical, embodied, "proto-feminist" one. It is this process of mutual reflection, by means of which both Irigaray's philosophy and Sūr's *bhakti* texts may be elucidated and illuminated, that will generate a blueprint for what I am seeking: an erotic and embodied account of how a proper self might be constituted, and, out of this, an ethical encounter between the self and the other—an encounter whose ethicality is derived from the subjects' freedom from socially and culturally (predetermined) epithetical predicates and their associated duties and expectations.

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Mantra, a Sanskrit word that can be roughly understood as a religious or mystical hymn, has as its root the Indo-European *man* (*men*), to think. This root is related to various words in other languages that refer to mind or

thought such as *mens* (Latin), *mente* (Spanish), *mental* (French), or *gemynd* (Old English). These words were incorporated into English along with Greek *mysterion* (secret rites, doctrines, or ritual implements) and *myein* (to initiate or to close the mouth or the eyes), from which mystery and mystic are derived. In the mystical Christian tradition that began with Pseudo-Dionysius, the mystical was restricted to initiates, or *mystai*. Pseudo-Dionysius cautioned his audience to make sure “none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed . . . since initiation into the divine is beyond such people.”¹ In the following centuries, only those men who had access to education in the classics and knowledge of Latin, by then the language of the theological tradition, were able to participate in these divine mysteries. A similar situation can be found in the Vedic (and/or mantric) tradition that preceded the *bhakti* tradition to which Sūr Dās belongs. Only educated men versed in the classical tradition and able to read Sanskrit were able to fully participate in the divine mysteries. When the Christian and Vedic traditions developed alongside one another through centuries, those who had the duty of preserving the heritage faced a dilemma. They guarded a cherished secret that could be of benefit to their respective communities, yet many members of those communities (most notably women) were disenfranchised from it.

Even though the historical circumstances of these Christian and Hindu communities were different, similar solutions to similar problems were suggested. In the Christian tradition, while some may have resisted the move towards more inclusiveness, many individuals called “mystics” were exemplars of how, at specific historical moments, concealed mysteries could be revealed in a vernacular accessible to all.² The Sanskrit Vedas continued to provide a “textual” source for the religious practices of diverse religious communities throughout India. Yet these communities eventually elevated these texts alongside other less “canonical,” theologically dissident ones, such as *bhakti* poems, to the status of “scripture” and/or incorporated them into various ritual plays (*lila*) performed annually. Many composers of devotional poetry have been described by Western scholars as Hindu “mystics” on the basis of similarities between *bhakti* (devotion) texts and what are called “mystical” texts in Christianity.³ As one influential commentator of *bhakti*

¹ Pseudo-Dionysius, “Mystical Theology,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 136.

² For example, cf. the introduction in J. M. Marín, “Teresa of Avila and the Dionysian Tradition,” *Magistra: A Journal of Women’s Spirituality in History* 13 (Winter 2007).

³ For examples see F. Hardy, *Viraha Bhakti* (New Delhi: Oxford University press, 1987), esp. Part Four, “Mayon Mysticism: the Alvars.” See also V. Dehejia’s introduction to *Antal and Her Path of Love*, trans. V. Dehejia (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

puts it, this colloquialization⁴ was an “... unprecedented act. The writing of the commentary challenged two claims made by traditional Hindu society: the belief in Sanskrit as the exclusive vehicle for revelation and theological communication, and the importance of the hierarchical class system.”⁵

It is not only certain women’s experience of wholesale exclusion from initiated scriptural knowledge, then, but also the disembodied, immensely cerebral, masculine language with which the texts were composed⁶ that occasions mysticism and the mystical. According to Irigaray, the mystical is

the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames. This is a place where “she”—and in some cases, he, if he follows “her” lead—speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from a source of light that has been logically repressed, about “subject” and “Other” flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another, about contempt of form as such, about mistrust for understanding as an obstacle along the path of *jouissance* and mistrust for the dry desolation of reason.⁷

Along Irigarayan lines, the mystical is not a “place” about which consciousness or rationality can make sense. But rather it is that which has been repressed by logic. To be in a mystical place is to relinquish the futile (masculine) inclination to grasp at the mysterious *with the mind*, to apprehend, describe, and classify that which resists such cerebral activities. In the erotic communion with the divine, the imposition of “understanding” numbs the

⁴ The *bhakti* poetry of Sūr Dās is an example of such colloquialization. He authored his work in *Braj Bhaṣā*, the regional dialect of Braj. More explicitly on this point, Deśika tells us in his text, “Just as the clouds take in the waters of the ocean and then pour it down in the form of rain so essential to the life of everyone, the Lord gathered together those parts of the Vedas which are most significant and *revealed them briefly in the language (Tamil) which is accessible to everyone* (“Introduction” in *Śrīmad Rābhyastrayasāra of Śrī Vedānta Deśika*, ed. and trans. M. R. Rajagopala Ayyangar [Kumbakonam, India: Agnihothram Ramanuja Thathachariar, 1956], 5, emphasis mine).

⁵ J. Carman and V. Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10.

⁶ The problem of masculine scriptural and theological language relates to Irigaray’s issue with philosophical approaches to subjectivity. Irigaray argues that much of this language is embedded in a Western ontology-first tradition, which denies the subjectivity/otherness of (or appearance of sexual difference in) the woman in its use of masculine/neuter pronouns or words like “objectivity” or “facticity” to refer to the female body (if such accounts even contain a genuine acknowledgment of the feminine at all); L. Irigaray, *To Be Two*, trans. M. M. Rhodes and M. F. Cocito-Monoc (New York: Routledge, 2001), 17.

⁷ L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 191.

rapturous feelings while rationality sterilizes its productive potential. Perhaps most essential in Irigaray, mysticism is a form of religious experience proper to the feminine, but not wholly unavailable to the masculine.

On this account, a man must retrace a woman's mystical journey and even get burned with the flames of *viraha* (as does the poet Sūr) in order to understand *la mystérique*, the specific discourse of the female mystic. In attempting to understand this language, Sūr must relinquish *his* (per se a "masculine") abstract epistemology and, instead, trace the steps of the *gopī* (cowherd maiden). In so doing, Sūr proceeds "to a point when he can no longer find himself as 'subject' anymore" and then presses on into an "a-typical, a-topical mysteria."⁸ Sūr's experience, initiated by taking a "detour" through the metaphorical language that women employ to describe their path, produces a first-hand understanding of this metaphorical vernacular, *la mystérique*. That is, he comprehends this language by having his own *bodily* experience of it. This path leads Sūr Dās on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Krishna devotion, medieval Braj⁹. From there he writes about the characteristic experience of the/his *bhakti* mystical experience: an erotic (a)rousing of an embodied, emotional self by what will become a perpetually and immitigably absent Beloved. And Sūr composes/weeps an "Ocean" about this experience—an experience made possible first by following the *gopīs*' "lead."

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If one dives into *Sūr Dās' Ocean (Sūr Śāgar)* of devotional songs (which may be read as scripturally subversive Hindu texts¹⁰), one would see that his oceanic expanse is much more than an analogy for the volume and breadth of his work.¹¹ Rather the *Ocean* consists almost literally of the cumulative tears of *gopīs*' devotion to Krishna and of the tears that audiences cried after hearing him perform his poignant songs. In fact Tansen, a renowned

⁸ Ibid., 192.

⁹ A region in current-day Uttar Pradesh, India

¹⁰ It is widely held that the beginnings of the *bhakti* tradition and its earliest textual compositions explicitly challenge notions of social standing (*varna*) and caste (*jāti*), which are derived from and negotiated through the time-honored and privileged Vedic texts.

