Yoginīs in the Flesh: Power, Praxis, and the Embodied Feminine Divine

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Abstract

The word yoginī is an ambivalent term, generally defined as a female yogin. For the purposes of the University of Hawai'i's Center for South Asian Studies' Symposium on the Ineffable in Religion and Ritual, I envisioned the ambivalence of the yoginī as characterized by semantic ineffability. This ineffability is seen in the divergence of definitions and descriptions of the yoginī in text and ethnography. The tantras portray her as flying, blood thirsty, and the object of tantric sex rites; she is rarely portrayed as a yoga practitioner. Human yoginīs in India, by in contrast, often identify themselves as sannyāsinī (renunciate), practice some form of yoga, and are often celibate. To address the question of why textual and human yoginīs bear little in common, I render a polythetic definition of the yoginī by first looking at the many modes of definition and classification used to render meaning of the concepts that are integral to the formation of the yoginī. I then problematize the categorical construction of the yoginī and the disjunction between textual references to the yoginī in tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha ("Wisdom Mantra Corpus" or "Seat of Wisdom"), the Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇas, and ethnographic accounts of embodied yoginīs. These three sources, which emerge from various sectarian, historical, and social milieus offer interrelated yet distinct descriptions of the yoginī and as such provide a broad base of signification upon which to render a polythetic definition.

Keywords Yoginī · Yoga · Yogin · Tantra · Women and religion · Hinduism · Śakti · Śākta

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Symposium on the Ineffable in Religion and Ritual, I presented and envisioned the ambivalence of the yoginī as characterized by semantic ineffability. This ineffability is seen in the divergence of definitions and descriptions of the yoginī in text and ethnography. Scholarly studies of the Śaiva and Śākta-tantras[1] reveal that the yoginī is not described as one who practices or embodies yoga. Rather she is described as mythic female divinity associated with power, capable of flight, affiliated with birds and other wild animals, and initiates men into the Tantric *kula,* or clan during sexual intercourse (White 2003, 27). In line with the mythical vision of the yoginī, Alain Daniélou offered a historical definition of the yoginī as being "attendants of Durgā. Originally, they were eight, but later they became thirteen, then sixty-four. They are represented as ogresses or sorceresses" (Daniélou 1985 [1964]: 288).[2] Human yoginīs in India, by in contrast, often identify themselves as *sannyasinī* (renunciate), practice some form of yoga,[3] and are often celibate.

In the pages that follow, I problematize the categorical construction of the yoginī and the disjunction between textual references to the yoginī in tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha ("Wisdom Mantra Corpus" or "Seat of Wisdom"),[4] the Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇas, and ethnographic accounts of embodied yoginīs. These three sources, which emerge from various sectarian, historical, and social milieus offer interrelated yet distinct descriptions of the yoginī and as such provide a broad base of signification upon which to render a polythetic definition.

Shaman Hatley defines the polythetic classification mode as:

> [A] membership in a class is [that] determined by possession of significant shared properties, no single one of which is necessarily held by all members of the class – [which is] in rejection of the monothetic, essentialist 'idea of perfect, unique, single differentia' (Hatley 2013: 917).

First introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who rejected dogmatic, essentialist modes of meaning-making, the polythetic mode exhibits a lack of clearly defined boundaries between different usages of the same concept. Wittgenstein argued that one should attend to various usages of a word through "a complicated network of similarities

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[1] Tantra, when written as a proper noun, refers to a monistic, non-dualistic theological system, which uses rituals, images, mantras, and deities as devices through which to attain non-dual, liberated awareness; tantra, written as common noun, refers to the ritual texts that emerge out of various Tantric schools. Tantric philosophy, in general, subverts hierarchical norms that govern the stratification of gender and caste (using *adharma* rather than *dharma* as a means to liberation).

[2] Cited by Hausner, Sondra L., "The Category of the Yoginī as a Gendered Practitioner," in *"Yoginī" in South Asia: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1472.

[3] For the purposes of this paper, yoga is defined in its broadest sense as any practice aimed toward liberated consciousness.

[4] The Vidyāpīṭha is particular branch of Kashmir Śaivas who worship Śakti as well as Bhairava (Śiva in his fierce form).

overlapping and criss-crossing," which he referred to as "family resemblances" (Biletzki and Matar 2016).

Polythetic modes of meaning-making are especially important when considering how yoginīs occupy a place in both the imagination—through oral and textual mythologies, hagiographies—and in the real world, as Tantric adepts, gurus, and yoga practitioners. This mode acknowledges the polyvalence of the term, while monothetic modes of defining yoginī would render some of these as false categories.

To better understand how textual-historical definitions and lived experienced of self-defined yoginīs, descriptions from the tantras can and should be placed against the backdrop of strīdharma (women's duty) and strī-svabhāva (women's nature) found in the Manu Smriti, which explicitly prohibit ideas of ideal spiritual womanhood. When these two divergent conceptions of ideal spiritual womanhood are looked at alongside one another, it can help to contextualize and understand the polyvalence of the human yoginī, who must mediate between strīdharma and her commitment to religious life.[5]

Embedded within textual definitions of the yoginī exists what Sondra L. Hausner calls a "deep ambivalence" between her power of attraction and her repellent gruesomeness within historical and textual sources. She notes that, "There is a deep ambivalence in the yoginī…[she] may be at once alluring and repellent… She embodies or contains the charged force of the liminal, which is both dangerous and other" (Hausner 2013). In concurrence with Hausner's claim, I extend this ambivalence to the embodied human yoginī in South Asia, who bears the brunt of history while seeking liberation through her own lived yoga sādhanā (praxis). Textual scholarship on the yogini, until recently, has defined her as an internally envisioned divine entity or as a human intermediary who was an object of Tantric ritual. These definitions are rendered according to text, rather than the lived practices of women.

