

**FROM THE TEMPLE TO THE WITCH'S COVEN: JOURNEYING WEST
WITH KALI MA, FIERCE GODDESS OF TRANSFORMATION**

A Study of Contemporary Kali worship in North America: Syncretism,
Sacred Relationships, and the Gendered Divine.

by

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Figure I.1 Victoria Bearden, *Black Kali*, acrylic on canvas, 2010 (victoriapaints.com)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the cult and mythos of the goddess Kali both in her Eastern and Western contexts, comparing and contrasting them in order to gain a better understanding of the Western appropriations of Kali within feminist goddess spirituality. Utilizing a variety of methods, including ethnographic research conducted at Kali temples in California, this research is aimed at providing an entry into the lived contemporary tradition of the Western Kali within goddess spirituality circles, focusing on embodied experience, devotion, ritual, and syncretic practices.

Kali, a fierce Indian goddess, is often seen in the Hindu context as a central manifestation of the all encompassing Mother Goddess (Mahadevi, Devi, Shakti, etc), and therefore is a particularly engaging example of contemporary Western appropriation of religious and cultural symbols and narratives. This thesis contributes to understanding Kali in her new North American domain, as well as serving as a case study of the shifting religious landscape in the West.

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A NOTE ON SPELLING, DIACRITICS AND TRANSLITERATION

After much deliberation, I have decided to refrain from using diacritical marks for most of the terms used here, and especially for the names of deities such as Kali, Shiva, and so on. There are several reasons for this. First, the lack of consistency in usage of diacritics across the sources used here, and in the literature more generally, makes it rather challenging to adopt a unified approach.

Secondly, while the standard diacritical marks are based on a classical Sanskrit pronunciation, much of Kali's cultus is popular and regional, and phonetically differs from Sanskrit to varying degrees. Here I discuss both textual and ethnographic explorations of Kali whose incarnations are many and varied, and it seems rather ironic to impose a single orthodox spelling of her name, and of terminology related to her traditions. It would be doubly ironic, it seems, to use diacritical marks when discussing the Western Kali, since her name and terms such as Shakta, Tantra, yoni, lingam, and so on, are mostly uttered in English by her North American devotees. On the other hand, this lack of discernment between terms that have the same spelling in English but sound differently and have different meanings in the Indic context can sometimes create confusion, and so whenever necessary to clarify such differences, I have retained diacritical spelling.

More generally, I have retained diacritical marks in most direct quotations, and wherever their usage is especially relevant (for example, to distinguish the Kerala-based cult of Kali, where the local pronunciation is closer to Kālī than the standard Kālī). Similarly, I have adapted some terms that are used extensively here to English phonetic spellings, for example Shiva in place of Śiva, *prakṛiti* in place of *prakṛti*, *shakti* in place of *śakti*, etc. However, I have retained diacritical marks for a few technical terms that are seldom used, simply to make cross-referencing easier. For the same reason, I have retained them in the titles of specific source texts, but not in general-use terms such as Tantras or Puranas. I have also noted the diacritical spelling whenever providing a definition for any foreign terms, except for words that have entered the English lexicon, such as yoga or mantra. Since this paper is not focused on textual exegeses where pronunciation marks are of paramount importance, it is my hope that such an approach renders it fully readable for Indologists and non-Indologists alike.

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INTRODUCTION

“Know that from your home to the temple to the cremation grounds, She is with you, holding your pain and sorrow, joy and elation always. Illuminator of Paradox, She is Great Goddess, Devourer of Time, Beginning and Ending, now and always.”
– From Kali Maa’s creedal statement, Sharanya website

On an October evening in 2010 I arrived at an ordinary house in an ordinary, quiet San Francisco neighbourhood, somewhere on the ocean side of the Foggy City. While outside it was windy, and the sidewalks were slick with rain, inside it was warm and cosy, and the scent of incense filled the rooms. Yet the people gathered here did not come merely to socialize; they came because within this seemingly ordinary house there is a sacred space, a sanctuary to the Goddess, and tonight a puja in honour of Kali Maa was being celebrated here. This intent lends the evening solemnity, and when introductions and preparations are all over, we assemble in the small living room, nine participants in total, anticipating the beginning of the worship ritual. Chandra, the head priestess, begins by guiding us to turn our minds inwards, to focus on our intentions for this evening. Her opening remarks soon give rise to a slow chant, her voice resonant and clear, penetrating in its velvety quality; a special voice reserved for the goddess. “Aaauuum Maa, Aauuum Maa...” Other voices join in, forming a chorus, while clapping hands and ceremonial rattles punctuate the rhythm. Chandra leads the way into the sanctuary, letting us all to settle comfortably for the beginning of what turns out to be an immersive, intimate hour and a half in the company of Kali, the Dark Mother.

The temple room is submerged in candlelit shadows, the flames glinting off the bronze and the polished stone of *murtis*, flickering and warm, visually expanding the small space. The aroma of incense is stronger here, permeating everything. We are seated cross-legged on the floor, it is covered with a thick rug and strewn with cushions, and there is just enough space to fit everyone snugly in a circle. A large tapestry of Kali dominates the altar wall, printed with a traditional Kalighat school Bengali painting in red, black, and saffron, her eyes and tongue prominent and mesmerizing. Smaller representations of Kali, as well as of other goddesses, also abound in the room, in the form of icons, statues, and art pieces. The altar space, set up at eye-

level and spilling into the circle, is crowded with candles, murtis, a prominent stone yoni-lingam, various ritual implements, and flowers and fruit waiting to be offered to the goddess. Later, I found out that many of these items were brought by some of the other participants, Chandra's students who are studying the arts of priestessing in a year-and-a-day long course entitled *Daughters of Kali* (traditionally, "a year and a day" is the recommended length for a Witch's training in modern neopaganism, one of many syncretic elements incorporated into the tradition). As for the bronze statue of Kali herself, she is small, and at first hard to notice amid the candles, offerings, and attendant deities, such as Gaṇeśa and Shiva. Yet, as one's breath slows and one's eyes close under the measured rhythm of Chandra's voice, Kali is made to expand and fill the room. She is in every flickering flame and in the glinting bronze, she is in the incense

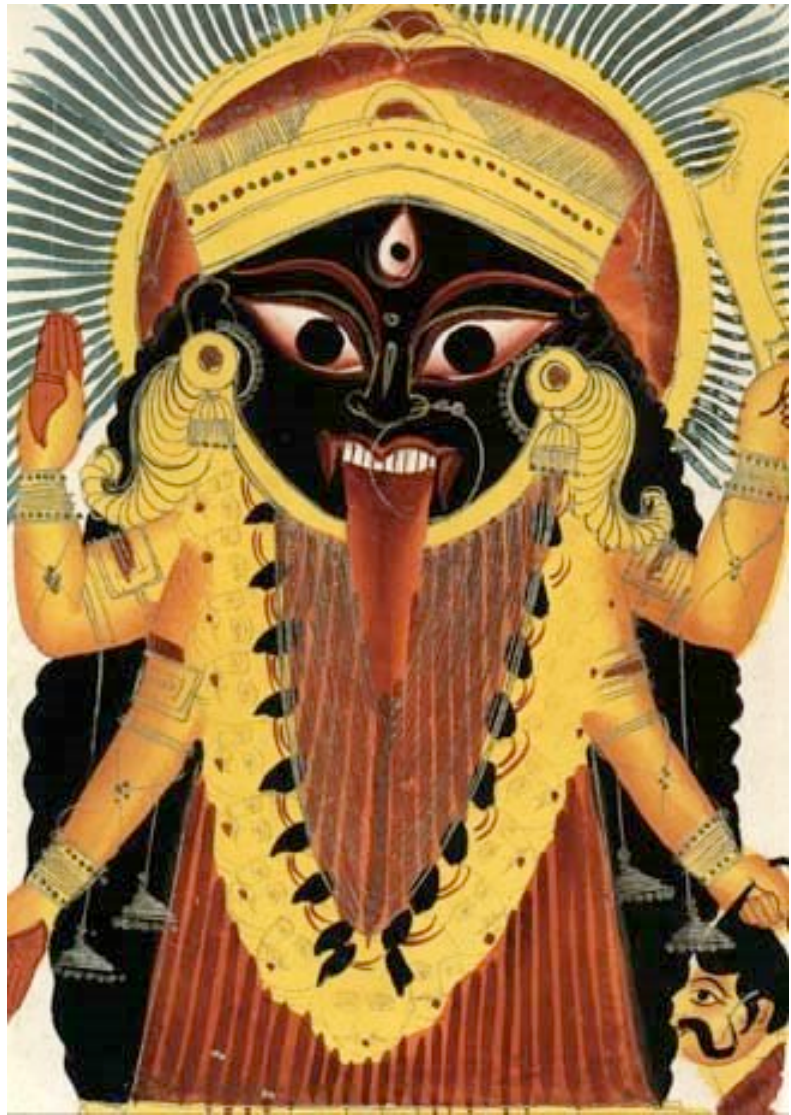


Fig 1.2 Kali, Patuā painting, Kalighat school. As I remember it, a very similar wall hanging dominated the altar room in Chandra's house.

and in the mounting rhythm of the chant, she is in the bodies of the people present and in those who are missing but are thought of. She is in the Sanskritic root mantras and in the ordinary English syllables, which sound so extraordinary when said with new meaning and new purpose. She is in one's mind and in one's body, and though she is a goddess, *her* body is also somehow present and tangible and real.

Thinking back to that evening, it occurs to me that Kali's presence persists well beyond the ritual, beyond even a mere memory, in a lived experience under one's skin; it is a presence that follows one out into the street and all the way home. She is here with me even as I write these lines, many miles away and many months later. What do I mean by this? In what sense is she "present"? How was she present at the puja described above, and how is she present in the lives of the people who attended the service? These questions get to the heart of Kali devotion and ritual, which I will explore in this thesis. Many times since embarking on the research of Kali devotion, both in its Eastern and Western contexts, I wondered: *What is it* that makes Kali so tangible and so monumental for those who encounter Her? What about this fierce, independent, and rather foreign goddess that makes her at once ambiguous and celebrated in her native Indian context? Or that once appalled and fascinated travellers and colonial administrators? Or that still captivates and inspires Western women and neopagan practitioners? How are these varied visions of Kali interconnected? What are the consistencies and differences between them? Is it all the same Kali, or can one speak of many related but distinct 'Kali's? And, most relevant to my interests here, how do these factors converge in giving a rise to the Western Kali — the Kali encountered in academic scholarship and in New Age bookshops; in blogs and in personal websites; in goddess chants and in modern Tarot card decks; in devotional poetry and in Californian temples?

These questions have shaped and guided the present inquiry, and though I do not believe I can give exhaustive answers to them yet, I think this study is significant in exploring the structures implicit in Western Kali religiosity, and revealing its genealogies of ideas. Perhaps the most vivid characteristic of Kali devotion (and of Indic goddess religiosity as such), is that though it is comprised of an extraordinary plurality of voices, communities, texts, images, practices, and interpretations, it maintains itself as a holistic tradition, at least on the surface. Such "unity in multiplicity" is similarly characteristic of modern Western neopagan and goddess spirituality, and perhaps for this reason the two traditions have blended so easily. Moreover, even briefly probing the reach of Kali in the West, one soon discovers that individual instances of her re-imagined and re-appropriated manifestations have their roots in a myriad of overlapping sources, such as popular culture, colonial history, South Asian scholarship, feminist theory,

diaspora communities, art and literature, and the increasingly global exchange of ideas and ready availability of online images and texts. Much like Kali in Her most abstract and universal form, the study of Dark Mother religiosity defies straightforward definitions and simple solutions, and permeates many levels of socio-historical, political, and devotional realities, requiring in turn a multifaceted line of inquiry.