¹¹ "Even if it seems probable that the *Sūrśāgar* is not the work of a sole author, we are in the presence of a relatively coherent tradition, tradition that, as we will see with the example of the hymnology *vallabhites*, has continued to enrich itself until recently" (G. Rousseva-Sokolova, *Jeu et Devotion* [Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion, 2005], 31, translation mine). I agree with Rousseva-Sokolova that it is possible that many authors may have contributed to the *Sūr Śāgar*, yet—as she notes—style and conventions are coherent throughout the entire literary corpus, which strengthens the argument for a single author. For the purpose of this paper, I will assume that an individual named Sūr Dās single-handedly authored each poem.

musician of the medieval Emperor Akbar's court, is credited with having sung of the evocative power of Sūr's poetry thus:

Some are hurt by a warrior's arrow
 some are tortured by pain
 Those hit by Sūr's lyrics
 are pierced, through and through¹²

Similarly, our contemporary J. S. Hawley offers testimony to the affective intensity of Sūr's poetry as it appears in the *akerūr lilā*, a Hindu ritual "play," the performance of which he had the opportunity to experience first-hand. Feeling the growing intensity of "every successive line of poetry," within the crowd, Hawley recalls:

[I]ittle springs welled up in every direction, gurgling with coughs and the clearing of throats, and soon *the whole audience was a marsh of emotion*. It was a remarkably humbling experience: I felt no longer one of a great number of discrete individuals but rather *a drop in a sea*. And from that point on, the action performed on stage seemed only the *play of waves across deep currents of grieving* that swept through the crowd about me.¹³

Hawley's beautiful description lends power to my earlier assertion that the *Sūr Sāgar* is composed of more than text—it is an "ocean" of un-fathomable depth, of women's spiritual devotion and/of tears. Each audience member becomes, like a *gopī*, a "drop lost in the vast ocean."¹⁴ Experiencing Sūr's work in this way is due to the rare "synthesis between poetry and music" which he perfected. This musico-poetic synthesis is made possible in *pads*, the style of which Sūr composed his poetry. *Pads* were not just "fit to be sung"; they were the "style of lyrical poetry...best for self-expression."¹⁵ The music illuminates and inspires "...creativity, wonderful imagination and technique of allusion, and pregnancy of feelings."¹⁶

Anguished songs of longing (*vyakulata*) and separation (*viraha*) are decidedly among the most passionate and prevalent themes in Sūr Dās' work. These songs account for roughly a fifth of more than 5,000 songs that have been attributed to Sūr. We can surely imagine Sūr's original recitation of his poems

¹² U. Nilsson, *Sūrdās* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982), 2.

¹³ J. S. Hawley, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 233, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Nilsson, *Sūrdās*, 51.

¹⁵ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 279.

¹⁶ A. Hussain, *Erotic Sentiments in Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Atma Ram & Sons, 1982), 279, 282.

accompanying tears of his own. He not only vicariously experiences the weeping of the *gopīs*—the tears he produces are indeed his own. Sūr Dās’ poems speak to his feeling of abandonment and his personal longing for God’s physical reunion (of which Lord Krishna is an avatar) with his beloved cowherd maidens. Sūr’s poems also become an integral part of “plays” (*līlā*) whose annual performance ritually recreate the sorrow—and tears—of the *gopīs* in the physical absence of Krishna. Paralleling what was said of Sūr, the “plays” are not re-creative in a passive sense; *līlā* have the potential to evoke the sorrow of longing and separation from both its performers and spectators.

Sūr expounds upon the theme of tears most often by appropriating the voice of the *gopī* mystics and by imagining himself embodied in the feminine. And no other feminine body is of more interest to him than the cowherd maidens of Braj who suffer from amorous longing for Krishna. To these *gopīs*, Krishna is “known less in his presence than in his absence.”¹⁷ This perpetual absence inspires *viraha*. *Viraha* connotes both physical separation from the object of one’s desire and the concomitant emotions one experiences due to the separation (and perpetual absence) from this object. Sūr variously describes the intense emotions of *viraha* as the feelings of bitterness, anger, jealousy, and remorse. All of these emotions contribute to the experience of feeling on fire, which is commonly how he describes the bodily sensation of longing. To illustrate, Sūr Dās describes his imagined feminine body as being “scorched”¹⁸ with separation and “bound and burned” in yearning.¹⁹ His heart is “abandoned and ablaze.”²⁰ And in “face of the fever of being apart,”²¹ the *gopī*-Sūr tearfully petitions to Krishna: “cool this body’s fire!”²²

Quelling the flames and cooling the body would require Krishna to return to Braj (a place to which he is rumored to have never returned) and satiate the passionate longing of the *gopīs*. Since such a return is considerably out of the question, the *gopīs* cry out in lament—punctuated by tearful sobs and gasping breaths—for his physical absence. Unlike the yogi, the “disembodied, spiritualized Krishna”²³ does not grant them solace. In fact they prefer to remember the ephemeral—yet profound—*physical* presence of Krishna, re-

¹⁷ J. S. Hawley, *Sūr Dās: Poet, Singer, Saint* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1984), 93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 105.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

²² J. S. Hawley, “The Damage of Separation: Krishna’s Loves and Kali’s Child,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72 (2004), 378.

²³ J. S. Hawley, “The *Gopīs*’ Tears,” In *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. K. C. Patton and J. S. Hawley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 109.

creating it in the ritual circle dance (*mahārās līlā*). And it is this short-lived experience to which they cling in memory and which their tears continue to illustrate. But tears are not only means of communicating the endless devotion (*bhakti*) of the *gopīs*.

Tears, as Sūr imagines them, are “a torrent of holy obligations”²⁴ that mitigates the bodily heat of *viraha*. But as J. S. Hawley notes, even though the “plentiful flow of tears” work as a ceaseless “fire department,” they cannot extinguish the flames of separation.²⁵ In buckets of tears, the *gopīs* futilely douse the flames but only drench themselves in the process. This cool wetness is ultimately unsuccessful in satiating the hungry flames of desire because *gopīs*’ tears lack theurgic potency in a sense.²⁶ No matter how much the cowherd girls weep and lament, Krishna will not physically return. Krishna is both the cause of their lovesickness and its panacea. With respect to this theme one is reminded of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 147 which famously opens, “My love is as a *fever*, longing still/ For that which longer nurseth the disease.” One’s painful longing may be fulfilled, but this feeling is only ephemeral. The subject of one’s desire cannot be grasped indefinitely; otherwise that subject becomes a possession—an object—and is therefore no longer Other.

As the *Gurū Granth Sāhib* tells us, no talisman, spell, or medicine will alleviate the pain of separation. “You’re the medicine for our worldly disease,” says one of the cowherd girls in the *mahārās līlā*.²⁷ Only Krishna can help, but “Lord of Braj—the doctor [or drug]—has gone.”²⁸ A cowherd girl can only weep until the water of tears form “a river that has flooded her eyes/ And risen to such a high water-mark/ that it overflows the eyelid-banks.”²⁹

²⁴ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 105

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hawley is astute to note, however, how *gopīs*’ tearful dirges bridge their earthly world closer to the divine realm of Krishna. In this way, the *gopīs* do attain some link to Krishna through their weeping. Similarly, through the concept of avatar and ritual play (*līlā*), the presence of Krishna is recreated through the ritual weeping of the actors who play the *gopīs*. “Brahmin boys who play Krishna and Rādhā should be understood as very incarnations of God” (Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 60-61). The spirits of these deities literally descend upon the creative space that the circle (*nās*) encompasses, magically re-creating their presence through ritual. What is more, the children play the roles, singing the dirges of separation with crying eyes. The actors’ selves “disintegrate into tears” and they become actual manifestations of divinity (Hawley, “The *Gopīs*’ Tears,” 109).

²⁷ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 208.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Hawley, “The *Gopīs*’ Tears,” 104.