In light of these exclusively textual definitions, current scholarship must contend with past androcentric tendencies in Indology that relied heavily on text and eschewed cultural

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[5] The Manu smriti lays out two things in regard to women, strī-svabhāva and strīdharma (trans. by Dave 1972):

2.213 svabhāva eṣa narīnāṃ narānām iha dūṣṇam / ato arthān na pramādyanti pramadāsu vipaścitaḥ // women's nature (svabhāva eṣa narīnāṃ) is to seduce men in the world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females.

2.214 avidvāṃsam alaṃ loke vidvāṃsam api vā punaḥ / pramadā hyutpthaṃ metuṃ kāma-krodhavaśānugam // Women can lead astray in the world (loke) not only a fool, but also a learned man, and make him a slave to desire and anger (kāma-krodha)

According to Strī-svabhāva, a woman's nature, is unstable, weak, fickle, wicked, and impure and that her womanly nature should never be allowed to surface. To meet the goals of this, she should be married before puberty, she should be a righteous wife (dharmapatni) and devoted to her husband (pativrata).

5.147 bālayā vā yuvatyā vā vṛddhayā vā api yoṣitā/ na svātatrtheṇa kartkyaṃ kiṃ cid kāryaṃ gṛheṣvapi// Nothing should be done by a girl, young woman, or even an old woman, even in her own house.

5.148 bālaye pitūr vaśe tiṣṭhet pāṇigrāhasya yaivane/ putrāṇāṃ bhartari prete na bhajet strī svatantratāṃ// In childhood a woman must be subject to her father, in her youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead, to her sons; a woman should never be independent.

5.155: No sacrifice (yajña), no vow (vrata), no fast (apuyuposaṇa) must be performed by women apart (from their husbands); if a wife obeys her husband, she will for that reason be exalted in heaven.

perspectives, particularly those of women. Miranda Shaw, in her book *Passionate Enlightenment,* says that, "Indologists in the past have tended to accept male religiosity as normative and universally representative," and that "many factors have predisposed scholars to fail to recognize the existence of women's religious activities," such as "uncritical acceptance of reports of male informants in the field, unwitting participation in sectarian polemics, and an inability to gain access to women's gatherings and religious practices," to name a few (Shaw 5). I agree with Shaw's assertion that if we take for granted the truth of androcentric scholarship on the yoginī, we will assume that yoginīs and their practices are either mythological, or merely a manner in which to attain social liberation, rather than spiritual. My sense is that reality of the yoginī is complex and the self-definitions of embodied, human yoginīs affirm this sense.

To render a polythetic definition of the yoginī I first look at the many modes of definition and classification used to render meaning of the concepts that are integral to the formation of the yoginī: *yoga, yogin, śakti* (spiritual power), and *siddhi* (supernatural power). I then analyze three primary sources: 1) the tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha, a Kashmir Śaiva sect of Tantrics who venerate Ultimate Reality as Bhairava and his retinue of Yoginīs; 2) The Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇas, which narrate the story of Parvatī, who is rendered as analogue to Śiva, the Lord of yoga; and 3) ethnographic data from various sources (Lynn Denton's ethnography on the Nātha yoginīs of Varanasi, June McDaniel's ethnography on Bengali Tāntrikas, and Sondra Hausner's ethnography of Radha Giri of Haridwar).

I draw from ethnographies illustrate how embodied yoginīs negotiate power and praxis in ways that are *specific to women's social realities*—realities which are in part defined by *strīdharma*. These women exhibit the ability to transgress social categories of strīdharma through an appropriation of tantric traits ascribed to the yogini. This transgression of social and religious categories perhaps facilitates the realization of social and spiritual liberation. These women provide examples of how yoginīs are understood very generally in two distinct ways: mythic and actual. Undergirding these conceptions of the yoginī is the essence of *śakti* that is accessed or expressed through *sādhanā,* as it is variously defined by each woman and their respective communities.

I assert that if women as embodied yoginīs have been written out of history, then they can be rediscovered through an interrogation of the category of the yoginī as well the processes of categorical construction through which the concept of the yoginī has been rendered. The examples given reveal that each yoginī possesses *śakti*—which is expressed and asserted through praxis (*sādhanā*) that is constructed and understood according to the socio-cultural and religious parameters in which they existed. What is striking in each example is the disparity between outsider perceptions and their own self-revelation evidenced in their poetry, textual teachings, or selfless action.

Scholarly Modalities and Definitions of the Yoginī: Classical, Historical, and Self-Defining

The yoginī's ambivalence can be seen in between a variety of Tantric and Purāṇic texts as well as within scholarly discourse. Scholarly references must grapple with the ambiguity presented in textual source materials in ways that result in either over generalization or over-specificity regarding the definition of the yoginī. More recently

scholars such as Shaman Hatley, and Sondra Hausner are putting current modes of classification of the yoginī to the litmus test of signification due to the recognition that the human yoginī seems only tangentially related to textual-historical descriptions.