As a result, I chose to approach this ineffable goddess both on a macro level, through literature analysis, and on the micro level through ethnographic study. Since my interest lies primarily in the lived religion of individual practitioners, and their experiences with, imaginings of, and engagement with the goddess, I have focused here on the encounters with Kali in neopagan and goddess spirituality circles. Necessarily, this limits my engagement with the two other main types of Western Kali imaginings: Kali religiosity in diasporic Hindu communities, and the ways Kali imagery surfaces in Western art and popular culture (which are not necessarily devotional, or even consciously goddess-oriented, but nonetheless significant as part of the overall dialogue). At times, however, it is hard to distinguish between these three modes of appropriating Kali in the West, as the representations overlap and inform one another. Kali easily penetrates into the logo of a cultic rock band (the Rolling Stones)¹, or into an iconic TV show (*Xena the Warrior Princess*)², or into political and social commentary (in 1947 Time magazine featured a cover illustration by Boris Artzybasheff, showing a self-mutilating Kali as a metaphor

¹ The famous lips and tongue logo for the band Rolling Stones was apparently inspired by an image of Kali. John Pasche, who was commissioned to design a logo for the Stones' record label, tells the story how Mick Jagger had showed him an image of the goddess Kali as inspiration. (<http://chasemacliskey.wordpress.com/2010/08/17/a-moment-in-logo-history-the-rolling-stones-tongue/>, quoting from *Band ID* by Bodhi Oser (2008). While we cannot know exactly what image of Kali it was, or what meaning the image held for the rock star at the time, the blogger Logo Extremist speculates that the logo depicts the "sense of wildness, freshness, sensuality and provocation, which were the traits of the Rolling Stones" (<http://logoextremist.blogspot.com/2009/11/story-of-classic-logo-of-rolling-stone.html#ixzz1olHRDNmS>).

² In an episode of the fourth season of the TV show *Xena: Warrior Princess* Xena transforms into Kali to battle the demon king Indra-jeet, a story set during Xena and Gabrielle's travels in India. This episode, produced with the active involvement of the Indo-American Political Foundation, reflects a feminist model of reclaiming Kali's imagery as the 'fierce aspect' of the Goddess. The show itself is iconic in North American culture, and especially loved in feminist circles for its powerful and complex portrayal of female characters, so its portrayal of Kali is doubly significant. At the end of the episode the two main actors and the foundation's president expressed a hope to have portrayed prayer and the religions of India in a respectful manner, and Lucy Lawless, who portrays Xena, states: "with understanding comes tolerance". (I have discussed the representations of Kali in Western media previously, in a paper presented at the CSSR Annual Conference in May 2011, entitled "Bloodthirsty and Beautiful Stranger: Images of Kali in Western Cinema").

for the partition of India).³ The result of such fluidity is that these images become referential, both to themselves and to their origins, and are in constant dialogue with one another.

Like the Kali puja at Sharanya Devi Mandir, above, images of Kali in popular culture reveal that in her migration west some of her divine characteristics and mythic narratives have been emphasized much more than others. Her imagery is indeed so striking that it often eclipses the context of narrative and symbolism that has given rise to it. Though in modern Hindu iconography the appearance of the goddess has been softened somewhat (for example, she is portrayed as a beautiful young woman, and not as the emaciated and frightening hag seen in some medieval icons),⁴ she is nonetheless a powerful representation of nonconformity. With her wild flowing hair, her dark blue skin clad only in a necklace of skulls and a skirt made of severed arms, her tongue lolling and red with blood, and her arms brandishing weapons, she looks nothing like a virtuous Hindu wife. Kali is beyond societal norms and duty-bound, structured life stages. Kali is even beyond time itself, for if her consort Shiva, whom she stands atop in most of her representations, is Mahakala, the Great Time, then she is Mahakali: She Who Devours Time.⁵

Westerners in their encounters with Kali are often awed by her imagery as well as by her mythos, and especially so when she is contrasted against the prevalent patriarchal monotheistic traditions, or with the goddesses of the European pagan past, whose original cults and practices are mostly lost and have only recently begun to be reclaimed and re-imagined by neopagan communities. Interestingly, Western devotional responses often echo some traditional modes of worship, and are comparable to the diverse continuum of Kali (and goddess) practices that exist in India. An independent and active goddess, Kali is often portrayed without a consort or, nominally, with the passive Shiva prone under her feet. She is wrath incarnate, destroyer of worlds, and demon-slayer (*Mahisasura Mardini*); and her traditional dwelling places are the battlefield and the cremation ground. Though this defines her as a cosmic goddess who stands outside the social order transcending it, it does not mean she is only a goddess of the villages, of outcasts, or of *tantrikas* (though, of course, many of these groups honour and worship Kali). Like

³ “The Trial of Kali”, *TIME Magazine*, October 27, 1947.

⁴ I discuss this juxtaposition in greater detail in chapters one and three.

⁵ Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire: Tracing Kali’s Footprint in Indian Literature* (New Delhi: Indialog Publishers, 2004), 61

other pan-Indian goddesses such as Devi and Durga, with whom Kali is often seen as synonymous or interchangeable, she is worshiped by a variety of devotees from all strata of society, regardless of gender and economic standing. Her diverse followers, who likewise approach her in many ways and from a variety of traditions,⁶ interpret Kali in meanings ranging from all-merciful Mother, fierce and loyal protector, a grantor of boons, visions, and power, and to the supreme cosmic principle and liberator. As June McDaniel writes in her detailed and thorough study of Shaktism in West Bengal, even to pinpoint a theological position amid goddess-worshippers (Shaktas) is difficult: “Monism, monotheism, dualism, polytheism, henotheism: all of these are legitimate positions in Shaktism, and each is widely held.”⁷ While some maintain that all goddesses are but one Great Goddess, for others *all creation* is but aspects of the goddess, and others yet see the Goddess as the creator and supreme deity who has given rise to the universe and to everything within it, including other deities. In the case of Kali, much of this applies, and sometimes more than one theology is practiced at a time. It is no wonder, then, that in the West too Kali can be many things to many people, to paraphrase a quip from Kali scholar Rachel McDermott.

Returning to the altar room in Chandra’ house and to the intimate Kali puja I was privileged to be part of, it is possible to begin unravelling the significances of Kali’s presence in Western goddess spirituality by looking at the differences and similarities between her traditional Indian context, and the ways she has been transplanted in the West. As that night proceeded, I learned many things about the syncretic tradition of Sha’can and its honouring of Kali as Universal Mother. The very name used to describe this tradition is a composite word or a contraction: Sha’can consists of “Shakta” and “Wiccan”, referring not specifically to Wicca religion but to the modern Witchcraft tradition more generally, blending the two practices into

⁶ June McDaniel’s excellent book on Shaktism in West Bengal *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, is but one example of the sheer diversity of practices and approaches to the worship of the goddess in one geographic area. Kathleen Erndl’s *Victory to the Mother* is another, focused on goddess worship in Northern India. In chapters one and two I discuss the subject in greater depth. However, as McDaniel writes “Shaktism is a vast maze of belief systems and practices” (2004:6), and this statement largely applies to Kali worship as well.

⁷ June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5

one. Being accustomed to mainstream Hindu worship as encountered in India or in traditionalist temples in North America, it was unusual and refreshing for me to see a woman lead the ritual, and moreover, lead it in English, while incorporating many Sanskrit hymns and prayers. The content of ritual was likewise an organic amalgamation of Eastern and Western goddess worship: the evening opened with casting a circle and calling the quarters (a common element in neopagan, Wiccan, or Witchcraft traditions); then followed a Tantric Shakta puja, with the proper acknowledgement of the various gods, offerings to Maa and Shiva, the chanting of root mantras and the celebratory singing of Her hymns, and at its culmination a symbolic sacrifice (represented by a watermelon). Winding down the evening, a Tarot card draw helped facilitate the goddess's personal message for each participant, and her blessings were passed on with the tying of auspicious red thread bracelets and the distribution of *prasad*. Both similar to and entirely unlike traditional Hindu temple worship, this syncretic devotional practice was saturated with a consciousness of the goddess that is rooted in a particular time, place, and community of devotees. It seemed to me that the combined elements of Indic puja and those of North American witchcraft created an intensely embodied and intimate experience, facilitating not only the communication with the divine, but also with the community of worshippers present. Precisely what kind of characteristics shape and inform the time, the place, and the community of devotees glimpsed here is the subject matter of this exploration of Western Imaginings of Kali, the Dark Mother.

This puja ritual left an indelible impression on me, both as a scholar and as an individual. Though prior to embarking on this ethnographic research I was already immersed in the study of Kali, I have, up to that point, been alternating between the two opposing directions, approaching Her both from the East and from the West, holding a flower in one hand and a Tarot card in the other, so to speak. This encounter had finally materialized for me the notion that a meeting of the two traditions is not merely possible, but is a real and flourishing devotional practice, grown on North American soil and nurtured by local cultural and social realities, and perhaps for that reason it seemed to me so seamlessly natural. This study conducted among devotees of Kali in California thus forms an instance of synthesis, the nexus where the complementary fields of knowledge engaged in this project converge and give rise to something new. However, in order to

unpack this realization in scholarly terms, and to situate it in the context of the religious landscapes of India and North America, one must subject the organic, unstructured flowering of practices, ideas, and devotions to a more or less linear narrative. Therefore, in the following chapters I first unravel the constituent parts of this thesis, touching upon the overlapping mythic, cultural, and devotional realities engaged here, and only then I return to the syncretic tradition of Sha'can, having thus re-created my own journey to Kali Ma.

This research project is driven by two complimentary goals: an ethnographic study of North American Kali devotion, and a literature review of the socio-historical context in which this tradition has emerged in the West. Both pursuits are inseparable from one another, as much as they are inseparable from the study of the Eastern Kali tradition — not least because much of the scholarly work conducted in the West in the realm of South Asian goddesses has had a direct influence on the development of the Western goddess tradition. Both approaches aim to illuminate the socio-cultural and religious impulses behind Kali's migration to the West, the devotional practices she has become associated with, her popularity within Western goddess spirituality, and the different elements of her mythos that have come to the forefront in this new milieu. Ultimately, questions such as “Why are Westerners fascinated by Kali?” and “What are the differences between Kali's Eastern and Western incarnations?” engage several layers of culture, history, and experience all at once. In order to get at those layers and examine their implications, I have divided up the chapters thematically.

The **first chapter** introduces the figure of Kali and her various significances in Hindu theology, focusing on the Shakta and Tantra streams. As a deity with pan-Indian presence, Kali is an incredibly diverse goddess even within her own native context, and the aim of this introductory chapter is to delineate some of the more central aspects of Indic Kali devotion, and describe the most salient parts of her mythology. Naturally, without such a background it would be impossible to discuss the appropriation of Kali in the West, but even more significantly, I hope to illustrate even some of the inherently complex and ambiguous nature of the goddess, which perhaps makes her suitable more than any other for such transatlantic migration. My rather brief portrait of Kali is drawn from a number of prominent authors, such as Sarah Caldwell, Vrinda

Dalmiya, Kathleen Erndl, David Kinsley, June McDaniel, Rachel McDermott, and Suchitra Samanta. It is curious that even here the image of Kali arises in a dialogue of Eastern and Western perspectives, as a growing number of Indian scholars and feminists add their voices to the study of Indian goddesses more generally and of Kali in particular. I have endeavoured to include as many of these perspectives as possible, since there is no one single vision of Kali, as in West, so in the East. Neela Bhattacharya Saxena's work, which I discuss towards the end of the chapter, is of particular interest here since, as a native Bengali and Kali devotee on the one hand, and a Western scholar of the goddess on the other, she combines in her understanding of Kali both theoretical and experiential forms of knowledge – the very traits that best characterize Kali's Western movement at large.