Sometimes the waters “Surge so high that the eyes vomit in pain.”³⁰ So tears gradually flow over the eyelids or violently erupt from the eyes, collecting at the feet of the weeper. These tears form a river that rises to the point of flooding Gokul, “drowning” all those in mourning. Here one is led to question whether or not bodily fire or drowning in tears is *actually* a “death” that *viraha* exacts upon the *gopīs*.³¹

With flu-like symptoms, the girls burn with the fever of longing and shiver from the cooling saturation of tears. But it seems that over time, Krishna’s absence transforms the object of their devotion so that the practices of weeping and lamentation themselves become that to which the *gopīs* are devoted. Hawley remarks, “In the realm of Krishna *bhakti*, it is not just Krishna who is the object of devotion but the *gopīs*’ suffering as well.”³² This form of devotion embodies the highest form of love, *prem*, which is pure, selfless; it does not exist to satisfy any particular selfish, concupiscible desires. Confirming this, Krishna proclaims in the *mahārās līlā*, the cowherd girls “lose themselves in love” by loving him in a “passionate mode” that is unavailable to the social roles of mothers, fathers, and friends.³³ Because of this, Hawley asserts that Krishna’s girls of Braj “have gone beyond the world of subject and predicate, mine and yours: they are selfless.”³⁴ The cowhead girls, like their tears, are drops in the ocean when they are momentarily assimilated and lost in the depths of divine love. So Sūr sings: “the *gopī* is a drop lost in the vast ocean.”³⁵

None of this erotic language would seem unusual or out of place to students of Christian mysticism. Erotic language enters the tradition in seminal form with Pseudo-Dionysius himself who claims union (*henōsis*) with God, the goal of mystical theology, which is attained through love as *erōs*. This is because “*eros* is eminently a power of unifying, binding, and joining.... [it] is ecstatic; it does not permit lovers to be among themselves but binds them to be among their lovers.”³⁶ Indeed, Sur’s poetic accounts of the erotic encounter shared Krishna and Rādhā, his principal inamorata and quintessential *gopī*, vividly illustrates the Dionysian mystical goal of unification:

³⁰ J. S. Hawley, *Three Bhakti Voices: Mīrā Bāī, Sūr Dās, and Kabir in Their Times and Ours* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 169.

³¹ Hawley, “The *Gopīs*’ Tears,” 105.

³² *Ibid.*, 97.

³³ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 186.

³⁴ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 105.

³⁵ Nilsson, *Sūrdās*, 51.

³⁶ Pseudo-Dionysius *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. J. D. Jones (Madison: Marquette University Press, 1980), 147.

When Rādhā turns her mindful gaze,
 to the clever one [Krishna] who is wed to Passion,
 It's a brilliant spray of eyes and faces—
 two moons, four *cakor* birds—
 Or a pair of pairs of honey-thirsty bees
 circling liquid faces that promise to sate
 Their greed, but these too are bases for bees,
 and the thirst never goes. The eyelids never close.
 They've ridden the chariot of lust by night
 and sped through the flickering light of dawn
 into this everlasting day
 They say Sūr's Lord is the thief of the mind,
 and of wealth as well, but now the title
 belongs to a wedded pair.³⁷

The intense, passionate gaze shared between the foremost of the cowherd maidens, Rādhā, and the Lord Krishna reflects the achievement of the mystical goal of erotic union (*benōsis*), figured here as a “wedding” of eyes. In this poem, the two embark together on a night-journey in a “chariot of lust” (which is about as explicit as Sūr's poetry gets with respect to overtly sexual language—yet the audience is able to connect the dots). The whole time their eyes (“*cakor* birds”) are insatiably and unblinkingly fixed to the face (“the moon”) of the other, eagerly drinking-up its radiant honey-like beauty.

Yet this union does not decidedly demolish this *gopī*'s boundary between self and Other. A between-ness is maintained throughout the poem. In fact, the concluding lines of the poem are masterfully composed by Sūr to be ambiguous. Is it Rādhā and Krishna that are wed together or is it their eyes? In the former, the two lovers remain discrete entities; in the latter, they merge into one divine subject. The following watercolor on silk image by Manohar Saini, entitled “The Merger of Radha and Krishna,” can be seen as a modern artistic re-presentation of Sūr's vivid imagery.³⁸ In Saini's painting, we can discern a boundary between the two lovers; however, the artist also blurs this boundary by portraying them profiled so as to “wed” their eyes together as one. Perhaps these seemingly contradictory notions inhere in the *bhakti* mystical experience.

³⁷ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 82.

³⁸ The photos of each artwork discussed in this article were provided by their online vendor, www.exoticindiaart.com. [Permission for reproduction of this artwork was given to the author of this article.]



Therefore, the erotic exchange between Rādhā and Krishna can be seen as a perfect expression of what Irigaray means by “neither body nor language simply, but incarnation *between us*: the word being flesh and the flesh word.”³⁹ Although Irigaray’s words here resonate with the famous theological language of John’s *evangelion*—used to describe the embodiment of the Christian God in Jesus—it is re-called here with erotic connotations.⁴⁰ It can be argued that the relationship between word and flesh (or “dialectic”) that she discusses is expressed in Sūr’s corpus during the divine tryst between

³⁹ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 12.

⁴⁰ I recognize that Irigaray is dealing specifically with issues pertaining to Christian incarnation (among other things) in *To Be Two*, and that the human-divine relationship in *bhakti* Hinduism is markedly different from the Christian one with which she is concerned. Nonetheless, I am appropriating Irigaray’s language here because I think it elucidates well the erotic relationship between Rādhā and Krishna as I also maintain that the Hindu (textual) tradition to which Sūr belongs provides fertile grounds on which Irigaray’s notion of erotic, embodied female subjectivity is properly cultivated.

Rādhā and Krishna. In their shared *carnal* act, Krishna takes bodily form as avatar while Rādhā, as their sexual union signifies the purest form of love (*prem*), is lifted into the realm of the divine and becomes associated thereafter with Krishna both as “his” divine feminine paramour and as Rādhā-Krishna, the indispensable feminine dimension of the divine (*śakti*). In this sensual moment, Irigaray’s “dialectic” is manifested: Krishna becomes flesh and, in the mutual touching that comes to signify *prem*, Rādhā becomes word. Sūr, almost as if he had anticipated Irigaray, has provided us with a delightful poem that illustrates this dialectical exchange. Here, he sings primarily in the first person as Rādhā:

You [Krishna] become Radha and I will become Madhava [Krisha; lit. “The Honey”], truly Madhava; this is the reversal which I shall produce. I shall braid your hair and will put (your) crown on my head. Sur Das says: Thus the Lord becomes Radha and Radha the son of Nanda [Krishna].⁴¹

In this “reversal,” which for Sūr implies⁴² a kind of sexual tryst between a literal drag queen and drag king, sexual difference is not demolished, but rather maintained. Indeed, the act of each self becoming the Other here can be read in a strictly literal manner: these two *truly* switch places. However, a more symbolic reading is possible. Rādhā acquires a symbol of divinity and Krishna a tangible head of hair to be coiffed. That is, Rādhā is elevated in her earthly embodiment while Krishna’s spiritualized form is given corporeal immediacy. Flesh becomes word and word flesh.

Irigaray’s idea of this dialectic does not imply a simple transition from a former state (ex. “abstraction”) to another (ex. “materiality”). Instead, in such an exchange, the *gopī* palpates Krishna’s “spiritual substance.”⁴³ And the *mutuality* of this touching—the “caress”—would imply, for Irigaray, that Rādhā and Krishna are neither solely actor or acted-upon. Because of this, she and He are neither subject nor object, but rather are *two* subjects. The “caress is an awakening to you, to me, to us”; it gives rise to intersubjectivity.⁴⁴ Below, Rabi Behera has visually depicted Radha-Krishna entangled together in dance as one, yet still distinguishable as separate subjects. Yet, Behara also illustrates their combined, singular nature: their contorted posture makes it so that each individual is supporting the other on

⁴¹ W. G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry* (Mineola, New York: Courier Dover Publications, 2004), 84.