Classification systems abound and also vary greatly depending on academic discipline and field. For the purposes of this study, I have located three distinct classification modes often used to extrapolate the meaning of the yoginī: (1) classical; (2) textual-historical; and (3) self-defined. The classical mode of defining terms and making meaning is primarily structural, grammatical, and diachronic in nature. Textual-historical modes of classification are synchronic and draw meaning from the historical, cultural, and narrative contexts in which they are used. Self-definition is subjective in nature, yet draws meaning from a variety of other modes, including historical, mythological, theological, and sociological.

The disunity between past and present meanings can be attributed to the variable modes of classifications that are employed in yoginī scholarship and the multiple, contradictory meanings and descriptions that are given, sometimes within a single source. The mode used to define any word alters its meaning insofar as each mode incorporates various categories of meaning in the process of construction. In practice, many modes of definition are used at the same time to develop meanings that are understandable across linguistic and historical boundaries. The word *yoga*, for instance, can be read grammatically, which does little to illuminate its broader significance without giving some recourse to its historical and textual usages. Ambiguities and ambivalence of yoga's meaning are absorbed into a gray area that exists between various kinds of grammatical and historical interpretations.

Yoginīs, Yogins, and Yoga

Even though current definitions and conceptions of yoga, yogin, and yoginī are all polyvalent, the concept of yoga must necessarily possess certain qualities that pertain to both yogins and yoginīs, thus creating a web of family relations between concepts. The limitation of a purely textual category casts a distorting shadow over the full valence of the yoginī. These definitions also do not take into account the relationship between yoga and the yogin. The Upaniṣads, Bhagavadgītā, the Yoga Sūtra, and many other texts define yoga as (1) a state of liberation or undifferentiated consciousness (*mukti,* or *samādhi*), and (2) a practice that leads one to *mukti* or *samādhi*. It is either the ends or the means; often it is both. The following texts define yoga as a path, a state of being, a practice, and union.

> *Bhagavadgītā 2.48*: Perform actions while established in yoga. Abandon attachment Arjuna and be equanimous in success and failure. Yoga is said to be equanimity.
> *Yoga Sūtra 1.2*: Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations the mind.
> *Linga Purāṇa 1.8*: Yoga is nirvana, the condition of Śiva.[6]

These various definitions are often considered comprising one's total understanding of yoga and should not be viewed as contradictory.

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[6] Trans. James Mallinson, *Roots of Yoga (Penguin Classic)* (UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2017).

Scholarship on the yoginī, while not denying the connection between yoga and yoginī, tends to gloss their relationship, preferring to focus more on the yoginī's supernatural and gruesome characteristics. Gordon David White's book *The Kiss of the Yoginī* develops a well thought out and multidimensional definition of the yoginī based on various tantras, particularly the *Kaulajñananirṇaya* (ninth to tenth century). White preferences the tantras of the Ghorakhnath yogis that are attributed to Matsyendranath. The justification for using texts of this particular Śaiva Tantric school is their focus on the yoginī. His eight-part description of the yoginī goes as follows:

> (1) they were a group of powerful, sometimes martial, female divinities with whom human female 'witches' were identified in ritual practice; (2) their power was intimately connected to the flow of blood, both their own sexual and menstrual emissions, and the blood of their animal… victims; (3) they were essential to Tantric initiation in which they initiated male practitioners…; (4) they were possessed of the power of flight; (5) they took the form of humans, animals, or birds, and often inhabited tress; (6) they were often arrayed in circle; (7) their temples were generally located in isolated areas…;and (8) they were never portrayed as practicing yoga for the simple reason that yoga as we know it had not yet been invented. (White 2003: 27)

While his definition is broad, it only remains so within the parameters of the Ghorakhnath tantras. He problematizes the issue of Tantric sex rites through an analysis of their textual basis and their ritual transformation in what he calls "high Tantra." His study, however, focuses almost exclusively on sexual rites and not with the female participants who are yoginīs. According to White's presentation, these women appear in *Kaulajñananirṇaya* as mere accessories to rites of initiation for men (White 2003). There is no discussion on who these women might have been, or how and why they came to participate in the tantric rites. Implicit in these descriptions is the refutation of the notion of the yoginī as a female *practitioner* of yoga. These views implicitly support the objectification of the woman as ritual vehicle, while rejecting the notion of women as agents in their own spiritual liberation.

Power, *siddhi*, and *śakti*

Textual-historical and self-defined meanings for the yoginī possess two key traits: (1) power, conceived of as *śakti,* and (2) praxis, conceived of as any performative act such as ritual, asceticism (*tapasya*), or *sādhanā*. Śakti has two interrelated meanings: first, "Śakti" denotes the Mahādevī, or great goddess in her multiple emanations, such as Durgā, Umā, Parvatī, and Kālī; second "*śakti*" can be understood as the power inherent in manifest reality. This power is feminine in nature and is usually harnessed by the gods in the Purāṇas, as exemplified in the sixth century Devī Mahātmyā, wherein the gods' harness their *śakti* to manifest the great goddess Durgā to defeat the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsura to save the world. The two meanings often converge in theological contexts in which the devī is consorted to one of the gods (*deva*). Yoginīs by extension are both Śakti and possess *śakti,* making them both agent and instrument of Divine power.