Chapter two moves to situate Kali within the context of Indic goddess worship, which in and of itself served as an inspiration for many early spiritual feminists. Drawing on the prominent voices in the field, this chapter will concentrate primarily on theoretical approaches to Indic goddess worship in the current literature, and how those have shaped the study of Hindu goddesses and Kali in particular. In the interests of space and brevity this literature review will be cursory, yet it will help situate Kali in her native cultural, historical, and devotional context. Speaking of one Hindu goddess means speaking of all Hindu goddesses, even if only in passing, and in this chapter I concentrate on the Shakta stream of Hinduism, as within it the veneration of the Sacred as feminine has been most fully realized. This will also illustrate the inherent *feminine nature* of key concepts in Hindu ontology: *shakti*, *maya* and *prakriti* (energy, illusion/ physical phenomena, and materiality), which, as Tracy Pintchman maintains, contribute directly to the rise of the “Great Goddess” tradition of India.⁸ This will prepare the ground to move westward and look at the budding goddess tradition of North America, delineating the similarities and differences between the two.

Chapter three explores Western feminist religiosity and goddess movement from the 1960s and to the present day, concentrating on those aspects of it which both prepared the ground for and shaped the arrival of Kali in the Western religious landscape. The aim of this chapter, however, is twofold. First, it presents briefly the methodological approach employed in exploring

⁸ Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

such a varied and fluid form of spirituality as the Western goddess movement. An organizing principle of the movement itself, as well as of my exploration if it here is *experience* — and in the first part of this chapter I elucidate what I mean by it. Using a nonlinear approach and a genealogical attitude, I look to such authors as William Connolly and Robert Orsi in order to develop an approach that is sensitive to the de-centralized, embodied, and actively lived forms of Western goddess spirituality. Here I briefly explore the question of ‘place’ and the embeddedness (or dis-embeddedness) of religious symbols in geographical, cultural, historical and social contexts — an important notion for such a wandering and transnational deity as Kali. Following Orsi’s notions of abundant empiricism and using his notion of “the unexpected” as a fruitful entry-point into a tradition, I also discuss the possibilities and the challenges inherent in the present exploration.

Secondly, this chapter’s aim is to sketch a portrait of goddess religiosity in the West, so that its ethos, dominant voices, and potentially problematic aspects become apparent. As much as possible, I try to present an emic understanding of the movement, comprised as it is of many distinct voices and theo(a)logical positions, which often complement, contradict, or are in creative tension with one another. Goddess spirituality draws on various sources, from feminist theory and issues of social justice, to Jungian archetypal psychology, world religions, and women’s individual experiences, dreams, fantasies, and revelations. Interestingly, Kali has entered the movement’s pantheon of “discovered” and appropriated divine feminine figures early on, and since then has undergone various transformations. Rising up through various avenues, she captivated many of those feminist theologians who have given up on redeeming monotheistic faiths (Christianity and Judaism in particular), and turned instead either to the European pagan past, or to the living goddess traditions around the world. Kali’s mythos and symbolism resonated strongly with some of the tenets and goals of feminist spirituality, so her arrival might seem curiously providential.

More importantly, however, the various ways in which Kali has been appropriated illustrate also some of the important struggles in the movement at large, which I also discuss in this chapter. Some of these included issues concerning the ethics of borrowing religious symbols cross-culturally, the politics of speech and privilege, and the primacy of embodied personal

experience. I approach these critiques in a similarly emic fashion, since the very debate revolving around them is a continual and integral part of the movement. Far from having reached a consensus, the various ways in which Kali has been appropriated illustrate a continuum of devotional practices and personal engagement with the goddess. In terms of methods, chapter two consists in part of a literature review, and in part of textual analysis. Since much of the secondary literature written on goddess spirituality in the West (and especially by its founding mothers) is also its *primary* literature, I try to include a variety of sources, including academic scholarship, personal testimony, theological explorations, art and poetry. Such an exploration is pertinent here because it is through these lenses one first glimpses the Western Kali as she can be encountered on the Internet and in neopagan pantheons, in New Age bookshops and in goddess-themed Tarot decks. This is also the Kali who is encountered personally, internally, and *experientially*. Whether approached through trauma or revelation, sought out consciously or stumbled upon in dreams, the Western practitioner's encounter with Kali is always direct and transformative. It is this very mode of engagement, through an embodied experience, which brings me to the next chapter.

Finally, in **chapter four** I present a detailed case study of Western Kali devotion, based on research carried out in California at two prominent centres for North American goddess worship, and focusing on the more syncretic form of the two, the Sharanya Kali Mandir in San Francisco. Returning from time to time to questions raised in the previous three chapters regarding the various modes of Kali worship, the ethos of goddess spirituality in the West, and the significance of embodied experience, my aim here is to sketch a full-bodied account of a lived and living contemporary tradition. To carry out the fieldwork I had visited California in the fall of 2010, around the festival of Navratri, and attended Kali Puja at Sharanya, a Devi Mandir in San Francisco (established by Chandra Alexandre in 1999 as a sanctuary and a mission), and at the Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach (established by Elizabeth Usha Harding in 1993). I had also conducted interviews with several Sharanya members, both at the time of my visit and on later dates.

I chose to focus on this geographic area for several reasons. First, because California is home to a few of the more prominent, active, and well-established spiritual communities

dedicated to Kali in North America. Secondly, the ability to compare and contrast those of them that I have attended gave me a chance to observe distinct models of transplanting religious practices into a new cultural milieu, illustrating that Kali worship in North America is far from uniform (much like it is in its historically and geographically native context). Thirdly, the similarities and differences in the founders' journeys towards establishing Kali temples in California reveal a range of ways to engage with Kali in a Western context (here I am referring primarily to Chandra Alexandre, founder of Sharanya, and Elizabeth Harding, founder of Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach, although Shree Ma, the founder of Devi Mandir in Napa is also a figure of interest, though one that I do not cover in this exploration, as I have been unable to visit this institution for myself, seeing as it is private and is generally closed to visitors). Finally, the relative geographical proximity of these temples (they are located in the same state, but at its opposite ends), allows for some cross-pollination of ideas, texts, objects, practices, and people, and situates them in a shared religious and cultural community — this time in North America.

Interestingly, the two female founders of Sharanya and Kali Mandir are both spiritual seekers and scholars of religion, and had established their temples to Kali as a result of their own revelatory experiences in India. At the same time, the Indian context of their initiation or first encounter, as well as their respective backgrounds and distinctive visions, determined to a large extent the type of Kali devotion they brought back with them to California. Chandra Alexandre, who describes herself as a hereditary witch and who is a prolific scholar and theologian in her own right, has been initiated in Orissa into a Tantric Kali tradition, and acts both as Sharanya's CEO and its High Priestess. Therefore, while I draw on my own observations and interviews, I also incorporate some of Alexandre's writings on the inception of Sharanya and on the Dark Goddess tradition. Elizabeth Harding, on the other hand, had first encountered Kali in the context of Ramakrishna's ecstatic Kali devotion, centred on the mother-child relationship. Similarly, the temple she established in Laguna Beach is closely aligned with its parent, the Dakshineswar Kali temple — a large Indian centre for Ramakrishna's followers. Though Harding is very active in the community and in the organization, she does not take on any religious role, and the Mandir employs a full-time Hindu head priest (often from Dakshineswar), and worship is conducted by an all-male priesthood. Though I would have liked to do an in-depth comparison of the traditions

presented at both of these temples, my focus here and in chapter four is on Sharanya, since that is the site of my more extensive fieldwork and interviews. Nonetheless, returning from time to time to this comparison is useful, so as not to limit one's notion of Western Kali worship to a single model.⁹

Looking beyond the scope of this project to its implications, I believe that the phenomenon of the Western Kali is in itself indicative of a greater ideological and practical shift in Western religiosity. Those elements that are most attractive to Kali's Western followers, such as a feminine divine, a direct and personal religious experience, an emphasis on embodiment, a bridging between the dualities of body and spirit – are not unique to Kali devotion, nor even to neopagan goddess spirituality. However, the subject of “Western religiosity” (if such a singular term is indeed appropriate) is almost too vast to handle, even cursorily, due to the myriad of varied factors shaping it, simultaneously and in the present time, and with the aid of ever-advancing technologies. Through an in-depth exploration of this single case study I hope to offer some insights into this process, understanding, however, that even this paper is helping to shape and alter the nature of the discourse.

⁹ It is important to note that neither model is “more authentic” than the other, at least not from my point of view as a researcher (though of course notions of authenticity are negotiated within these communities, as in many other religious communities). It is also not my aim to make a detailed comparison between the two. Instead, I am more interested in the fact that the devotional practices and conventions represented, on the one hand, by Sharanya, and on the other, by Kali Mandir, lie on a continuum of porous and fluid notions concerning the female divine, Kali, Hindu religiosity, embodiment, and religious experience. Inscribed, as they are now, on the landscape of California, they become rooted in the land and associated with certain regional and cultural conventions. Since Sharanya is more representative of the syncretic re-imagining of the “Western Kali”, it is therefore the tradition I focus on in this paper.

1. KALI, THE DARK MOTHER

“Her physical form engulfs and symbolizes all space. Her blue-blackness conveys the endlessness of space itself. She is dark, and is called Digambari, because she is clothed in space alone. She is time and she is space; she is at the centre of existence, while she is also at its margins. In her, life and death are inextricably bound... She is shunya and purna, void and full, at the same time.”
Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, In the beginning IS Desire

Among India’s many goddesses, Kali firmly captures one’s imagination, perhaps like no other goddess. Her dark blue skin, her wild hair, her uncompromising independence and fierce demeanour — all differentiate her even from pan-Indian female deities such as Durga. Kali is commonly seen as the fierce aspect of Durga or Parvati, especially whenever she emerges as manifestation of their rage and anger, as is recounted in several episodes of the *Devī Māhātmya*. At the same time, she is just as often understood to be a goddess in her own right, either synonymous with the pan-Indian Durga or Devi, or, the essence or true form (*svarūpa*) of the Mahādevī, that is, divinity itself in female form. In some Shakta circles Kali is both creator and manifest universe; she is the terrifying object of passionate devotion and self-surrender, as well as a compassionate and fiercely loyal mother. In various Tantras she is postulated to be the foremost of the Tantric goddesses, the ten Mahavidyas, subsuming all the others into her ultimate being, yet “Kālī” is also the name given to a multitude of local folk and village goddesses, rarely represented by more than a rock or a pot of water, their power circumscribed by the geographical boundaries of a village or a patch of forest.