⁴² Again, it is uncommon for Sūr’s *pads* to be explicitly or plainly sexual; they are, instead, metaphorical and suggestive.

⁴³ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

one of their own feet while each of them have a hand, as it were, in playing the flute.



It appears, then, Irigaray is right to suggest, “we need to love much to be capable of such a dialectic.”⁴⁵ But does the Rādhā-Krishna comm-union⁴⁶ *really* achieve Irigaray’s dialectic? Is their form of much-love the kind that Irigaray envisions? This relation presupposes sexual difference, which, to Irigaray, is integral for the emergence of the truth (or ethicality) of otherness

⁴⁵ Ibid., 12. I should note that Irigaray is referring to an *agapē*-istic sense of love and not an erotic one in this context. At this moment in the text, it is not so evident that she is as committed to sexual difference. However, I will argue that Krishna’s erotic love for Rādhā is “generative,” and thus at least complicates a distinction made between *agapē*-istic and erotic loves.

⁴⁶ Drawing upon the previous section of this paper, I prefer to use the word “comm-union” to describe Rādhā’s and Krishna’s relationship, since it semantically preserves the contradictory aspects of this relationship—that they are two *separate* individuals engaged in the reciprocation of erotic gazes and touch, and that they unify into a *singular* entity, Love Itself (*prem*).

and, consequently, of (inter)subjectivity.⁴⁷ And, indeed, Rādhā makes good to “love the [O]ther as a whole, to love him [Krishna] in his life without giving him [her] own.” The dance-pose icon of Rādhā-Krishna from above again depicts what I think Irigaray means when she says shared desire does not obliterate the particularity and uniqueness of the subjects, but rather “renders it I-me together with I-you.”⁴⁸

Yet, Irigaray then adds that such desire en-genders a seemingly contradictory “double intention” that we might also expect in the *gopī*: to remain entangled with the divine in an intimate dance that blurs the distinction between self and Other, and to dis-entangle herself in order to assert the unequivocal boundary between the two of them. But it is not the *gopī* who seems to seriously entertain the latter intention, but rather Krishna. This is because, the space in which the *gopī* and Krishna are enveloped, the *rās*, is the space in which she and He experience the other in her or His most immediate and intimate form. Why would any *gopī* who follows such an experience of onto-theological and amorous fullness want to be faced thereafter with a most abruptly perceptible and perpetual absence—that of her former lover? Her desire would then reach out to touch the Other who is no longer palpably there to receive or reciprocate it. This is the violent and distressing residue of a *gopī*’s mystical experience (*viraha*) and it seems to contradict Irigaray’s directive that we “love enough to generate and not to wound.”⁴⁹

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Still, for Sūr Dās, the *gopīs*’ experience of weeping is not altogether violent, solitary, and mournful. On the contrary, the *gopīs*’ weeping seems to be a comforting experience that (re)creates the sensation of Krishna’s loving, erotic/sexual (*kāma*) embrace. What interests us here is a deeper exploration of the notion that weeping and lament become that to which the *gopīs* devote themselves. Perhaps devotion to devotional practice itself is due to the erotic experience that weeping generates. Or put differently, making devotional weeping the focus of *bhakti* eroticizes tears by redirecting desire toward *embodied* ritual practice itself. As we have seen with the *gopīs*, devoting oneself to a comm-union with God (or to the practice of *bhakti* itself) imperils the

⁴⁷ “The other as such, the other who guarantees irreducible alterity, belongs to the gender which is not mine”; *To Be Two*, 92. In her preface to *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, Irigaray broadens her notion of difference to include distinctions that are not necessarily—or as “natural”—sexual ones. She claims “respect of difference(s) is... what permits the constitution of a properly human subjectivity”; trans. S. Pluháček (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), xi.

⁴⁸ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

devotee with the possibility of great longing, sorrow, and mental distress. Choosing to devote oneself in this way invites suffering (resulting either from God's interminable absence or from one's abandonment of social duty, living on the margins of society).

If the *gopīs*' weeping produces a warm bodily sensation of Godly (erotic) embrace, then the cowherd girls' devotion can be seen as a vocation that eroticizes the experience of suffering. In fact, Dadu Dayal, a medieval Hindi poet, states that separation is necessary and prior to a real and complete understanding of love. He writes, "*separation* awakens the pain; pain awakens the life; life awakens the sex (love) and the body calls the lover"⁵⁰ By reveling in the fullness of separation and the pain of its embodied experience, one can come to know what true love—the love of union (*samyoga*)—entails. Through pain and suffering, the sexuality of the *gopīs* awakens and, consequently, they become increasingly conscious of the erotic quality of their bodies and its ability to call forth a (human) lover. Choking, gasping, wet, and burning—indeed, it is difficult to ignore one's embodiment during an episode of violent weeping. Again, the pain of separation from one's Beloved leads to a heightened sense of embodiment.

The ephemerality of the mutual caress and its bodily pleasure are crucial to negotiating the apparent violence that arises out of the *à-dieu*. During this tryst, this singular and fugitive moment, the *touch* of Krishna (a)rouses the woman's (inter)subjectivity. I recognize that, from a purely anthropologic perspective, Krishna's permanent severance of his contact with his beloved *gopī* is reasonably viewed as an injurious act. But, on the divine end, I argue that Krishna is doing exactly what Irigaray recommends: that he loves enough to *generate*. Again, in making this assertion, I am not denying the *gopī* deep emotional wounds as a result of this abandonment. But if we stretch our imagination to see the logic from a divine standpoint, Krishna's departure presents itself as an act of love on par with his caress that first awakened the *gopī*'s subjectivity. For Krishna to remain proximate and physically immediate to the *gopī* might encourage the *gopī* to continue grasping for the divine. Such would jeopardize her newly conceived (inter)subjectivity. Ergo, his permanent withdrawal is an act of love that allows the *gopī* to properly *generate* her own sense of self. Irigaray speaks to this point: "Each remote from the other, we are kept alive by means of the insuperable gap. Nothing can ever fill it. *But it is from such nothingness that a spring of the to be is derived for us.*"⁵¹ Yet, at this point in Irigaray's text, the lovers are still carnally embraced and yet there is already an unbridgeable gap present between them.

⁵⁰ Hussain, *Erotic Sentiments in Indian Literature*, 56, emphasis mine.

⁵¹ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 9, emphasis mine.

Because of this, for Irigaray the lover's departure would not newly instantiate a space between her and Him, if erotic touch was *mutually* shared between two subjects. Remaining indefinitely to envelop or "consume" one another in perpetual divine embrace would destruct the gap that guarantees by difference (or "transcendence") and, as result, appropriate (i.e. objectify) the other as his/her own.⁵² Abandonment leaves the girl to the mundane realm, albeit as a newly constituted self that possesses an intensified emotional apparatus and a heightened sense of embodiment.

Thus, staying or leaving can be construed as act of love, yet I think that Irigaray would agree that the pain inflicted upon the cowherd girl by absence is not as grave as objectification and concomitant loss of subjectivity. Desiring him and longing for him, as long as he remains transcendent to her, actually "becomes an opportunity for self-cultivation."⁵³ There is, then, in Sūr Dās' *bhakti* songs, an embodied and erotic woman—the *gopī* mystic—for whom the intensity of her emotions and the integrity of her subjectivity depend, initially, upon an absent god, *in* whom her erotic desire, by virtue of his remoteness, is displaced. In Sūr's moving lyrics we hear the voice of such an individual who, through the songs of mourning her absent love, achieves a heightened sense of self. Impregnated with emotion, sensuousness, and embodiment, the woman's lamentation is "neither shrill nor too grave...the song of an intention sustained by an ideal."⁵⁴ This woman speaks *through* her feminine body (perhaps this is another way in which flesh may become word?).