How the yoginī conveys and embodies *śakti* in both text and life lends greatly to her perceived polyvalence. Power is communicated in various ways depending on

theological milieu and social contexts. The forthcoming descriptions of the yoginī in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata*, the *Brahmāyamala* of the Vidyāpīṭha and the Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇa-s illustrate the yoginī's *śakti* in myriad ways—sometimes she is fierce, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes she is rendered as an ascetic. The tendency to focus on the verbal, imagistic signifiers, such as blood lust, which are used to denote power often detracts from the essence of the yoginī, which is in all cases her embodiment of *śakti*. Sondra Hausner offers an apt description of the relationship between power and the yoginī. She says:

> The yogini embodies power as a tool, not an end. What that power is meant to effect – and the set of social relationships, hierarchies, and the interests for whom it is mobilized – will be historically and culturally located, dynamically shifting (Hausner 2013: 1517).

Nevertheless, these two essential elements remain consistent throughout various notions of the yoginī in diverse historical and cultural milieus.

Yogins and yoginīs are both thought to possess supernatural powers (*siddhi*-s) that are the result of either their *sādhanā* or divine birth, such as clairvoyance, the power of flight, immortality, healing abilities, telepathy, mind control, and so on and so forth. Various sectarian groups employ different means to harness power. Tantric schools are highly ritualistic and in general do not utilize renunciation practices as way in which to cultivate *tapas* (mystic heat). Tantrics, on the other hand, use meditations, mantras, visualizations, sacrifices, and substances to generate *tapas,* which acts as a catalyst for Divine self-realization. Non-tantric schools employ renunciation practices that are generally associated with yoga. Fasting, celibacy, extensive periods of silence (*mauna*) or isolation, lack of sleep, wearing minimal clothing, even in the winter months, and other forms of physical *tapasya*, are common practices.

Tantric and Puranic Yoginīs

Yoginīs of the Vidyāpīṭha

The tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha remain an apt source for influential definitions and descriptions of the yoginī on two fronts: they present a comprehensive cosmology of the Yoginī in the Bhairava Tantras and they have been integrated into the later corpus of Abhinavagupta's writings, which systemized Tantra and brought it into the purview of the orthodoxy by aestheticizing transgressive practices. They are considered Śaiva tantras due to their association with Bhairava, yet the cults of Vidyāpīṭha have strong Śākta inclinations as they subvert Śaiva Tantra's power structure so that the typically masculine hierarchy is superseded by a feminine hierarchy that places the Kālī and her cult of Yoginīs at the pinnacle. (Sanderson 1990: 671).

The *Brahmāyamala* and the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* tantras of the Vidyāpīṭha give definitions and descriptions that support the notion of yoginīs as either Divine or as embodied human women. These yoginīs are beseeched either internally and symbolically through visualization, or externally through rituals with human yoginīs. The *Brahmāyamala* presents an extended taxonomy of yoginīs who manifest as human

women. These women are considered consorts and can be manifested as one's wife (*sahajā*), a courtesan (*kulajā*), or an outcaste woman (*antyajā*). The *Tantrasadbhāva*, another Vidyāpīṭha scripture, says that these women are "born" in various ways: in sacred fields, sacred mounds, from yoga, mantra, and through mastery of yoga and mantra (Hatley 2007: 159–61).

The *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* notes that yoginīs are of two main kinds: those are born into clans (*kulajā*), who are also human (*mānuṣya*), and those who are Divine (*devatāḥ*). Shaman Hatley argues that these taxonomies affirm that female divinization "lies at that heart of the image of the yoginī" (Hatley 2014: 987). An important aspect of these taxonomies is that they acknowledge that women are not only objects of Tantric *sādhanā* but that they are also adepts, practitioners, and gurus.

Those who are born into clans as children are conceived of in "the intercourse of the consecrated" and are divine from birth. There are also those yoginīs who reside in sacred sites—*pīṭhas*—often prepubescent girls, while women after the age of twenty-seven become yoginīs through possession or practice. These women are noted as having certain physical and behavioral characteristics, which align them with families of the *Mātṛkā*s (Divine Mothers), such as Brāhmī, Māheśvarī, Cāmuṇḍā, and Mahālakṣmī. They are characterized as: radiating out of the heart of the deity as a network of power (*yoginī-jāla*), appropriators of the cycle of time (ruling as incarnations of God in the four world-ages, or *yugas*), connected with cremation grounds, connected with *pīṭhas* or power seats (generally understood as sites of Śakti temples), wild, blood drinking, and skull bearing (Sanderson 1990: 671).

Alexis Sanderson notes that the tantras elaborate on these traits so that the aspirant is able to identify the yoginī for ritual. What is important to note is the relationship between yoginī and male tantric: the male aspirant prepares his own body as a sacrifice to the yoginī, or the body is analogous to both the sacrifice and the altar, and in some cases his own blood is used as an offering (Sanderson 1990: 671–72). While one may read these tantras as objectifying women for the sake of men's liberation, they could conversely be read to extract women's religious power, as male adepts must give praises, make offerings—sometimes monetary, and respect the yoginī lest the ritual be ineffective, or even dangerous to the adept.

The Yoginī as Analogue to the Yogin in the Śaiva and Śākta Purāṇas

The Śiva and Kurma Purāṇas, which are Śaiva, and the Kālikā Purāṇa, which is Śākta, state the explicit association of the yogin with Śiva, and the yoginī with the Mahādevī. A yogin is described as one who engages *tapas*, which takes the form of contemplation. The Great Goddess, who is conceived of variously as the Mahādevī, Kālikā, Satī, Parvatī, and Umā, among others, is also presented as practicing *tapas*, also rendering her a yoginī who is consort and analogue to Śiva.