Though she exists in many diverse forms across India, the Kali whose iconography is most familiar and recognizable across the country is the Bengali Kali Ma, the deity whose historic cult at the Kolkata temple of Kalighat so shocked and disturbed the colonial and missionary imaginations some two hundred years ago, that a legacy of this sensationalized and orientalized perception of Kali still crops up unexpectedly in such popular culture appropriations as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*.¹⁰ This is not to say that early Western visitors to India

¹⁰ I have explored two contrasting cases of depictions of Kali in Western popular culture, including *Indiana Jones* and an episode of the television show *Xena: Warrior Princess* in a paper presented at the Annual CSSR Meeting in Fredericton, May 2011, entitled: “Bloodthirsty and Beautiful Stranger: Images of Kali in Western Cinema.”

were alone in their critique or misunderstanding of Kali; as Cynthia Ann Humes demonstrates in her work, colonists had often echoed the concerns and criticisms of many indigenous groups uneasy about the goddess. Whether it was objection to the slaughter of animals in her honour (currently still practiced in some areas, while mostly discontinued in others, especially in the north of India), or extreme devotional practices such as hook swinging (since then made illegal), criticism came from such varied voices as orthodox Brahmins, Vaishnavaites, Jains, and Indian Christians. Humes even speculates that the later British demonization of Kali and her association with the so-called Thugee cult was accepted by many in India precisely because it reflected much of the indigenous unease with the goddess (an association which later led, paradoxically, to the rise of Kali as an icon of Bengali independence).¹¹

So what does one make of this intricate, complicated goddess? Is the Kali of yogic and Tantric rituals the same as Kali of the *bhakti* tradition of Ramakrishna? Is the Kali invoked in possession rituals in Kerala the same as the Kali of village black magicians in West Bengal? Can she be equally approached and honoured with blood sacrifice as with flowers, cloth, and sweets? While some may claim that these are but a myriad of different Kalis, many of her devotees, diverse as they may be, insist that no matter what form she takes, she is always the same Kali Ma. Here I will try to follow this lived, experiential understanding of Kali, and focus on those aspects of her cultus that unite these disparate forms into the powerful sacred reality she possesses for her devotees.

1. Blood, Skulls, and Frenzied Dance: Kali the Destroyer, She Who Devours Time

In the Hindu pantheon Kali is often understood to be the wrath of the goddess incarnate, a destroyer of demons and enemies, and even a potential threat to the entire cosmos if her battle frenzy is not calmed — a theme one sees most frequently in association with Shiva, her husband-consort, with whom she holds dancing competitions which threaten the worlds. From the earliest mentions of Kali in the Hindu tradition, appearing first around 600 CE, she is associated with the

¹¹ Cynthia Ann Humes, “Wrestling with Kali: South Asian and British Constructions of the Dark Goddess,” in *Encountering Kali*, ed. Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey J. Kripal (London: University of California Press, 2003), 145–168.

battlefield, as well as with marginal locales, peoples and devotional traditions; she is terrifying in form, dwells in cremation grounds, and accepts blood sacrifice. In the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, for example, Kali is introduced as a deity worshipped by a band of thieves, and especially their leader, who desires a son. When an intended sacrifice of a Brahmin youth goes awry, burning the goddess's icon, the infuriated Kali comes out of her image and slaughters the offending tribe of thieves along with their leader.¹² In several seventh and eighth century dramas Kali, or the goddesses Caṇḍī (a common epithet for Kali and Durga) and Cāmuṇḍā (a deity often conflated with Kali) feature as the terrifying patron deities of marginal, bizarre sacrificial cults. As Kinsley writes, in Bhavabhūti's *Mālatīmādhava* a female devotee of Cāmuṇḍā captures the heroine with the intention of sacrificing her to the goddess. Cāmuṇḍā's temple is situated near a cremation ground, and a hymn to the



Figure 1.1 Kali stepping on Shiva, an example of popular Bengali devotional art found on postcards and in calendars.

goddess “describes her as dancing wildly and making the world shake” as well as one who “has a

¹² David Kinsley, “Kālī”, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1987), 117. This episode is particularly curious because the sacrifice of a Brahmin fails, thus polemically establishing the caste's superiority even over the goddess. Several similar episodes throughout the *Purāṇas* and in later writings express similar socio-political bias, including the episode recounted in Manu of the “guilt” of the god Indra over killing a malevolent drought-causing serpent who turns out to be a Brahmin. Indra, in this account, is so overburdened by the weight of his sin that he then asks womankind to share the guilt with him, and the reminder of this bloodshed haunts women to this as monthly menstrual blood. I return to this incident later on in this chapter.

gaping mouth, wears a garland of skulls, is covered with snakes, showers flames from her eyes that destroy the world, and is surrounded by goblins.”¹³ In a later piece, Somadeva’s *Yaśatilaka* of the 11th-12th century, appears a goddess called Caṇḍamārī, who in appearance and behaviour closely resembles Kali of the battlefield and cremation grounds: “The goddess adorns herself with pieces of human corpses, uses ooze from corpses for cosmetics, bathes in rivers of wine or blood, sports in cremation grounds, and uses human skulls as drinking vessels. Bizarre and fanatical devotees gather at her temple and undertake forms of ascetic self-torture. They burn incense on their heads, drink their own blood, and offer their own flesh into the sacrificial fire.”¹⁴ Kali’s association with marginal (or tribal) peoples, situated at the periphery of society, is even seen in a 6th-8th century architectural manual, which prescribes that her temples be built away from villages and town, near cremation grounds and the dwellings of Caṇḍālas, or very low caste peoples.¹⁵

One central battle narrative that still defines Kali mythos to a great extent, whether as the goddess of Shakta tantrikas, or in Bengali devotionalism, is found in the central Shakta text, the *Devī Māhātmya*.¹⁶ Kali appears on two occasions, both times as an embodiment of Durga’s wrath. In the first episode, Durga, herself emerging from the combined “energies” of the male gods, faces the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha. As they are about to attack her, she becomes angry, her face turns black as ink, and Kali springs forth from her forehead:

She is black, wears a garland of human heads and a tiger skin, and wields a skull-topped staff. She is gaunt, with sunken eyes, gaping mouth, and lolling tongue. She roars loudly and leaps into the battle, where she tears demons apart with her hands and crushes them in her jaws. She grasps the two demon generals and in one furious blow decapitates them both with her sword.¹⁷

In a second episode in the same text, Durga and her horde of fierce goddesses called the Mātṛkās (i.e. the Mothers), fight the demon general Raktabīja who replicates himself with every drop of blood he sheds, so that the goddesses, wounding him, become surrounded by innumerable

¹³ Kinsley, “Kālī”, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁶ I return to look in greater detail at this text and its role in the Hindu Shakta tradition in the next section. However, it is worth noting that though it names Durga as the main manifestation of Mahadevi, or the Great Goddess, it is still a central text for Kali devotees.

¹⁷ Kinsley, “Kālī”, 118.

Raktabījas. Kali then defeats the demon by sucking his blood dry and tossing his clones into her gaping mouth.

This battle scene is often conflated in popular devotion (and especially in iconography) with another, similar, appearance of Kali in the *Liṅga-purāṇa*, where Kali is Parvati’s wrath incarnate. Once again, Shiva asks Parvati to defeat the demon Dāruka who is threatening to overthrow the gods, and who as a result of centuries of austerities has received a special boon – that he can only be killed by a woman. Obviously, Dāruka thought this a clever plan, since women did not seem to pose a threat to him. According to one account, Parvati enters Shiva’s body, and is transformed into Kali from the poison stored in his throat.¹⁸

In many narratives of her battles with demons, Kali gets so intoxicated with the frenzy of battle and the warm blood of her victims, that she goes on a rampage that threatens to destroy the world. This apocalyptic event is stopped when Shiva intervenes and calms her – commonly, at least in iconography, by throwing himself under her feet.¹⁹ Since Kali is conflated with Parvati, whenever she is associated with a male deity it is Shiva — though, unlike Parvati who acts as a calming and civilizing presence on her destroyer husband, Kali seems to incite Shiva to destructive and cosmos-threatening behaviour. In the end, it is he who must calm her, and not the other way around.²⁰

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 118.

¹⁹ Whether or not this is a later, Brahminical, construction of Kali (as is the need to “tame” her) is debated both by scholars and theologians. In particular, the reason for Kali’s protruding tongue is often given as shame (for having stepped on her husband), although some have speculated that it could also mean sexual arousal. As Vasanthi Srinivasan points out, in Tantric readings of this image Kali is the ultimate realization of Truth, and as both the creator of manifestation and its destroyer, she stands upon Shiva who symbolizes “non-existence” or the passive potentiality which precedes manifestation — an expression of a monistic vision of the divine.

²⁰ Curiously, this can be juxtaposed with the origin story of the Shakti *pithas*, or energy seats of the goddess, which I discuss below in section II. Briefly, in that story Parvati/Sati sacrifices herself in a sacrificial pyre as a result of a grave insult from her father, and the disconsolate Shiva wanders the earth with her body in his arms, his grief and mad dance threatening the survival of the world. The other gods conspire to cut off Sita’s body piece by piece to deprive Shiva of her corpse and stop his grief, and where the pieces fall the power of the goddess is naturally manifest in the landscape. Though the narrative elements are very similar, the idea of divinity as literally sustaining and destroying the universe is applied either to Shiva or Kali as its supreme manifestation, depending on the sectarian context in which the narrative is situated.

This theme recurs in a second episode in the *Liṅga-purāṇa* with slight variations, when Shiva battles the demons of the three cities. Kali is part of his entourage, wild haired, blood-hungry, and adorned with skulls; she is also called the daughter of Himalaya in the same passage, a clear identification with Parvati, which further supports the idea of Kali being her personified rage. Finally, in an instance unrelated to battle recounted in the *Vāmana-purāṇa*, Parvati takes offence to being called, teasingly, Kali (meaning, “the Black One”) — a nickname Shiva uses because of her dark complexion. Offended, she undertakes rigorous austerities to acquire a lighter complexion instead; when successful she is then called “Gaurī” (the Golden One), and her discarded dark sheath becomes a furious battle queen, Kauśikī, who subsequently gives rise to Kali.²¹

It is possible to keep on listing many similar episodes in the puranic texts that play on the same elements, including in narratives of Sati and Sita. In the latter, the usually docile and virtuous wife of Rāma transforms into Kali to defeat a



Figure 1.2 Kali in her ten-armed form, popular Bengali devotional art.

demon so terrible that Rāma, back from his victory over the dreadful Rāvaṇa, freezes in fear. Though a discussion of the gender power dynamics of the Ramayana is outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting that on several occasions it is hinted that Sita harbours much greater reserves of courage, character, spiritual power, and virtue than her illustrious spouse. The importance of her triumph both over the demon-king Rāvaṇa, in an indirect way, and over this

²¹ Kinsley, “Kālī”, 118-119.

episodic demon in a direct manner as Kali, is better understood when one examines the meaning of “demons” in the Hindu worldview, and the allegorical significance of overcoming them. Moreover, this enables one to better understand the progression of Kali devotion, and the powerful message of her violent and transformative imagery.

Within Hindu cosmology, where time and the universe are eternal and cyclical, and all matter is subject to the laws of karma, human and animal life is located at a midway point between the divine and the demonic spheres — i.e. realms where either supremely virtuous or supremely sinful souls incarnate as powerful, super-human beings. Demons are thus most associated with the sins of extreme pride and delusion, though at times they can perform *tapas* and gain boons from the gods, as was the case with Dāruka — a fact that usually backfires. Kali, whose name implies not only blackness, but is also *kāla* or time, is a cosmic force of righteous destruction that can also be interpreted as a violent sort of enlightenment: her sword cuts through illusion, pride, and ignorance; the decapitated head she holds in one of her four arms suggests the dissolution of the personal ego, as ego is that which prevents one from realizing the Truth; the severed arms on her girdle symbolize the destruction of all past karmas which frees her devotees from the cycle of reincarnation and grants *moksha*, or liberation. It is no coincidence she is called *Mahākālī*, while Shiva, the Destroyer, is called *Mahākāla* — the Great Time. Though he is time itself personified (which in the end destroys all things), she, as Mahakali, is the One who Devours Time, the great void in which all, including time, disappears. In a sense, Kali’s dark and violent imagery is a logical progression in the development of a goddess-centred theology: a universe that is both the creation and the very body of the ultimate sacred reality, envisioned as a Mother, must have a destructive side as well. Kali, as Dark Mother or as ultimate form of the Mātṛkās and *vidiyas* (manifestations of the Goddess as knowledge forms), is thus envisioned as devouring time itself, transcending both death and life.