Another erotic *pad* by Sūr Dās tells of a growing girl, *stirred* by the presence of Krishna, becoming increasingly "aware" of the sexual dimension of her maturing body:

The growing girl,
sitting in the house surrounded by groves
is deeply bewildered
and stirred.
In her heart
the dark image of the god of love [Krishna]
has emerged.
Often she lifts her bodice
and looks at the
budding breasts.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid., 16.

⁵³ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁵ Nilsson, *Sūrdās*, 60.

What is compelling about this poem is that, once again, Sūr's brilliant imagination neither spares us the language of embodied experience nor the presence of Krishna. Krishna is complicit in inspiring the girl's curiosity and awareness of her pubescence. "Deeply bewildered and stirred" by the dark Lord's image in her heart, the young girl looks at her breasts in a wholly new and erotic way. Sūr continues, describing Krishna's presence in her heart—in her chest:

he sees their reflection
in gem studded walls,
he has no need to wear
any ornament,
for the breasts are
those themselves.⁵⁶

The *pad* concludes with the notion that the breasts (*kuca*) are of unparalleled beauty—Krishna himself needs no other ornamentation or embellishment. Instead he need only clothe himself in the radiant beauty of the young girl's breasts. This is why in *bhakti* poetry "the breasts have been the deciding factor of beauty" because "the breasts are considered to be the abodes of the Cupid."⁵⁷

In the aforementioned poem, Sūr directs the audience's attention to the erotic dimension of the *gopi*'s body by speaking of her pubescent "budding breasts." In another, he sings of Rādhā (the prototypical cowhead girl) and how her breasts firm when she senses that Krishna is nigh. "Hundred thoughts rush in her heart,/when she sees the clouds gathering.../She looks once at the door/ and then at her hardening breasts."⁵⁸ Like the first poem, the sensible presence of Krishna makes the girl increasingly more aware of her sexual embodiment. In both cases the cowhead girls examine their breasts, however the second poem takes a more overtly erotic tone. Whereas Krishna's presence seems to have functioned as the sign of the onset of female sexual maturity in the former poem, in the latter his presence causes the breasts to undergo anatomical changes closely associated with sexual intercourse. The hardening of the *gopi*'s breasts in this case is a visible indication that the girl is becoming aroused. The possibility of a visit from Krishna is a possibility for a divine tryst. Such a prospect causes heightened bodily/sensorial awareness ("She is startled by the/ rustle of a leaf"), anxiety

⁵⁶ Ibid., emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ Hussain, *Erotic Sentiments in Indian Literature*, 237.

⁵⁸ Nilsson, *Sūrdās*, 61.

(“look[ing] once at the door...”), and sexual excitement (“...and then at her hardening breasts”).

Indeed devotional weeping may also remind a young woman of her (sexual) body, with tears cascading down her cheeks, dripping from her jaw, and splashing upon her (developing) breasts. As we have said, Sūr also speaks of tears wetting a cowherd girl’s bodice as if they are perspired from the breasts. Her chest hot from the gasps of violent weeping and the contrasting chilliness of teardrops upon her breasts keep her consciousness at a bodily level. Soaking her bodice,⁵⁹ flowing like a stream between the cleavage of her breasts,⁶⁰ or as “pearl” adornments, Sūr imagines devotional weeping within an intensely erotic context. The *gopīs* weep for reunion with Krishna, offering him their “physical frames,”⁶¹ which have been moistened by tears.

The cowherd girls do not experience pain and suffering themselves qua erotic, then (this would result in understanding them as emotional masochists); instead *gopīs*’ tears traverse the curves of their body, passing over key erogenous zones, giving them a heightened consciousness of their embodied subjectivity. Tears, then, are erotic insofar as they fall upon regions of the body that would be intimately involved in sexual communion with the divine. Weeping therefore can be an erotic experience for the *gopīs*—even in a state of passionate despair—because their tears moisten their breasts, providing a sensible reminder of their erotic, embodied presence in the world. In Sūr Dās’ devotional songs we thus encounter a human-divine tryst that is *celebrated* for its consummate sensuality and *mourned* for its brevity and nonpareil. The divine Other’s movement from intense presence to immitigable remoteness allows Him to be continually desired rather than perpetually had and absorbed. We will see later that this perpetual absence forms a foundation for the development of ethical relations between newly re-constituted human subjects.

* * *

With this, we turn to Sūr’s notion that the *gopīs*’ devotional mourning both dissolve self and self-interest into pure selfless love and soften the rigid structure of social obligations and domestic duties. This, in turn, dissolves the social and political predicates imposed upon the *gopī*, thereby freeing her to negotiate her own identity independent of them. To drive the point home,

⁵⁹ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 227.

⁶⁰ Nilsson, *Sūrdās*, 87.

⁶¹ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 102.

one of the cowherd girls challenges Krishna's admonishment to return home to family and social responsibilities crying out,

What mothers and fathers do we poor girls have anymore? What standards of womanly obedience can we obey? How can we perform our duties to the family any longer? We've lost all that. *It's all washed away with our tears...*⁶²

Washing away the girls' obligations and sense of social self, tears function as a universal solvent in the *mahārās līlā*. Living like yogis, the *gopīs*' tears clear away oppressive social structures and free them to live an ascetic life on the margins of society, "le[aving] all social convention behind."⁶³ In fact, seeing Krishna inspires them with a sort of divine madness that finds living under the restrictions of law and social ethics unacceptable. Instead, the girls cast off the world of rules in order to live within the universe of *prem*, the love relationship that Rādhā-Krishna represent (as divine prototype).⁶⁴ Here, devotional weeping has transgressive power. The cowherd girl continues her protest to Krishna, illustrating the profound simplicity of her devotion to Him:

Why would we want to return to Braj
 after seeing what the universe wants to see?
 There's no one else who can care for us,
 so talk all you want, we've no other home.
 Fathers? Mothers? Who are they?
 We just don't know them anymore.
 Who has husbands to lure them, or sons?
 Where are those homes to which we'd return?
 Morals—what are they? And sins?
 We're driven mad, we've forgotten them.
 We're simple girls and so it seems
*no simpler path we know...*⁶⁵

Following the consummation of love through the Great Circle Dance, the cowherd girls are left with separation, refusing to cease their tearful vigil.

⁶² Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 203-204, emphasis mine.

⁶³ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 107.

⁶⁴ As we shall see in this paper, inspired by the stories of the *gopīs*, Mīrā (a sixteenth-century poet from the great *bhakti* lineage) wrote of a princess who was "expelled from her marital home" due to her love for Krishna (which resulted in denying sex to her husband); cf. Hawley, "The *Gopīs*' Tears," 97.

⁶⁵ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 213, emphasis mine.

In “Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage in the Lives of Some Hindu Women Devotees,” D. Kinsley traces the separation of religious devotion (*bhakti*) from sense of social duty to many later devotional movements in Hinduism. According to Kinsley, *nowhere* in earlier Hindu scriptures such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* is devotion depicted as incongruous with or as an alternative to custom, family obligation, caste,⁶⁶ and social duty. Instead, the *Gītā* recommends that *bhakti* be one method of “undertaking *dharmā*,” expressed through the “integration” of meditative practice into the activities of quotidian life.⁶⁷ But the plausibility and coherence of understanding devotion in this way was challenged quite explicitly in the works of poet-saints such as Sūr Dās and Mīrā Bāī. To these poets, adherence to custom and performance of certain social duties hindered the extent to which an individual could love Krishna. Because of this, much of the poetic corpus generated during the later devotional movements addresses an apparent tension between *bhakti* and *dharmā*, “between one’s inherited duty and one’s inherent duty.”⁶⁸ In the event that inherited (social) duties came into conflict with the inherent duty to love God, the poets of the *bhakti* tradition espoused abandoning any social demand that would complicate or prevent a devotee from fully loving the Lord.