Yet, according to a tantric non-dualist reading of the Śaiva and Śākta Puranic texts, it could be inferred that Parvatī is not only analogue to Śiva but of the same essence. In the *Śiva Purāṇa* (SP 2.1.15-5.55-56) and *Kūrma Purāṇa* (KP 1.11.3) Brahma seeks to have a son, who will procreate and populate the earth, but is unsuccessful. In Brahma's rage, Śiva, the Lord of yoga is born, but not as Brahma originally intended. Out of Brahma's mind is born Ardhanārīśvara—the lord who is half male and half female. Brahma is terrified of what he sees and asks Śiva to divide himself.

In order to appease Brahma's fears, Śiva (also called Rudra) splits himself into male and female, with the intent of generating desire (*tapas*) so as to populate the earth. Rudra manifests the male as many gods and the female as the Mahādevī who is inherent in all of creation. Within this story, the Mahādevī is so pervasive that she is hard to discern, just as the air we breathe is so pervasive one does not notice it. The gods request that she give herself finite qualities so as to be seen. She takes a black and white form, as well as becoming Satī, Śiva's betrothed. The Kālikā Purāṇa states that if he marries, his wife must be a Yoginī.

> *Yā me tejaḥ samarthā syādgrahitumiha bhāgaśaḥ / tāṃ nideśaya bhāryārthe yoginīṃ kāmarūpiṇīṃ*
> Point out to me a woman whom I may desire as a wife who is a *yoginī,* who is *kāmarūpā* (takes multiple forms), and can bear my seed. (KP 9.46-50)

According to this prolegomenon of the creation of the universe, Satī is united with Śiva in the beginning as primordial Śakti and can therefore also be considered yoginī.

Throughout the tale of Śiva and Satī's marriage, it is supposed that she performs *tapas* out of duty (*strīdharma*) to win and retain the affections of Śiva. While this is partly true, one must not forget that Śiva *is* Satī ontologically and genetically. A closer reading of their origination in terms of their subsequent union as husband and wife affirms that Satī's *tapas* is not only for the sake of marriage but performed so she can remember her true nature. The Śiva Purāṇa states that Satī "remembers herself" and frequently tests Śiva, which is perceived as petulance. It is stated: "Out of her own free will Satī had assumed human form; by her own power of illusion she became and acted like a human… petulant and weak in faith… She let her mind dwell, not on attachment, but on detachment from the world and worldly bondage" (ŚP 2.2).[7]

Stella Kramrisch provides a commentary to the story of Śiva and Satī:

> The incarnation of the Great goddess as Satī was her way back to Siva through the failings and sufferings of the human condition that she had chosen… she is with Siva both as a *yoginī* and as a loving woman. (Kramrisch 1981: 314)

She experiences the divine and human nature of herself as an internal conflict. On one hand she longs for ultimate knowledge, and on the other, she longs to experience worldly love and devotion. In this story, we see Satī, not as the passive wife, but a complex multilayered being who longs for the ultimate and the worldly and must make personal, agentive decisions regarding her own fate. In the corpus of stories about Satī, her portrayed fragility and obeisance are a ruse of the Great Goddess, Kālikā, whose only aim is to reunite with Śiva, the other half of herself, so that she may know god as herself in undifferentiation.

Ethnography

The ethnographic accounts of the yoginīs that follow show an admixture of traits that both align them with and distinguish them from tantric and Purāṇic yoginīs—

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they are independent but also socially rooted; they are fearsome, but also benevolent; they reject the orthodoxy, but are often celibate. I have constructed a random sample of ethnographic data of various yoginīs from different locations across Northern India from Bengal to Benares between the years of 1976 to 2010 in order to make generalizations based on the details of their *sādhanā*. All the ethnographies cited deal with either yoginīs who identify themselves as such, or with women who live in communities who identify them as such. Beyond their self and social definition, I use their own words are used to elaborate upon those traits and behaviors that qualify them as yoginīs.

In her study on *sadhvī*s and Nātha Yoginīs, Antoinette DeNapoli argues in favor of the use of women's own voices and narrative strategies to better understand how meaning is made and remade within the context of women's religious lives. She says that:

> Narrative strategies function as rhetorical "disclaimers of intent" (Lawless 1988) with which these *sādhus* not only assert (female) agency, but also create an alternative (female) tradition of devotional asceticism to the more dominant (male) tradition of Brahmanical asceticism by drawing on regional models of female devotionalism as well as a more generalized bhakti discourse. Through analysis of these interrelated themes, we understand some of the ways in which the Rajasthani female *sādhus* I worked with imagine and articulate their spiritual authority and agency in an institution in which they are clearly minorities. (DeNapoli 2009: 85)

Though DeNapoli's research deals with bhakti and asceticism, her claims regarding the articulation of female *sādhu*'s spiritual authority and agency can be extended to include human yoginīs who must function in similar social contexts.

Following the lead of Lynn Denton, Sondra Hausner, and Antoinette DeNapoli, I have attempted to locate: (1) how they or others identify them as yoginī and what it means to them; this is often where we find reference to the text; and (2) how they use their experiences as evidence of their spiritual progression and power. This data is incorporated into the larger framework of classical and textual-historical modes of classification in order to provide a comprehensive view of the yoginī.