Though the Shakta Tantric vision of Kali seemed to have developed at a later stage (approximately in the medieval period), various elements of her mythos reveal an inherent tension of ideologies competing to frame her narrative and imagery. Some Indian feminists have even called for the reclamation of Kali from the patriarchal structures that have ‘adopted’ and attempted to tame her, such as seen in the work of Lina Gupta, which I return to below. At the

same time, it is difficult to unravel the ‘original’ elements from supposedly ‘later’ ones, as they are closely interwoven, and are read differently by various groups of devotees. More overtly Brahmanical elements (such as Kali’s “shame” at having stepped on her consort Shiva) compete with the unapologetic prominence of her fierceness in popular devotion. Though she remain a prominent figure in folk Shaktism, the question whether Kali is a ‘deity of marginal peoples’ and of the peripheries of society is likewise contentious since “margins” are observed from a “centre”, and in reality there are margins and centres everywhere, depending on one’s perspective – an issue I also explore below. In the figure of Kali these narratives converge, and inform contemporary Kali devotion, both in India and in the West, and ultimately it is this multiplicity that makes her both difficult to pin down and continuously fascinating.



Figure 1.2 Kali killing hordes of enemies, as well as the demons Śumbha and Niśumbha (at centre-right), painting by Kailash Raj (Exoticindiaart.com). This piece is done after a famous folio of the Devi Mahatmya done in the miniature, Kangra Pahari style, from the reign of Raja Sansar Chand, roughly 1780-1810 CE.

2. *Terror, Blood, and Sacrifice: Kali, the Goddess of Liberation*

The concepts of transformation, time, and ingestion are central to understanding the practice of sacrifice within Kali worship, and especially animal sacrifice.²² Though in present-day India Kali is worshipped in a variety of way in diverse parts of the country, her cult is especially prominent in Bengal, Assam and Orissa, with a similar yet distinct Kali following in Kerala, where she is most often called Baghavati — a title roughly equivalent to Mahadevi, or Great Goddess.²³ Suchitra Samanta in her study of sacrifice in the Bengali Kali practice, calls her a “ubiquitous presence” in contemporary Bengal, citing her omnipresence in the landscape, blurring the boundaries of the religious and secular worlds:

Her name appears on the name-board of Calcutta restaurants, grocery stores, and pharmacies... [her image] on the dashboards of almost every taxicab and bus in the city. Worshipped both at domestic altars as well as at the numerous Kali temples... [she] occupies a powerful emotional place in the Bengali heart as the ideal and protective Mother.²⁴

Notably, the prevalent perception of Kali as Mother, and the cultivation of such a relationship with her, is due to the immense influence of the life and works of two Bengali saints and Kali devotees, Rāmprasād Sen and Ramakrishna. This tradition emphasizes the loving and compassionate aspects of Kali, with the devotee in the role of her adoring and trusting child. At the same time, her most popular icons, the four-armed avatar Daksina (south-facing) Kali, and the ten-armed Mahakali both still portray Kali as a wild, frenzied, and terrifying presence. Though she is dark, naked, adorned with freshly cut heads and arms, and covered in blood, to her devotees, Kali grants everything, from prayers and wishes, to reincarnation in heaven, to total

²² I have written previously on the theme of sacrifice in Kali worship in greater detail than the subject can be treated here, and the following is in part an abbreviated adaptation of a section from a paper I had published in the *Ottawa Journal of Religion*, entitled “The Intimacy of the Sacred in Kali Worship and Sacrifice” (2010).

²³ Below, as well as in the next chapter, I discuss some of the studies specific to the states of Bengal and Kerala regarding Kali, in particular the work of June McDaniel and Sarah Caldwell, as well as Kathleen Erndl’s study of goddess worship in Northern India, where Kali is popularly seen as the fierce aspect of Devi, in complement to the gentle aspect, Vaisno or Gauri.

²⁴ Suchitra Samanta, “The ‘self-animal’ and divine digestion: Goat sacrifice to the goddess Kali in Bengal”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53 (1994): 780

liberation. By facing south, the direction of Death, she gains mastery over it. She is stepping with her right foot on the prone body of Shiva (sometimes simply representing the universe), a scene that captures the moment when Shiva places himself in her path to stop her mad, destructive dance. According to Kinsley, the tradition of Kali as Mother comes out of late medieval Bengali devotionalism, in which the devotee, in contrast to the Tantric adept seeking to stand fearless before Kali's more terrible aspect, adopts the position of a child. As Kinsley writes, "though the child's mother may be fearsome, at times even hostile, the child has little choice but to return to her for protection, security, and warmth."²⁵ Though Kali's image seems to lack the maternal comforts and benign outlook of so many other Hindu goddesses, there is an inherent logic in this approach, for the acceptance of fearful truths about life and human existence, such as the inevitability of death and chaos, is ultimately liberating. Kinsley summarizes Rāmprasād's devotional attitude:

To be Kali's child, Rāmprasād often asserts, is to suffer, to be disappointed in terms of worldly desires and pleasures. Kali does not give what is normally expected.²⁶ She does allow her devotee/child, however, to glimpse a vision of himself that is not circumscribed by physical and material limitations. As Rāmprasād says succinctly: "He who has made Kali... his only goal forgets worldly pleasures." Indeed that personal has little choice, for Kali does not indulge her devotees in worldly pleasures. It is her very refusal to do so that enables her devotees to reflect on dimensions of themselves and of reality that go beyond bodily comfort and world security.²⁷

Kinsley even suggests that Kali is a way for the highly structured regimented Hindu world order, with its preoccupation with purity and pollution, to come to terms with "the built-in shortcomings of its own refined view of the world", and to put the order of dharma in perspective, recognizing that life itself is disorderly, and "untamable, unpurifiable."²⁸ This view, however, may be somewhat romanticized. In contemporary India Kali worship is often just another strand in the rich tapestry of Hinduism. Even in areas like Bengal and the famous Kalighat temple of Kolkata, where animal sacrifice to the goddess continues, simply worshipping Kali is hardly considered marginal. The type of worship and worshipper, on the other hand, does matter in the public perception, with some tantric forms of Kali practice being the most

²⁵ Kinsley, "Kālī", 125-126.

²⁶ Though, this is debatable, judging from the contemporary attitudes of her devotees.

²⁷ Kinsley, "Kālī", 128.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 129.

controversial, such as left-handed rituals, sexual practices, and so on. For example, June McDaniel in her study of goddess worship in West Bengal writes that her informants, though willing to speak to her of such practices as tantric *sadhana* involving sexual intercourse, “stolidly” refused to introduce her to women who live as vocational tantric *sadhana* partners, as they are considered to be only slightly higher in status than ordinary prostitutes.²⁹ McDaniel also demonstrates that practices that are common in the village setting, may be seen in a negative light in the urban context, and so on.

Regional differences equally matter, as Kali worship is becoming increasingly ‘vegetarian’ in areas with a large Vaisnavite population and influence, such as Rajasthan and the Punjab (i.e. puja elements involving blood, meat, and violence are phased out and replaced with vegetarian offerings, or hidden and continued in private).³⁰ This brings me back to the issue of sacrifice. At various times and places, offerings to Kali may be vegetable or animal, textually prescribed and mandatory or vow-related and optional, and they may be offered at temples (where chanting and purification rites are performed by Brahmin priests), or domestically on Kalipuja day. Though it seems that the transformative ritual purpose of sacrifice remains largely unchanged, in order to truly understand its role in Kali worship, one must begin with an examination of animal sacrifice. Though more stark and shocking, it is the historically more dominant practice, and it allows one to glimpse the relationship dynamics between the goddess and her devotees.

Suchitra Samanta in her study of Kali and blood offerings in Bengal remarks that this tradition can only be understood from within a uniquely Hindu view of the self. At Kalighat temple, for example, meat from daily sacrifices is cooked and presented to the goddess as part of her regular food offering, then sold as *prasad*, while meat from a privately sponsored sacrifice is returned to the sacrificer, to take home as the ‘greatest form of *prasad*’. Samanta proposes a view

²⁹ June McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess worship in West Bengal*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113.

³⁰ Kathleen Erndl, *Victory to the Mother: The Hindu Goddess of North Indian in Myth, Ritual, and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), in particular 5, 43-44, 71-72, 91-92. Especially interesting are various version of myths that Erndl collects as explanations of how the coconut offering came to “replace” the actual head offering (human or animal), juxtaposing to an extent the “fierce” and the “gentle” forms of the goddess worshipped in the Punjab. Though a detailed exploration of tensions between blood offerings (Shaiva or Shakta) and vegetarian (or Vaishnava) modes of goddess worship is outside the scope of this paper, it is an important part of goddess religion in India. As Erndl points out, none of the myths are entirely separate and all are syncretic with one another to some degree.

of sacrifice (termed *bali* or gift) based on the Hindu conception of the divine as Shakti, which she contrasts with the Judeo-Christian understanding of the relationship between self and divinity. She writes: “Where in the Western tradition God and man are perceived as two separate entities, the distinction between sacrificer and Shakti are... ambiguous”, and therefore the meaning of the sacrificial act here is termed to be the “*relationship* between divinity and sacrificer” (emphasis mine).³¹ In presenting an alimentary theme that is particularly meaningful and relevant in the Hindu context, Samanta proposes a “homology between the ‘self’ (*jiva*) of the sacrificer and the sacrificial animal (*pasu*),”³² an equation in which the ‘consumption’ of the ‘self-animal’ by the goddess over many lifetimes eventually leads to the soul’s union with divinity and to liberation (*moksha*).

Samanta’s research also supports the notion that Kali’s power and grace are sought in particular in times of crisis (a point I return to when discussing her Western incarnation within North American goddess spirituality). Samanta writes that many of her informants offered vow-related *bali* at times of crisis, sometimes in secret, and have found them to be efficient. Some informants mentioned less common forms of *bali*: enemy-offering (a kind of dough figure ‘immolated’ with a sword on Kalipuja), self-offering



Figure 1.4 Richard B. Godfrey. *The Goddess Kali*, 1770 Print

³¹ Samanta, “The ‘self-animal,’” 783

³² *Ibid*, 782

(blood offering from own chest), and even offering goat heads to jackals, animals associated with Kali. In all these cases, sacrifice marks both a critical, agonizing point in the life of the sacrificer, and at the same time, it is a point of transformation.