Therefore, to the *gopīs*, devotion to God was the highest duty one could fulfill. Because of this, we see two distinct understandings of *dharmā* at work in later devotional traditions of Hinduism, one consistent with *bhakti*, another inconsistent. As Kinsley has cleverly put, in devotional movements, *bhakti* and *dharmā* both consist of “loving the Lord,” but he also noted the struggle that women saints endure with respect to the inconsistent duties of loving both an inherited Lord (husband) and an inherent Lord (God).⁶⁹ Through the ostensibly autobiographical poetry of Mīrā Bāī and Sūr Dās’ imaginative appropriation of *gopīs*’ embodied experience, we see women tearfully torn between inconsistent demands—to whom shall they be faithful? We may recall, for example, the following words sung in the name of Mīrā Bāī: “Mīrā’s Lord is the One Who Lifts Mountains; I don’t need a bridegroom.”⁷⁰ Believing that loving God is the highest fulfillment of one’s

⁶⁶ “For my Lord, I have/ given up all;/ even my caste./ So says Sūr Dās”; cf. Nilsson, *Sūrlās*, 48.

⁶⁷ D. Kinsley, “Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage in the Lives of Some Hindu Women Devotees,” in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. J. Lele (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 83.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 83-84.

⁷⁰ R. Bly and J. Hirshfield, *Mīrā Bāī: Ecstatic Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 17. It is important to note that, in the collection’s Afterword (Pp. 67-99), J. S. Hawley qualifies Bly and Hirshfield’s selection and translation of poems sung in the name of Mīrā Bāī. Since they

dharmā, these women dissolve their marriages and marital duties in favor of devotion to God. In the words of Kinsley, God becomes either “an alternative to marriage” or “an alternative form of marriage.”⁷¹

In the *akerūr līlā*, the *gopīs* continue to worship Krishna, despite his recommendation for them to return to their homes and domestic/social responsibilities. The torment of their love for him is a unique form of worship, which is understood as “the natural form of religious discipline: *viyoga*.”⁷² Ironically enough, their practice of ceaseless devotion to Krishna was confirmed as the “proper end of religion”⁷³ through Krishna’s own words and actions in the *mahārās līlā*. In his triumph over the selfish and fickle desire of *kām*, and his substitution of it with the unselfish, unwavering desire of *prem*, Krishna legitimated *viyoga* as an ascetic form of religious practice—yoga’s rival sibling.

More should be said about *viyoga* as it is not only a form of ascetic religious practice, since there is, in the words of a certain *gopi*, “no simpler path” one can know. Here is the principle difference Hawley notes between the “simple”—yet profound—religion of the cowherd girls and the elaborate, formalized practice of the yogi. The religious practices of both *virabini* (the women who practice devotional weeping and longing) and *yogi* are developed in response to the inevitable separation one feels between self and divine communion (Rādhā-Krishna). Yet *viyoga* “delights” in the suffering of separation, imputing to it positive “religious valency”⁷⁴ while yoga attempts to surmount it through a contemplative form of meditation and strict bodily discipline. Both methods of (*vi*)yoga can be described as meditative, however. Yet, *viyoga* is a verbalized form of meditation characterized by “straightforward lamentations” that are addressed directly to the deity. The yogis, conversely, adopt an indirect and nonverbal method of meditation.

do not figure any of the “certifiably early poems” that one “might most reasonably associate with the historical Mirabai” into their collection, we should regard the *Mirā* with whom we are acquainted here is a modern construction, appropriated and re-presented through various religious imaginations (Pp. 85-86). Hawley suggests, however, that we should not simply eschew poems whose authorship cannot be definitely attributed to *Mirā Bāi* herself. Even though these translations or “versions,” (P. 89) as Hawley would prefer to call them, are ahistorical in their approach, many scholars contend that these poems can be read as textual templates, providing room for “improvisation” (P. 90). As a result, these versions, he concludes, are not unfaithful to the way in which *Mirā* is understood in contemporary India: “totally in love, utterly devoted, single-minded in her speech, simple in tone, straighter than straight” (P. 94).

⁷¹ Kinsley, “Devotion as an Alternative to Marriage,” 83.

⁷² Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 235.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 187.

⁷⁴ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 96-97.

Vijoga seeks to establish a direct, sensible connection to the divine—“a religion of the heart,” as it were—in which salvation is immediately accessible, achieved through devotion.⁷⁵ Yoga also seeks to obtain salvation, yet it holds that one arrives at it only through a long and gradual process of self-discipline and cerebral knowledge. In the differentiation made between the practices of *vijoga* and yoga we detect the recrudescence of the age-old dichotomies between feminine/masculine, body/mind, emotional/rational, *epistēmē/theoria*.

* * *

A polemical, yet tender composition attributed to the supposed medieval-Rajasthani-princess-turned-poet-saint Mīrā Bāī,⁷⁶ tells us of transcendent power that devotional weeping possesses over against contemplative yogic practices:

Listen, my friend, this road is the heart opening,
Kissing his feet, *resistance broken, tears all night*.

If we could reach the Lord through immersion in water,
I would have asked to be born a fish in this life.
If we could reach Him through nothing but berries and wild nuts
Then surely the saints would have been monkeys when they came from
the womb!

If we could reach Him by munching lettuce and dry leaves
Then the goats would surely get to the Holy One before us!

If the worship of stone statues could bring us all the way,
I would have adored a granite mountain years ago.

Mīrā Bāī says: *The heat of midnight tears will bring you to God.*⁷⁷

Taking an authoritative, yet gentle tone (“listen, my friend...”) Mīrā Bāī guides us along the path, which devotional practice entails (“this road is the heart opening”). Through the dissolution of duty to husband and family, Mīrā Bāī abandoned social duty, breaking that which to that point had resisted the allure of divine matrimony. She continues, with a detectable flippancy directed at the abstemiousness of yoga, listing actions that are inefficacious in broaching the otherworld. A strict diet of “lettuce and dry

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “What I paid was my social body, my town body, my family body, and all my inherited jewels. Mirabai says: The Dark One is my husband now” (Bly and Hirshfield, *Mirabai*, x).

⁷⁷ Ibid., 64, emphasis mine.

leaves,” for example, does not assure transcendence because then, according to Mīrā Bāī, goats—who meet such demands with ease—“would surely get to the Holy One before us!” Perhaps the most pointed claim she makes in her poem is directed against complacency in “stone statues,” icons, and other articles of material religion.⁷⁸ Even though Mīrā Bāī shares the belief in an incarnate God (*Harī*) and the suffusion of his essence within iconographic representations, she proclaims that not even the adornment of a granite mountain would achieve the corporeal audience/presence of God.

According to Mīrā, to transcend this world—its demands and its expectations—and (re)attain erotic union with the divine, it is necessary to weep the bitter, stinging tears in separation (*viraha*). Weeping amidst the darkness of midnight (which is, incidentally, the purple-black color of Krishna’s skin), longing for comm-union with the Lord, “the heat of...tears will bring [one] to God.” Thus, as Hawley has averred, the boundaries of Mīrā Bāī’s social world could not contain the tears she wept. Devotional weeping causes lysis, breaking down the limits of the social world, making transcendence possible.