Nātha Yoginīs of Varanasi (Lynn Denton)

Lynn Denton's ethnography, done in Benares in the mid to late 1970s, focuses on women ascetics some of whom identified as yoginīs. Her aim was to ascertain their personal histories in order to develop a theory regarding the call to female asceticism in a culture that disavows female renunciates. The yoginīs in her study are all ascetics (and therefore not Tantric) and only represent a small group of yoginīs in India. One can use Denton's field data as way in which to contextual these women's *sādhanā* in an effort to understand the influence of society upon their choice to live as ascetics and yoginīs. Her efforts, though not wholly successful, extrapolate the following: (1) majority are from high-caste Bengali and Nepali families; (2) younger unmarried women live in *kanyā gurukula* (convent-like housing for girls); and (3) older women, often widows, live in *aśrama*s. Denton implicitly raises the question of why female Nātha ascetics are overwhelmingly high caste (her studies show that

the only two who were not twice-born were Sikh and the other a foreigner) (Denton 2012: 116). A reading of the Manu Smriti, which states that though all women are cited as having a sinful nature (*strī-svabhāva*), suggests that it is the high-caste women that are the most constrained by social mores of *strīdharma*, which prevent them from working actively toward their own spiritual liberation.

When asked why she chose such a lifestyle, one woman explained that, "In *grhastha* [householder life] you know great pleasure and sorrow, but you cannot know peace; that life is in a state of constant change and so your mind cannot become still. In the ascetic life you are single minded, and so you can achieve salvation." Many women stated aims of *siddhi* and liberation. States such as *ananda* (bliss), madness (*pāgalpan, bhairavī*), and *masta* (intoxication) are all understood as signs of power and liberation. These are also characteristics of mythic yoginīs and fierce incarnations of the Mahādevī, such as Kālī (Denton 59).

Denton found in her field study that the *sādhanā* of these women did not differ much from men's, implying that they renounce householder life and personal property, undertake frequent fasts, and are celibate as part of a path to salvation. In order to achieve salvation, these women must have more freedom than would be allowed in marriage. Their stories show the intersection between *sādhanā* and society. Their yoga and asceticism, though similar to their male counterparts, differs slightly due to there being more dangerous conditions for wandering female ascetics. Thus, they are settled and protected by their ashrams, which provide a veneer of respectability for a path that is otherwise considered socially subversive.

Bengali Tāntrikas (June McDaniel)

June McDaniel argues that many ideas about tāntrikas found in texts are not congruent with the lives of practicing tāntrikas today. She emphasizes the importance of anthropological methods in Tantric studies. She conducted her study over two years in West Bengal and interviewed many tāntrikas, some of whom identified themselves as yoginī. She cites conceptions of the yoginī in the *Kulārṇava* and *Yoni* tantras as feeding into popular conceptions of a highly sexualized, wild, and wanton tantric woman or yoginī. McDaniel notes that most of the female tāntrikas she interviewed were "strong, aggressive, not willing to put up with the problems of men… most were totally celibate." She further notes that "some female tāntrikas interviewed would fit into the 'unfit' category in the *Kulārṇavatantra*; women who were ugly, old, fearful, or even sleepy (KT 7.49–51)" (McDaniel 2012: 155). Her interviews illustrate disparities between text and lived reality.

McDaniel notes that many of these women were staunchly celibate, due to the fact that that tantric meditation requires the kind of concentration that would not be possible when in the grip of desire. Gauri Ma head of an ashram in Bakreshwartantra, says that *sādhanā* reveals a person's "inner history," enabling one to "see inside… to watch the inner life of the spirit." The goal of *sādhanā* is to gain Śakti and to have her take residence in your heart. Gauri Ma says, "It is Śakti who enlightens you, who brings you to the highest states. Śiva is as useless as a corpse, and that is why he is portrayed as one in the iconography" (McDaniel 2012: 156).

Another woman named Archanapuri Ma, a celibate member of a Ramakrishna lineage, says that her tantra *sādhanā* is a form of devotion. Prior to becoming the

head of an ashram in Jadavpur, she was a Vedantin, but later became a devotee of Śakti in the form of Kālī Bhavatāriṇī. McDaniel notes that Archanapuri Ma echoes the words of Gauri Ma, and "finds celibacy necessary for both service and religious love" (McDaniel 2012: 156).

Radha Giri, aka Mataji (Sondra Hausner)

Hausner met Radha Giri, affectionately called Mataji, at the 1998 Kumbha Mela and visited her frequently for the next few years. Through conversations and her time spent with Radha Giri, Hausner observes that her life as yoginī could not be reduced to mythic lore or outsider interpretation. Most yogins wander, eschewing attachments to the world, yet Radha Giri is rooted and stable as are her commitments to individuals in her community. Her sedentary lifestyle and familial practices reflect a complex tapestry of meaning that is woven from history, theology, and society. Hausner argues that:

> Being a woman renouncer, therefore, both reflects and defies women's roles in householder communities. Women renouncers do not necessarily wander to accrue religious power, but they do leave their natal and marital homes and find new places to settle as full-time religious practitioners. And in their new communities, women renouncers use their sedentary seats as bases from which to care for people. They do not reject the world but immerse themselves in it, using the religious power with which they are bestowed for the benefit of others. (Hausner 2005: 54–55)

Radha Giri, known for her feisty temper is considered a *sādhvī* (female renouncer) and yoginī, who is rumored to possess magical powers (*siddhi*). At the time of Sondra Hausner's ethnography, Radha Giri had lived for twenty-five years on a small island in the Ganges River near Haridwar, Uttar Pradesh. Hausner says that she was well known by residents for her fierce temper as well as by those who lived outside her community of followers. Yet, the community that surrounded her in Haridwar admired and respected her. Radha Giri, whether viewed as a witch or as Beloved Mother, was known as a yoginī. Her location made her highly accessible, and she was visited by a constant stream of yogins, sadhus, and other pilgrims. (Hausner 56).