Within the emerging scheme, blood is a substance that acts as a conduit, and drinking the blood of the immolated goat is said to grant immortality. At Kalighat temple, according to Samanta, the sacrificer is marked with goat blood during the ceremony in the forehead region of “centre of consciousness”, and the blood itself is now referred to as “ambrosia”, and is later “mixed with the green-coconut water and yogurt used to wash the sacrificial post, bottled and given to the sacrificer.”³³ Taking into account that under normal circumstances blood (and at time even meat) is an extremely polluting substance in the Hindu context, this very ritual is outside the normal order of things, much like Kali herself, with her nudity, wildness, independence, violence, and association with death and dissolution. Nonetheless, these anti-normative things are deeply transformative. This is also Samanta’s main theme: the transformation of the self-animal, i.e. the transformation of the “animal” parts of the self, occurs literally at the moment of offering the animal to Kali, the sacrificer and the sacrifice identified here with one another. Significant in this context is the understanding that the personal energy contained within each individual, that is, his or her *shakti* (power or life-force), is not entirely separate from the divine *as Shakti* (in this case figured by Kali the Mother, the feminine principle, or the ultimate reality).³⁴ This ultimate reality is at once a reality of the sacred and of the self. Samanta writes that the sacrificer is

animal-like in his lack of perception [and] desires enlightenment as realization and divine beneficence... *Bali* enacts the transformation of the sacrificer from raw flesh and blood to that of burnt offering... The “knowledgeable” goddess is invoked in the rite to devour the flesh and “drink” the blood of the deluded and bound self-animal, and thus assist in its enlightenment.³⁵

One may observe here a continuity between the deluded “self-animal” and the demons so often slain by Kali on the battlefield, as discussed above. These demons are commonly likened to animals that are sacrificed on the battlefield: presumably, they too are transformed and even liberated in the process. Similarly, buffalo are still considered an ultimate sacrificial offering to

³³ *Ibid*, 790

³⁴ In the next section I discuss the meaning of *shakti*/Shakti and its significance in Indic goddess devotion in greater detail

³⁵ Samanta, “The ‘self-animal,’” 790

Kali, in memory of her slaying the buffalo-headed demon from the *Devī Māhātmya*, Mahisasura. Kali as manifestation of the rage of various goddesses likewise reinforces the idea that a crisis situation marks any deep transformation, both for the goddesses who give rise to Kali, and for the situation at large, which on a cosmic scale entails the salvation of the entire universe. Kali becomes a “devourer of demons” — beings that represent lust, ambition, carnality, and ignorance. Curiously, goats are symbolic of these very same qualities, especially of uncontrolled sexuality, and therefore are a fit offering for Kali, as they homologize those qualities the sacrificer wishes to expel from the self.³⁶

³⁶ It is worth noting that in the West goats are similarly associated with lust, and other “demonic” qualities, including such European representatives as satyrs, known for sexual prowess and excess, or Pan, god of field and fertility, and likewise associated with sexual promiscuity or fecundity. Christian imaginings of the Devil, especially as medieval distortions of Greek deities, also figure him as goat-horned and goat-footed, and in Biblical Jewish context a custom of sending a goat off into the wilderness after a priest has transferred all the sins of the people onto it (Lev. 16) had literally given rise to the expression “scapegoat”.

3. *Magical Powers, Self-Realization & the Kali Practice: Kali as the Tantric Goddess*

The theme of transformation and self-purification finally brings me to the third (and for her Western devotees, possibly most central) aspect of Kali: her significance as a Tantric goddess. In the Indian textual corpus there are literally hundreds of tantric texts, and as a rule, Tantra refers more to a kind of philosophical approach or a tool kit for self-development than to the worship of a specific deity. While there are various forms of Tantra — Buddhist, Shaivite, and even Jain — goddesses play a central role as embodying knowledge and revealing the true nature of reality, as well as the personifications of power or vitality that permeates and moves all creation. Moreover, as Kinsley writes, “An underlying assumption in Tantric ideology is that reality is the result and expression of the symbolic interaction of the male and female, Śiva and Śakti, the quiescent and the dynamic, and other polar opposites that in interaction produce a creative tension.”³⁷ Therefore, though it is Shiva who is often thought to be the source of the Tantras (in the Hindu tradition he is often portrayed in conversation with Parvati, his pupil, discussing the finer points of some of the teachings), in most of the texts the emphasis is on Shakti as the entity who “pervades reality with her power, might, and vitality and... who is immediately present to the adept and whose presence and being underlie his own being.”³⁸

Shakti is a word that denotes both the abstract sense of “power, energy, vitality,” present in the cosmos as well as that of specific beings (like a person’s shakti, or a god’s shakti, often personified as a goddess), yet it is also a goddess, Shakti, which may refer to the greater reality of the sacred as ultimately female. In the next chapter I examine this concept in greater depth when looking at the theological development of the Great Goddess in Hindu thought, but for now I am interested in the rise of Kali as a central figure in Tantric texts, and especially in left-handed Tantra. Many of these texts praise her as the greatest deity, or the highest reality, and though she remains associated with Shiva, often it is clear that she is the one who holds precedence over him. The *Nirvāṇa-tantra*, for instance, states that the gods Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva “arise from her like bubbles from the sea, endlessly arising and passing away, leaving their source unchanged,” and next to her they are “like the amount of water in a cow’s hoofprint compared to

³⁷ Kinsley, “Kālī”, 122.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 122.

the waters of the sea.”³⁹ Similarly, the *Yoginī-tantra*, the *Kāmākhya-tantra*, and the *Niruttara-tantra* proclaim Kali as foremost of the *vidyās* (forms of the Great Goddess), that is, the essence or true form of the Mahadevi, as well as *brahman* itself — the undifferentiated, attributeless, eternal consciousness which is all Reality.

The *Mahānirvāṇa-tantra* uses Kali as a common epithet for the primordial *shakti*, and Shiva praises her as the true reality beyond all things, including himself:

Because Thou devourest Kāla, Thou art Kālī, the original form of all things, and because Thou art the Origin of and devourest all things Thou art called the Adyā [primordial] Kālī. Resuming after Dissolution Thine own form, dark and formless, Thou alone remainest as One ineffable and inconceivable. Though having a form; yet art Thou formless; though Thyself without beginning, multiform by the power of Māyā, Thou art the Beginning of all, Creatrix, Protectress, and Destructress that Thou art. (4.30-34)⁴⁰

Though it is not entirely certain why Kali and not another goddess, such as Durga or Parvati, became the prominent Tantric goddess, Kinsley speculated that in part this is due to the prevalence of ritual and individual practice in Tantrism. The seeker, or *sadhaka*, uses various techniques, internal and external ritual practices and mental, bodily, and spiritual exercises, to attain *moksha* — release, or salvation. The theme of uniting or transcending opposites (such as male-female, sacred-profane, etc) is consistently played out in these rituals, either in symbolic or literal form. The body is likewise paramount in Tantra, both the physical and the subtle body, as a locus from which one may know the world. The *tantrika*, by gaining mastery over the self and one’s own body, gains knowledge of the world, and ultimately realizes the highest truth: that what seems fractured into opposites is in fact a single reality, and the perceived multiplicity of forms is merely the play of this singular reality as Shakti.

According to Kinsley, the terrifying image of Kali is especially relevant in left-handed (*vāmācāra*) Tantra because she, more than any other deity, confronts the adept with precisely those dualities one must overcome: the pure and impure, the sacred and the profane, and ultimately, death itself as inseparable from life. The *sadhaka* becomes a hero in this context, *vīra*, and undertakes the ritual path of the “five forbidden things” (*pañcatattva*), which involves

³⁹ *Ibid*, 122.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 123. Kinsley is quoting from the translation of *Mahānirvāṇa-tantra* by Arthur Avalon, *Tantra of the Great Liberation*, published in Madras by Ganesh, 1972. To date, Avalon’s English translations of many tantric texts, completed with the help of Indian scholars, are the most widely utilized both by academics and English-speaking practitioners.

partaking of wine, meat, fish, parched grain (perhaps a hallucinogen?), and illicit sexual intercourse. Maintaining a rigid ritual context and, ideally, close supervision by one's guru, is essential, since the boundary between overcoming dualities and lapsing back into greater delusion is elusively thin. For this reason it is considered to be a heroic path, not to be undertaken lightly.

Numerous texts exist elucidating the exact techniques and meditations to be followed, mantras to be uttered, and rituals to be performed in the tantric quest of Kali as revealer of the Ultimate, but here I mention only a few prominent ones. For example, Kinsley quotes from the *Karpūrādi-stotra*, a short work translated by Arthur Avalon as *Hymn to Kali*, which locates her in the already familiar context of the cremation ground: she is black, dishevelled, blood trickling from her mouth, she is holding a sword and a severed head, wears a girdle of severed arms, and sits on a corpse in the cremation ground, surrounded by female jackals. However, it is notable that in this text she is no longer portrayed as an emaciated, hideous hag, but rather as young and beautiful (verse 1), with a serene and smiling face (18). While her left hands still hold a sword and a decapitated head, her right hands are now making the signs of dispelling fear and offering boons (4).⁴¹ This is consistent with the way Kali is most often portrayed in contemporary icons and *murtis*, and especially in Bengali and Orissan devotionalism.⁴² While some older representation of her still portray her as emaciated, ugly, and with sagging breasts, most are in museum exhibits of older paintings and stone statues (often labelled Cāmuṇḍā or Chamunda i.e. Durga/Kali's most terrible form) and never in temples where Kali is worshipped or in devotional

⁴¹ *Hymn to Kali (Karpūrādi-stotra)* ed. and trans. Arthur Avalon, Madras: Ganesh, 1965, 84-86. Quoted in Kinsley, "Kālī", 124.

⁴² An article by Usha Menon and Richard A. Shweder, "Dominating Kali: Hindu Family Values and Tantric Power" (*Encountering Kali*, eds. McDermott and Kripal) is especially interesting for investigating the contemporary meanings attached to the commonplace icon of Kali stepping on Shiva with her tongue lolling out. As Menon and Shweder note, the contrast between the "tantric" meaning of Kali as the manifestation of the ultimate and supreme female power which animates the universe, and the socially normative meaning of "shame" and need for this power to be checked and restrained, is in part informed by a 15th century Orissa text, the *Caṇḍī Purāṇa*, and in part is constructed by local narratives circulated by priests and devotees at the temple town of Bhubaneswar. This is a good example of the dialectic between tantric and devotional approaches, and the ongoing assimilation and re-negotiation of Kali worship within normative Hindu practice.

icons.⁴³ It is also notable that the *Karpūrādi-stotra* places the tantric practitioner at the site of the goddess's dwelling, the cremation ground, and entering bodily into the Kali *bhava*, or expression, thus using one's body as a tool to meditation upon and be transformed spiritually by the goddess:

He, O Mahākālī, who in the cremation-ground, naked, and with dishevelled hair, intently meditates upon Thee and recites Thy *mantra*, and with each recitation makes offering to Thee of a thousand *Akaṇḍa* flowers with seed, becomes without any effort a Lord of the earth.

O Kali, whoever on Tuesday at midnight, having uttered Thy *mantra*, makes offering even but once with devotion to Thee of a hair of his *Śakti* [his female companion] in the cremation-ground, becomes a great poet, a Lord of the earth, and ever goes mounted upon an elephant.⁴⁴

Though this seems more like a ritual for obtaining magical powers and earthly boons than enlightenment, those are not necessarily contradictory to a spiritual goal, but are some of the signs of spiritual development. It is not entirely clear if such boons as “Lord of the earth” and becoming a “great poet” are to be taken literally or symbolically, but it is evident that the text addresses a male seeker. Even if one takes the pronoun “he” to be a sort of universal, the offering of “a hair of his *Śakti*” clearly denotes the *vīra* to be male, since Shakti is feminine and most likely refers to an actual woman serving as the hero's tantric partner.

The idea of a gendered approach to Kali worship and to Shakta Tantra more generally is an interesting one, and raises various questions concerning the roles ascribed to male and female practitioners, the meanings behind various rituals involving real women, and the textually prescribed attitudes towards women. It is also notable that an emerging consensus among female tantrikas reveals a more internalized understanding of the dualities, including male

⁴³ I have seen some great examples of the “emaciated Kali” at an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York entitled *Mother India: The Goddess in Indian Painting*, (June 29 – November 27, 2011). It had a few early paintings and illustrations, such as “Kali Presenting the Heads of Chanda and Munda to Durga: Scene from the Devi Mahatmya” and “Durga and Kali Approach the Gathered Armies of Chanda and Munda: Scene from the Devi Mahatmya” (ca. 1780, Himachal Pradesh) which depict Kali with characteristic ‘ugly’ features: protruding ribcage, sagging breasts, disproportionate head and a huge jaw. They were well contrasted with a contemporary painting of Kali by Y.G. Srimati, where the goddess is depicted crowned, ten-armed, striding powerfully, clad in a skirt of human heads and garlanded, her eyes half closed as if in meditation and her countenance peaceful. Furthermore, the exhibition included numerous sculptural variations of “Durga slaying the Buffalo Demon” (depicting Durga, not Kali in the act), which gives support to the later emergence of Kali as a separate deity, possibly due to her Tantric connotations. A brief description of the exhibit and forty of the objects included in it can all be found on the museum website, at <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2011/mother-india-the-goddess-in-indian-painting>.