In sum, the devotional tears of the *gopīs* are manifestations of their transcendence. They cry “out” of their social obligations, escaping them, and cry “into” the realm of the divine. In this sense, devotional weeping allows the *gopīs* to transcend their former selves and the claims made upon them. These transcendent, devotional tears are not always confined to Mīrā Bāī’s midnight hours, however. With respect to the *gopīs* as Sūr imagines them:

‘Day and night our eyes rain tears.
The monsoon storms have settled inside
since Syām [Krishna] has gone away.

⁷⁸ It is possible that Mīrā Bāī’s voice is being appropriated to speak explicitly against the cultic practice of stone worship. In fact, in Braj there was an “encouraged...belief that [a certain] hill [was] an embodiment of [Krishna], or [was] a manifestation of his essential form (*svarūp*).” Similarly, there are a number of sacred stones in Braj that, although “spurious,” are central sites for pilgrimage as they are imagined as “bear[ing] some kind of marking supposedly made by Krishna or a member of his entourage.” Perhaps Mīrā took issue with the Brahmin exaltation of a “mere stone into the adoration of an anthropomorphic icon” (A. W. Entwistle, *Braj: Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* [Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987], 288-290). I am not firmly suggesting that Mīrā was speaking against these practices. However, I find the possible link interesting and noteworthy as it has comparative import. An interesting comparison should be made between pilgrimages in Buddhism and Hinduism, highlighting how sacred landscapes evoke intense episodes of weeping and oscillating experiences of presence and absence of God (cf. M. Eckel, “Philosophy in a Drop of Tears, In *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. K. C. Patton and J. S. Hawley [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005]: 112-131).

Everywhere mascara smears,
 blackening our cheeks and hands.
 From within our breasts a torrent spills
 And our blouses never dry:
Our bodies are liquefied in tears,
 Incessant sadness, passion, rage.’
 The women demand to know, says Sūr,
 ‘Has he forgotten Gokul? And why?’⁷⁹

Like Mīrā Bāī, Sūr draws upon symbolic color imagery to stress an implicit connection between Krishna and the *gopīs*. The tears of the cowherd girls’ ceaseless weeping have the effect of eroding cosmetic appearances. Rivers of tears murky with the silt of mascara run down their cheeks. Using their hands to wipe the tears away, the *gopīs* smear the dark tears along their cheeks. We can imagine the girls’ skin is “blackened,” resembling the beautiful purple-black skin of their divine lover. However, we also imagine the tears possessing the “heat” of Mīrā Bāī’s midnight tears. Infused with the “frenzied fire of separation”,⁸⁰ the tears smear along the cheeks, spreading like a wildfire, charring the facial landscape, and blackening it. Mirroring the incessant weeping of the eyes, other tears are “perspired” through the breasts from an internal monsoon of emotion, drenching the girl’s clothing. The entirety of such an experience feels as if the body is “liquefied in tears.” Once again tears are divined to possess the ability to dissolve the social self, softening the rigid boundaries that demarcate the passage between the internal/external.

A crucial difference between the theologies of tears presented in the present excerpts of Mīrā and Sūr’s poems concerns the ostensibly theurgic power of tears. Mīrā seems assured that “the heat of midnight tears *will* bring you to God,” but Sūr does not seem satisfied with this. His poem is not only a poetic occasion of the *gopīs*’ expression of “incessant sadness, passion, rage”; challenging Krishna’s messenger, Udho, the cowherd girls are convinced that their beloved God has forgotten his homeland, forsaken his cowherd maidens. As Sūr imagines here, it is not evident that the *gopīs*’ tears will compel Krishna to physically manifest himself in their company. What is more, one could argue the “heat” of Mīrā’s tears do not summon *Hari*’s empirical reality either. Instead, acts of weeping and lament generate a sort of yogic heat (*tapas*), which the body imparts to the tears. In this way, the

⁷⁹ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 231, emphasis mine.

⁸⁰ Hawley, “The *Gopīs*’ Tears,” 105. Although the tears are not described as emanating directly from the chest, the line I have cited comes from one of Sūr Dās’ poems, which speaks of a “flood” of tears that wet the “bodies on their breasts.”

weeping generates Krishna's presence (as a warm bodily sensation)—even as he remains physically remote. We ought, then, to return to the case of Sūr Dās since it is possible that through the “wailing and groaning of separation” he imagines, “the sense of presence comes, paradoxically, only in the absence of the object of one's love.”⁸¹ One should follow Hawley's recommendation that we read each poetic re-citation of Sūr as a “performative utterance” aimed at “bring[ing] about that of which [the individual] speaks.”⁸² In other words, *bhakti* poems are not simply descriptive. Performed with devotion and passionate emotion, the poems beckon Krishna, “the absent present God.”⁸³ As it was with Mīrā, the weeping of Sūr's *gopīs* can generate a sensation of God's presence. Even though He is physically absent, singing devotional poems engages the memory. And in that moment, the warm sensation of weeping and its violent emotions may actually be reminiscent of the comfort of God's divine (erotic) embrace.

* * *

One of the most profound of Sūr's claims identified in this paper is that devotional weeping is a simple and proper end of religion. Again, this religious practice (*vijyoga*) stands in contrast to that of the yogis. If we take the triumph of the *gopīs* in “de-converting” Udho (Krishna's black “bee” envoy) from the misguided techniques of yoga and its programmatic “sublimation” of desire, *vijyoga* is victorious as the “proper” Hindu devotional practice. This selfless devotion involves lamentation and tears. The tears of longing dissolve social expectations and assert the primacy of love over society's laws, ethics, and customs. There is no higher religious or ethical duty that one could fulfill than to devote oneself to God (Krishna). In this way, weeping is religious devotion par excellence. Given this, it is no wonder why this simple—yet profound—form of religious practice would become, to poet-saints like Sūr Dās and Mīrā Bāī, the “proper end of religion”⁸⁴—a *bhakti dharma*.

⁸¹ Hawley, *At Play with Krishna*, 237.

⁸² Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 176. On the notion of “performative utterance,” see, for starters, J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); J. L. Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979): 233-252; S. J. Tambiah, *A Performative Approach to Ritual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁸³ Hawley, *Sūr Dās*, 177.

⁸⁴ On this point, see also V. Verma, “Life and Times of Surdas,” in *Surdas: Poet and Personality*, ed. S. N. Srivastava (Agra [Uttar Pradesh, India: Sur Smarak Mandal, 1978], 31.

This is what Sūr wants to communicate about tears—the “torrent of holy obligations.” There is no higher obligation that one could privilege over against her/his devotion to the divine. In this way, according to the spirituality of poet-saints like Sūr, the proper duty of religion (and of our humanity) is devotion (*bhakti*). By first abandoning the duties of the caste system (*jati dharma*) to devote herself to her Lord, when she returns to the world, she does so with a changed sense of ethical (or the dutiful). Therefore, the absent god prevents the relegation or alienation of the woman’s identity to the divine realm while also providing the *blueprint* for ethical relations with concrete human others in the mundane, worldly realm (albeit freed of what Irigaray would call the “pre-givens” of nature and, particularly for the *gopīs*, of culture⁸⁵).

But before we discuss what the use of this blueprint entails for ethical relations, I should explain what I mean by “blueprint,” since it is a concept that I have developed out of Irigaray’s thinking. I preface this discussion by acknowledging that such a blueprint is in apparent tension with a certain moment in Irigaray’s work; nonetheless, I suggest that this concept is not necessarily incompatible with the *gopī*’s attainment of properly constituted (inter)subjectivity. The (erotic) relationship between human and divine (Rādhā-Krishna) provides a blueprint for ethical human-human relations. This is because God is the radical Other, the male Other with whom her mutual touch is shared, and *between* whom (inter)subjectivity is nurtured. To have intersubjectivity, the woman must first understand herself as a subject. But their amorous encounter not only *generates* a subject, but recall, in the case of the prototypical *gopī*, Rādhā, it also deifies the feminine.