Hausner calls Radha Giri a "sedentary yoginī" who does not wander from place to place, which differs from the conventional notion of the wandering yogin that is referred to in texts and seen often in Haridwar. The social context which defines and shapes her expression of *śakti* is, according to Hausner, connected to her settlement, which allows her to care for her community in ways she could not if she were on the move. Her physical situatedness has become the foundation for her ongoing *sādhanā,* which was socially grounded and engaged. Her settlement, thus, illustrates her negotiation between the life of itinerant renunciant and social circumstances that would make wandering undesirable or unsafe for a woman. The choice to remain in one location subverts normative prescribed behaviors for yogins and *sadhu*s such as those outlined in the *Saṃnyasa Upaniṣad,* which proposes strict rules against staying more than one night in a village, three in a town, and five days in a city (DeNapoli 2009: 82). The rationale for these guidelines is to avoid the kinds of social relationships that would result in worldly attachments that contradict the aims of yogic *sādhanā.*

Radha Giri's primary form of *sādhanā* outside of veneration to the Ganga and caring for the forest shrines is enacted in the form of what she calls *kriyā yoga,*[8] by caring for and defending the disenfranchised and downtrodden. There are several accounts of her *kriyā yoga:* caring for a madwoman by feeding her and protecting her from harm; feeding and caring for stray dogs to the extent that they share her residence; and the rearing of a girl child she named Ganga Giri, whom she found floating down the Ganga in a basket. Her unofficial adoption of the girl had been the focus of much controversy since she refused to give the girl to the local authorities, feeling that if the girl had arrived on her doorstep by way of the Ganga, then it was her duty to care for it (Hausner 2005: 127–28).

While Hausner mentions in her field study that the majority of yogis and yoginīs she met did not wander since wandering interfered with their religious praxis, Radha Giri's particular settlement attests to more than simple convenience. Her praxis is integrally connected to society; she subverts and upends social norms for women through her status as yoginī, yet at the same time finds a place of power and prominence in society through her role as "mother." Her socially engaged role provides a context and rationale for her fiery temperament, which has become the topic of her "mythic" reputation. Her outbursts, which are sometimes written off as "*yoginī* madness," are a unique form of *kriyā yoga* in that such behaviors function as way to protect people—particularly women and children (Hausner 2005: 131).

It is worthwhile to note that in Christian or Jewish traditions, when males enacted such a role, they were seen to be using the *prophetic voice*. When it is performed by a woman in an exoticized culture, it is "madness" both in her own culture and in etic scholarship. Such "madness," as it were, also brings to mind the third episode in the *Devī Māhātmya,* where Kālī springs forth from Caṇḍikā (Durgā) as the fierce and unwieldy vehicle of her divine rage that is enacted against the *āsura*-s in order to restore order to the universe.

In such cases, it becomes clear how Radha Giri negotiates several disparate roles—yoginī, Mātā, and *guru.* A yoginī by reputation is understood as transgressive, terrible, and frightening to behold, existing on the margins of society; a *guru,* by contrast, lives in the service of his or her *śiṣya* (students); and Mātā (mother) is the embodiment of idealized normative roles for women in Hindu culture. Mataji's ability to skillfully negotiate these roles through her *karma* yoga *sādhanā* that place her in service of her devotees as well as the Ganga mirrors the kind of understanding Śākta-bhaktas have of Kālī-Mā—a fierce but benevolent mother who is willing to defend her children from harm at all costs.

The Polyvalence of the Yoginī

The following table (Table 1) gives various characteristics of both historical and self-defined yoginīs side by side in order to illustrate areas of overlap and divergence, both of which are many.

This list illustrates characteristics of each classification mode used to define the yoginī. The list is instructive since it illustrates the disparity between textual descriptions and lived reality of embodied woman who self-identify as yoginīs. What is also

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[8] *Kriyā yoga* in this sense is not the same *kriyā yoga* mentioned in the *Patañjali Yoga Śāstra*. It is more akin to *karma* and *seva yoga*-s in that it is centered around moral and ethical behavior and service to her community.