⁴⁴ *Hymn to Kali*, verses 15-16; quoted in Kinsley, “Kālī”, 124.

and female, which one reconciles *within* oneself – leading to a more independent model of practice.⁴⁵ The issue of the female voice in Tantra is encapsulated by the question Parvati poses to Shiva in the *Yoni Tantra*: “Does a woman herself worship the *yonī*?”⁴⁶ As the divine couple discusses the mysteries of Tantra at their heavenly abode atop Mount Kailash, the usually docile (and mostly silent) Parvati voices a question that must have puzzled many women who are exposed to Tantric texts, where the female form, and especially the *yonī* (sexual organ), are worshipped above all things. In this particular text, Shiva answers that while the *yonī*, which “makes up the whole world” is worshipped by the male seeker, “the *liṅga*, the male organ, should be worshipped by her... By the mere worship of these two, one becomes liberated while in the body.”⁴⁷

As Loriliai Biernacki notes, this exchange presupposes a) that the worship of the *yonī* is a normative practice, and b) that the question itself is somewhat odd, since most tantric texts and

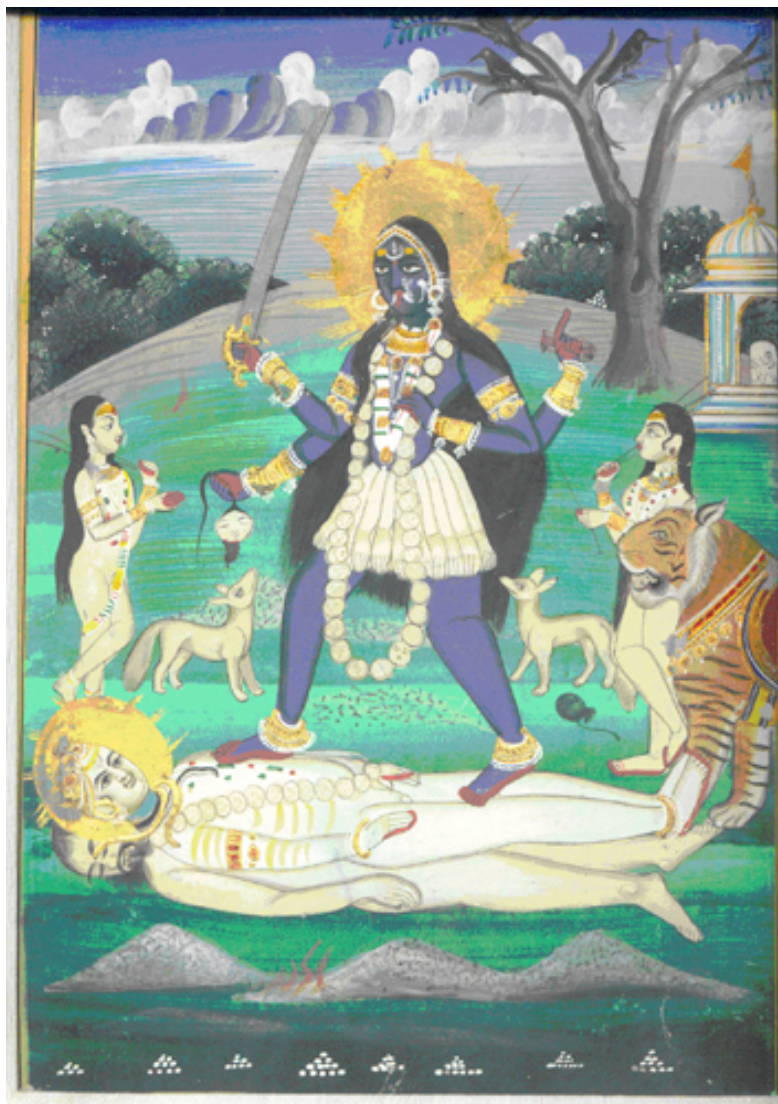


Figure 1.5 Kali standing on Shiva/Śava (Shiva as a corpse) with attendant yoginis, 18th-19th century miniature

⁴⁵ This can be seen in the work of June McDaniel among female tantric practitioners in Bengal, which I discuss in greater length in the next chapter, as well as in a contemporary theological work on Kali by Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *In the beginning IS desire*, a work which I return to as well.

⁴⁶ *Yoni Tantra* 5.23, quoted in Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and speech in Tantra* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 29.

⁴⁷ Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire*, 29.

rituals are designed for male audiences and with the male practitioner in mind. What is the role of women, then? Are they to worship equally with males? And if so, would they too worship a woman? Since Tantra does not form a monolithic corpus or category, the answers to this question are various. For our purposes here, however, it is notable that the tantric texts and practices that elevate women, prescribe a respectful attitude towards all women, and even make some provisions for the female *tantrika* have been collectively known as the Kali Practice. The importance of female worshippers or women as actors in tantric ritual is thus also implicit in Shiva's response above: "Only by the worship of *both* – that is both men *and* women worshipping their respective opposite genders — does one reach enlightenment in the body (*jīvan mukti*)."⁴⁸

Biernacki describes five key elements that make up the Kali Practice: a) it is centred on women, including seeking out women and treating them with respect; b) it is especially a mental practice, and so the normal rules for time, place or purity do not apply; c) it includes rites that involve worshipping living women, at times incorporating sexual union, and other times not, such as in the worship of young girls (*kumārī puja*); d) the praxis involved in it specifically goes beyond the time and place of a single ritual, habituating "an attitude that shifts the position of women and the relation to women"; and e) it views the goddess as embodied in living women, and so women as a *category* are revered and assimilated to Brahmins (an inversion of the more normative assimilation of women to Shudras, the lowest worker caste).⁴⁹

Notably, many of these elements are not present in many of the Tantric texts commonly available in English (and especially of the left-handed category), such as *Kulārṇava Tantra*, *Kālikā Purāṇa*, and *Kaulajñāna Nirṇaya*, which are relatively early texts, ranging from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries CE. Texts that support the notion of the Kali Practice generally date later (fifteenth to eighteenth centuries), and belong to a north-eastern Indian provenance. Apart from demonstrating that the shift in attitudes towards women, at least textually, happened in a gradual manner and in a specific time and place, the dominance of the earlier texts in English translation may in part explain why in Western scholarship there is a specific type of criticism directed at Tantrism. Two scholarly responses in particular problematize the tantric view of the

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 31 emphasis original.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

feminine: a) bringing into question the ambiguous attitudes towards real women, often bizarrely at odds with the reverence for the goddess; and b) investigating the agency of female tantric actors, who often are little more than conduits and suppliers of fluids for the male practitioner. While this is true for a certain strain of tantric texts, it is worthwhile reiterating that Tantra is not a homogenous doctrine and its corpus includes a diverse set of texts and perspectives, especially when discussing the implications of tantric practice for women.⁵⁰ I return to this topic in the next chapter as well, looking more closely at the socio-cultural context and lived tradition of Shaktas and *tantrikas*, and in particular, at the experiences and roles of contemporary women within the practice.

Curiously, Biernacki notes that although in many ways the Western image of Kali “appears constructed out of thin air”, in an unexpected way the Kali of New Age and Goddess Spirituality circles “may not be entirely inconsistent with the advocacy of respect towards women that we find in the ‘Kali Practice.’”⁵¹ Similarly, Rachel McDermott writes that in her Western reincarnation Kali offers women “healing in a male-dominated world”⁵² — and I examine this claim more closely in the next chapters, looking both at the Indian and Western milieu, since the assumption that the worship of female deities must automatically cultivate egalitarian attitudes towards women socially is in itself highly problematic. In the Indian context, it is not only Kali’s ability to empower women, but also the worship of the Goddess (or goddesses) more generally has been both called into question by some feminist authors, and ardently defended by others. In the next chapter, I look at this critique more closely, as it applies to the wider context of Indic goddess worship. That said, Madhu Khanna, a prominent Indian feminist scholar, writes extensively on what she calls the “women-Goddess equation” of Shakta Tantra, and its affirmative outlook on women’s power, women’s bodies, and even women’s innate tantric abilities, such as being especially good at mastering mantras. Though Shakta Tantra is not limited to the worship of Kali, and various texts often focus on other goddesses (such as Durga,

⁵⁰ Biernacki includes eight texts in her treatment of the Kali Practice: *Bṛhannīla Tantra*, *Cīnācāra Tantra*, *Gandharva Tantra*, *Gupta Sādhana Tantra*, *Maya Tantra*, *Nīlasarasvatī Tantra*, *Phetkārīnī Tantra*, and *Yoni Tantra*, though there are other texts, including some puranic literature, that would fall in this category.

⁵¹ Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire*, 33.

⁵² McDermott, Rachel. “The Western Kali,” in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, ed. by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 291

Mahalakshmi, or Tripurāsundarī), it is uniquely positioned as an affirmation of women’s own nature as an embodiment of the Goddess. Neela Bhattacharya Saxena similarly argues that Tantra alone, as the worship of the Goddess as such, is neither enough to empower women nor to disempower them — since tantric teachings and ritual are always broken through the prism of commentators and interpreters, practitioners, teachers, socio-political conditions, and women themselves. Saxena asserts that a deeper education in the tradition and a willingness (and ability) to investigate the texts, rituals, and practices for oneself can be potentially empowering for women, as much as manipulation of the texts at the hands of disingenuous and exploitative males can be disempowering and abusive. Saxena, whose work I shall return to in the following chapters as well, sees her own theological exposition of Kali as educational in part. A Bengali Hindu brought up in the Kali tradition, currently living and teaching in the United States, Saxena is uniquely positioned on the cusp between the Eastern and the Western ‘Kali’s, and she writes:

In the spirit of reclaiming or even reconstructing the tradition, as Gross does with Buddhism, I aspire to show the not-so-well-known aspects of the Shakta worldview. In Kali, Shaktism is able to synthesize pure consciousness and manifest materiality in her enigmatic female form without any apparent disconnect or schism. Such knowledge awakens women to their inherent divinity which could, if they chose, lead them to socio-political power, and towards the ultimate freedom of *Mahaparinirvana* or *Moksha*.⁵³

Having reviewed briefly the various devotional and ritual aspects of Kali worship within the Hindu religious landscape, I now move to situate her in the wider context of the Indic Goddess tradition. In order to truly appreciate the impact of Kali’s cult and mythos, it is necessary to see how she fits in with other female deities, which proliferate in the Hindu pantheon. In the following chapter I explore what does it mean to speak of the Goddess — as a female deity or as manifestation of the ultimate reality; what it means to speak of fierce and gentle goddesses, or of independent and domesticated ones? By situating Kali in this terrain, a landscape literally infused with the power of the Goddess and manifest as her body, I endeavour to broaden the scope of her reach, and to contextualize her in her native environment, which is a necessary step before I can follow her migratory path to the West, in the wake of traders and mystics, immigrants and scholars, and various seekers on the digital highways of the Internet.