I see at least two results of Rādhā’s process of becoming self and becoming divine that may be seen as liberating. First, that in answering the higher duty of devotion, women *absent* themselves of the demands of caste. Second, Rādhā becomes the feminine whom medieval women may identify with (*in*) themselves. Irigaray herself states that a woman’s freedom is partially obstructed if a male god remains objective to (that is, outside of) her.⁸⁶ Yet in “Divine Women” she also claims that woman needs “a mirror wherewith to become woman.”⁸⁷ A woman’s singularity and freedom from epithetical⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 90.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁷ Irigaray, “Divine Women,” trans. G. C. Gill, in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, 2nd ed., eds. A. Garry and M. Pearsall (New York: Routledge, 1996), 479.

⁸⁸ I use the term epithetical, deriving from the active voice of the Greek verb *epitithemi*, in its strictest etymological sense to refer to predicates that have been placed or imposed upon the subject by others (as opposed to predicates that the subject applies to her or his self, an

predicates are achieved through the *rās*. Krishna, as the radical and absent Other, no longer exists only objectively—out there, as it were—external to the woman; vis-à-vis Rādhā, radical Otherness can be in-carnated and located in the feminine body. Thus the *gopī* becomes *two*, both an “I” and a “you.”

To me, then, it is precisely *through* the *gopī*'s experience of Krishna's vertical transcendence (i.e. inappropriability and irreducibility) that horizontal transcendence between human beings is made possible. In *Between East and West*, Irigaray disagrees with me on this:

What can assist the woman in becoming subject is the discovery of the other, the masculine, as horizontally transcendent, and not vertically transcendent to her. It is not the submission to the law of the Father that can permit the woman to become herself, corporeally and culturally, but the conscious and voluntary recognition, in love and civility, of the other as other.⁸⁹

In this passage, Irigaray dismisses the notion that a woman can discover herself by surrendering to the radically other and vertically transcendent male: God. This is because, to Irigaray, lacking a God of their own gender, women are “forced to comply with models that do not match them...[and] cut them off from themselves and from another.”⁹⁰ These comments perhaps have greater import with respect to Christianity, however, since it is a religion in which a “female god is still to come.”⁹¹ Yet, in the case of medieval *bhakti* Hinduism, the discovery of the vertically transcendent masculine *generates* a feminine divine, Rādhā. Hinduism provides women with a cacophony of avatars of the feminine divine (*śakti*) with whom to identify; and for the *gopīs* and to many medieval and modern *Vaiṣṇavite* Hindus, Rādhā is Krishna's *śakti*.⁹² What is more, in order to commune with Krishna, the *gopī* does not conform to the “law of the Father,” insofar as the “law” is derived from the concept of caste (*jatī*) or social standing (*varna*); rather she challenges these closely related concepts by which her social rank, occupation, and ritual (im)purity are hereditarily pre-determined. The dance

action which, in Greek, could be communicated alternatively by the verb's middle voice, *epitithemai*).

⁸⁹ Irigaray, *Between East and West*, 130.

⁹⁰ Irigaray, “Divine Women,” 477.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁹² S. N. Srivastava (ed.), “Prolegomena,” in *Surdas: Poetry and Personality* (Agra [Uttar Pradesh], India: Sur Smarak Mandal, 1978), 17. See also B. B. L. Sharmā, “Rādhā of Sûradāsa,” in *Suradasa: A Revaluation*, ed. Nagendra (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1979), 110-117.

of intersubjectivity (*rāśi*) shared between Rādhā and Krishna provides a new model for ethical relations between human subjects that is not dictated by *jati*.

* * *

Tears of transcendence, tears that dissolve and transform the self, tears that remind us of our erotic embodiment, theurgic tears, tears that oscillate in absence and presence, tears that deliver us to God: such are the inherent powers of tears evident in the complex spiritual lacrymology of imaginative *bhakti* poet-saints like Sūr Dās. Yet *gopīs*' weeping also subverts those social structures that impair the actualization of human-human ethical interactions. It would appear, however, that Sūr Dās' mystical theology of tears is unethical, since he would have the social duties of Hindu women of medieval Braj dissolved in the *gopīs*' tears. Yet, when read as a sort of "proto-feminist," Sūr Dās' theology emerges as a means of subverting the oppressive social constructs of this world and of ratifying powerful mystical practices for women's use. Sūr's tears of longing thus dissolve social expectations and assert the primacy of love over society's laws, expectations, and customs. In this way, weeping is not a last resort or a passive sign of weakness. On the contrary, devotional weeping and the emotions that inspire and accompany it are immensely potent and magically transformative. Therefore, *gopīs*' emotional tears achieve a Sartrean magical "transformation of the world,"⁹³ yet for the cowherd women their emotions are not, as Sartre regards them, strategic avoidance of exercising one's agency. There is no higher ethical duty that one could fulfill than to devote oneself to God (Krishna). Given this, it is no wonder why this spiritual practice would become the "proper end of religion"—devotion as the highest duty (*bhakti dharma*).

Dharma can be understood ultimately as "the inner reality that makes a thing what it is."⁹⁴ Therefore, the women's mystical experience also divorces their sense of *dharma* from all the predicates that *jati* places upon it. As a result of their actions they get at the ultimate and most universal (*sanātana*) inner reality that makes them the human subjects they are: to serve God. In *bhakti*, the cowherd maidens thus perform a form of religious service that expresses the most basic and unchanging *dharma* of all human subjects. Besides, Rādhā's deification ensures that the relationship between her and Krishna is not wholly a vertical one (i.e. divine-human). From Rādhā, women are free to draw their own predicates with which to define themselves. The ethical

⁹³ J.-P. Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, Kensington Publication Corp., 1989 [1948]), 58-59.

⁹⁴ S. Rosen, with G. M. Schweig, *Essential Hinduism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 35.

relation between these women and other men would be thereby transformed, since they are no longer defined by “what men need [them] to be.”⁹⁵

This, again, is a reminder that in the various *paḍas* of Sūr (and the poems of others like Mīrā Bāī) the second of two obstacles to the proper constitution of a woman’s subjectivity that Irigaray identifies—cultural “pre-givens,” such as the caste system—are subverted and overcome. This is accomplished through the *gopīs*’ making devotion *the* duty (*bhakti dharma*) over and against any other *dharma*. Irigaray herself proclaims, “To be free is . . . tantamount to a new duty which we must fulfil [*sic*].”⁹⁶ And the *gopīs*’ new duty is a universal and unchanging one (*sanātana*). It is their “new duty” to hold devotion above all other duties (and predicates) made upon them by their families, local community, and caste.

To conclude, this dialogue between Sūr Dās and Irigaray offers an approach to religion that does not exclude either mysticism or ethics. In making devotion to God the highest religious duty (*bhakti dharma*), the cowherd girls envisioned an ethics that superseded those of the caste system and, as a result, they were freed from the social duties expected of them by the male aristocratic hegemony. In detaching themselves from this immensely stratified and socio-economically immobile system, women’s identities and ethical duties were not determined *for them* at birth. Rather, women could re-negotiate and re-formulate their senses of self and form their own communities, communities of *bhakti* practitioners who coalesce around similar values: embodied experience, cultivating the full range of human emotions, the importance of feelings, and the transformative power of love.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Irigaray, “Divine Women,” 479.

⁹⁶ Irigaray, *To Be Two*, 93.

⁹⁷ Thanks are due to K. C. Patton for her support and helpful critiques on the beginnings of this project, and to J. S. Hawley for dialoguing with me and sharing his expertise on *bhakti* Hinduism and, particularly, Sūr Dās. I’m additionally appreciative of J. M. Marín, whose advice was crucial in generating the form of this paper, and of K. Albright and the anonymous reviewer from *JPS* for their instructive comments and editorial suggestions.