Table 1 Types of mythic and human yoginīs and their attributes

Textual-historical Yoginīs		Self-Defining Yoginīs	
Kaulajñananirṇaya (trans. White)	Powerful Martial Associated with human "witches" Connected to the flow of blood, especially menstrual blood Flying Shapeshifting Arrayed in circles Did not practice 'yoga' Engages in sex rites with male initiates	Nātha Yoginīs (Denton)	Lives in *aśrama*s or other convent-like housing Practices *tapasya* Considered *sadvī* and *sannyasinī* (female renouncer) as well as a yoginī Seeks liberation Exhibits "madness, intoxication, and bliss" Celibate
Yoginīs of the Vidyāpīṭha	Powerful, sometimes human women Aligned with the *mātṛkas* (Divine Mothers) Rulers of time (*yugas*) Connected with cremation grounds and sacred sites (*piṭhas*) Wild Blood drinking Skull bearing Adepts of yoga and mantra Engages in sex rites with male initiates as equal and consort	Radha Giri (Hausner)	Sedentary Referred to as Mataji (Beloved Mother) Fiery temper Protective of encampment and community Practices *kriya-karma* yoga (service to the community)
Purāṇic Yoginīs	Associated with Satī and Parvatī as consorts of Śiva Śakti Creator of the world Practices *tapasya* (austerities) Inherent in all creation	Bengali Tāntrikas (McDaniel)	Old Staunchly celibate Fearful (rather than fearsome) Aggressive Gurus or heads of *aśrama*s Practice yoga

important to note are the areas of convergence between the two types. What becomes clear in the ethnographic data and interviews is that embodied yoginīs appropriate certain characteristics found in the tantras, either intentionally or unintentionally, to communicate the possession of *siddhi* and *śakti* (supernatural and spiritual power).

For instance, the Nātha yoginīs, whose tradition reaches back to Matsyendranath and the Ghorakhnaths cited by White, possess few of the characteristics given in the text. Radha Giri, apart from her fiery outbursts does not obviously mimic the textual-historical descriptions in the tantras or the Purāṇas. She does however associate herself with a place, which might be considered her *pīṭha*. She is additionally considered a kind of "mad-mother", much like the *Mātṛkās* of Tantric and Purāṇic lore.

The interesting accounts of the Tāntrika yoginīs by McDaniel implies that it is primarily by virtue of calling oneself 'yoginī' or 'tāntrika' that these women are considered transgressive and that their *sādhanā* is actually tame, involving celibacy, mantra, and meditation. These women, who in many cases are the *gurus* of men, are celibate not because of social propriety, but because of its practical application on the

path to realizing oneself as Śakti. If these women bear anything in common to the yoginīs of the tantras, it is their leadership and agency in the religious and spiritual worlds in which they exist.

Notes on Gender

The yoginīs mentioned in this study confirm that gender-identity is inconsequential on one level, in that it does not appear to have a direct impact on their choices to live as a yoginī, but extremely consequential on another as it moderates and dictates their lives as spiritual aspirants. Their choices are motivated by the search for *mukti*, and that search is reflected in their *sādhanā*. Yet, their actions do express a movement away from normative gender roles, which strongly supports the notion that gender is indeed constructed and performative. Those performances of gender that do not lend themselves to a clear path to liberation are eschewed, while those that are useful are maintained—as exemplified by Radha Giri's embodiment of the iconic Mātā, who cares for and protects the disenfranchised. Whether or not the choice to uphold or eschew normative gender roles is conscious on the part of all yoginīs remains a question, since surely the need to express *śakti* in socially viable ways is essential to the quest for *mukti* which takes place on the socio-cultural level of being.

  As such, it is immensely important to address the disparity between other's accounts of the lives of the yoginī and their own self-definition through their spoken words and actions. This is not because one story is somehow truer than the other. In fact, I believe that both accounts can offer a view of "what is." From the perspective of the biographer or the ethnographer, the lives of the yoginī help construct social histories that include women of power, which help us understand how feminine power was rendered and expressed in patriarchal systems that sought to obscure women's voices and roles in religion.

Conclusion

At the onset of my quest for the yoginī, I felt bereft at the dearth of sources. Yet, by this project's culmination, I was astounded by the sheer volume of yoginīs that seemed to reach out to me from the ends of the internet, through friends, mythologies, ethnographies, and folk stories. I came to realize that beneath the thin opaque film reel of androcentric yoga scholarship and lore, existed a vibrant *sangha* of mothers and yoginīs that share certain "family resemblances" such as fearlessness, compassion, and self-awareness. These women were not sinister or demonic, yet were self-possessed to such an extent as to appear transgressive when compared to others. It is notable to mention that all of the women I discovered used their *śakti* in the service of others.

  The words of the self-defined yoginī give us profound insights into the lived theologies of the Dharma traditions of South Asia. It is clear in *all* the accounts given that gendered identity is not of paramount importance to these yoginīs. Their *śakti* is expressed as not wholly their own in that they each act as divine intermediaries for Śiva, Śakti, or Gaṅgā Ma—divine forms which point to a non-dual and unqualified

divine. The *śakti* of the yoginī is also the *śakti* of the gods, expressed through praxis and *sādhanā* that adheres to the *dharma* of the yoginī in question. Their *dharma,* especially in the case of the Tantric Yoginīs of Vidyāpīṭha, can appear as *adharma*, since their actions and words transgress not only gender roles, but the normative behaviors expected in the culture of the time.

Letting go of marriage and motherhood are not so much overt rejections of society as they are necessary actions that facilitate non-attachment (*vairagya*) and an awareness of Self which allows *śakti* to be expressed and directed toward the attainment of *mokṣa. T*herefore, *sādhanā* when performed with the ultimate intent of liberation, can certainly be done with indiscriminative empathy and, if thus enacted, is necessarily socially engaged. Hence it is through renunciation of social mores that these yoginī engage with the world fearlessly, powerfully, and with beneficence as embodiments of the divine feminine.

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