⁵³ Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire: Tracing Kali’s footprints in Indian literature* (New Delhi: Indialog Publications, 2004), 45

2. THE ONE AND THE MANY: THE GODDESS TRADITION OF INDIA

*“There is no great goddess. When activated, each goddess is the great goddess.”
– Gayatri Spivak, “Moving Devi”*

The living goddess is everywhere in India. Even a casual, first-time visitor cannot miss the ubiquitous signs of devotion in any given landscape, rural or urban. From the cosmopolitan streets of Mumbai to the banks of the Ganges and from the foothills of the Himalayas to the rainforests of the South, the land is saturated with a plurality of forms of devotion and religiosity. Amid them, goddesses are prominent: from modest roadside shrines and colourful garlands marking auspicious trees, to elaborate temples and daily public worship rituals that never fail to draw a crowd, the divine is honoured in female form.⁵⁴ The Goddess is in the red flags flown from temple spires, she is in sacred rivers and mountains, she is, of course, in the temples, but also in the shop banners, postcards, billboards, and even auto-rickshaw canopies. The latter I have encountered in Jaipur, while sitting in a motored rickshaw where the cabin space, usually a uniform green and yellow canvas, was unexpectedly covered by a large Lakshmi image on the inside. It was wonderfully surreal to lean back in the seat amid the usual city bustle, smell of diesel, and car horns, and look up into the face of the goddess smiling benevolently from above.

Indeed, as both Diana Eck and Suchitra Samanta have written before, there is no real equivalent in Sanskritic languages of the term “sacred” used in the West,⁵⁵ or rather, both the sacred and the profane are porous and fluid. The rigid divide between the two is not necessary because what makes something (some place or someone) ‘sacred’ or ‘profane’ is relational, fluid,

⁵⁴ A note on capitalization: throughout the paper, I am using “goddess”, “Goddess”, and “goddesses” in following more or less a Western understanding of these distinctions, since there is no capitalization in Sanskritic languages and the term “G/goddess” or “*devī*” is used interchangeably by various sectarian movements, sometimes intending to indicate a supreme sacred reality, and sometimes simply referring to a female supernatural actor, such as a lineage goddess or guardian. There is a good discussion on the utilization of these terms in the study of Indic goddesses in the volume edited by Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition*, which I briefly review below. However, to clarify, I use here the term “Goddess” when wishing to indicate the sense of the female deity as supreme sacred reality (akin to Western usage of “God”); “goddess” when discussing a more localized form of a female deity or when thinking of the divine in female form more academically; and “goddesses” when referring to several female deities or the multiplicity of forms that the feminine divine takes in Indian culture and religion.

⁵⁵ Suchitra Samanta, “Maṅgalmayīmā, sumāṅgalī, maṅgal: Bengali perceptions of the divine feminine, motherhood and ‘Auspiciousness,’” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 26.1 (1992): 53, and also see Diana Eck in *Darsan: Seeing the Divine in India*.

and simultaneous, supporting thus the notion that divinity, and especially as the Goddess, is at once transcendent and immanent. The feminine incarnation of the divine, in the form of varied multi-armed, many-headed goddesses, is similarly present in different Indic religious traditions – even in those that ostensibly do not worship goddesses. For example, in Jain temples, a tradition known for its asceticism and otherworldly focus on liberation, I have seen many worshippers at the altars of goddesses, which at times eclipse the worship accorded to the Jinas, the hero-prophets of Jainism.⁵⁶ Brilliantly painted and decorated with lavish flowers and fabrics, Indic goddesses appear before us in temples as consecrated carved statues (*murtis*), but they are just as often represented non-anthropomorphically, as sacred pots, red and black stones, red flags, rivers, water, and stone-carved *yonis*, either as part of a *lingam* or not. Though individual deity names and properties may vary, nearly all goddesses are invariably invoked and referred to as “Ma” – divine mothers. This appellation also denotes the protective character of a great majority of female divinities, who, from the personal, clan, or village patron-deities to the embodiment of Mother India herself as Bharat Mata, are often strongly associated with land, home, boundaries and their protection, as well as the fertility and growth of all that is under their jurisdiction. On a greater scale, and especially within the Shakta stream of Hinduism, this embodiment of the Goddess as manifest reality is the result of her being the ultimate “fount of the universe”, both the unoriginated creative source of all, and the differentiated multifaceted creation.⁵⁷

So what does it mean to worship female deities in this terrain, intersected with various divine and human actors? How can one reconcile the discourses (and practices) speaking both to an overarching Great Goddess and to many local and regional goddesses? Who is the Indian Kali? Is she a monolithic figure, or is she refracted into regional deities? How does she fit into this tapestry? These are the questions I set out to explore in this chapter, before I can turn to the Western Kali, and her rise in neopagan and feminist goddess spirituality. After all, as June

⁵⁶ For more on Jain goddesses see Lawrence Babb, John E. Cort, Robert Zydenbos and others. In particular, Cort, “Medieval Jaina Goddess Traditions,” *Numen* 34.2 (1987): 235-255 and Zydenbos, “The Jaina Goddess Padmavati,” *Contacts Between Cultures V. II: South Asia*, ed. K.I. Koppedrayar (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 257-262.

⁵⁷ Tracy Pintchman, “The Goddess as Fount of the Universe: Shared Visions and Negotiated Allegiances in Purāṇic Accounts of Cosmogogenesis,” in *Seeking Mahadevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 77-101.

McDaniel rightly points out, while North American feminists and goddess practitioners have been reclaiming and reconstructing a Western tradition of goddesses from fragments of history, art, and myth, the worship of female deities flourishes in India: a practice unbroken for thousands of years.⁵⁸ As already outlined in chapter one, of all the Hindu goddesses Kali occupies a special position, inspiring both awed and ambiguous sentiments. In order to better understand her tradition(s), it is necessary to situate her within the Hindu goddess tradition more broadly, which is the aim of this chapter. In the literature on India's goddesses it is rare that any discussion of one deity can be truly separated from the notion of the Great Goddess (Mahadevi or sometimes simply Devi) and the Indic goddess religions. I use the plural "religions" in the same way one would use "Hinduisms", to emphasize that no monolithic single tradition can encompass the variety of cultural and religious expressions that comprise Indic goddess worship. At the same time, it seems one can still speak of an underlying and pervasive paradigm, reality, or set of qualities within this tradition; one can speak of the 'Goddess in India', as well as of 'Indic goddesses'.

Since an almost inexhaustible wealth of practices and texts can fall under the rubric of "Indic goddess worship", it is helpful to look at clusters of characteristics and key ideas associated with goddesses (or the Goddess), rather than a detailed study of any one case study. Following the seminal work of Tracy Pintchman on the subject, I discuss below the deeply feminine nature of *shakti* (energy), *maya* (illusion or reality) and *prakriti* (matter, nature, or manifest reality), and their coalescence into the figure of the Hindu Great Goddess. These theological concepts further expand into three interrelated theoretical paradigms that I find useful, when thinking about Indic goddesses: i) goddesses as animating powers or an active energizing principle, whether of the whole universe, of a male deity, or *yogi/tantrika* practitioner; ii) the often tacit continuity of various goddesses and female deities, which can assume multiple forms, distinct in one context and fluid in another, and thus permeating across regional and sectarian traditions; and iii) the fundamental embodiment of the feminine divine in the physical world, often constructed as sacred landscapes and seats of power (*shakti pithas*), and the continuity of Goddess and human women, usually within Shaktism.

⁵⁸ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 4.

However, while these ideas resonate throughout the religious traditions of India that venerate goddesses in some form (Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism), it is important to note that they are most prominent in the Śākta tradition, which is the focus of this paper. I do not intend to over-emphasize the universality of these traits and thus gloss over important differences in how goddess worship is understood by practitioners and devotees from ultimately distinct traditions, and I would like to stress that this is but an overview of a theological and devotional reality in which to situate Kali and her cultus. It is also important to note that the worship of female deities is not synonymous with an equitable treatment of human women in society, and this topic merits its own discussion (section IV.3 below). As Madhu Khanna rightly points out, “women have been kind to religion, but religion has not been favorable to them.”⁵⁹ Feminist critiques of (mainly Brahmanical) Hinduism have pointed out that despite the veneration of goddesses, women are still often seen as inferior, thus being barred from holding religious office, having direct access to spiritual liberation, acting as independent moral agents, and so on. Even the very bodies of women are conceptualized as essentially polluted, especially during menstruation and immediately following childbirth.⁶⁰ On the other hand, within Shakta circles (but not exclusively so), women are seen as continuous with the Goddess, and are accorded respect and veneration regardless of their age and social position. The rise of Shakta Tāntrism circa 600 CE, and its resurgence in 900-1600 CE, had seen the emergence of a textual tradition that was dedicated to the goddess and essentially “rewrote” goddess theology and cosmology in relation to the male deities, emphasizing her primacy and supreme nature. In turn, these textual and devotional traditions have influenced other branches of Hinduism, and popular worship of goddesses has infiltrated and shaped other Indic traditions, such as Buddhism and Jainism.

⁵⁹ Madhu Khanna, “The Goddess-Women Equation in Śākta Tantras,” in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. Mandakaranta Bose (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 109.

⁶⁰ Khanna, “The Goddess-Women Equation...” 109, 117-118. Especially telling is the explanation of menstruation as the remnants of perpetual guilt, taken on by womankind on behalf of the god Indra for his sin of Brahminicide. While Indra’s killing of the powerful thirst demon Vṛtra, a snake or dragon-like monster and ruler of rivers, clouds, celestial and ground waters, is deemed to be an act that releases the waters of plentitude, and thus bestows wealth, cows, and progeny, in a later version of the myth Indra is punished for slaying such a great sage. Realizing his sin is great, he convinces the women to bear one third of it for him (bestowing them the questionable boon of obtaining offspring and dwelling “at pleasure” with their husbands until the children are born). The sign of this guilt is still evident as menstrual blood.

The goal of this chapter, therefore, is twofold: first, my aim is to introduce the Hindu tradition of goddess worship, and secondly, to contextualize Kali within the Indic goddess tradition. Therefore, I focus on those aspects of Indic goddess worship which are most meaningful to Kali mythos and devotion, such as the simultaneous universality and plurality of the Goddess, typologies of goddesses (gentle and fierce), embodiment and possession, and social, moral, and soteriological implications for human women. Similarly, the discussion of the divine feminine in the Indian context is a necessary foil for the discussion of the divine feminine in the feminist goddess movement of the West as grounding for the phenomenon of the Western Kali (chapter three). Kali weaves in and out of both contexts of goddess worship, and my limited introduction of Shaktism here always returns to the most popular image of the fierce goddess: skin dark blue and luminous, tongue lolling and bloodied, clad in skirt of severed arms and adorned with a skull necklace and earrings of infant corpses, standing serene and beautiful on the prone body of Shiva or rushing into battle. Moreover, by going from the particular to the general and back again, I intend to illustrate the dialectic nature of the Hindu goddess tradition, constantly negotiating the concept of the G/goddess – a divine entity who is at once One and Many.

I. Fierce Creators and Devoted Mothers: A Tradition of Indic Goddesses

1. *The One and The Many, or, How to Speak of the Goddess?*

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the Indic goddess tradition for scholars is its diversity of practice and expression, as well as the apparent *simultaneity* of it – the coexistence of multiple cultic elements both on the micro level (within an individual’s personal practice or a single temple) and on the macro level (in one village, geographical area, city, or family/ethnic group). Certain goddesses likewise tend to be associated with different strains of Hinduisms, but these associations are neither universal nor inflexible. For example, while Lakshmi or Shri are most associated with Vishnu, and are often seen more of an intercessor for him on the behalf of devotees in the Vaishnava tradition, Durga and Kali, though loosely associated with Shiva, are perceived as more independent goddesses, grantors of boons and liberation in their own right (especially within the Shakta stream). Parvati or Sita, on the other hand, is more directly dependant on her role as Shiva’s consort, and her worship is most often associated with the Shaivaite tradition. That said, Parvati-Sita does not always enact the role of the “perfect docile wife” – especially in episodes when her wrath takes the form of Kali. Thus Kali, an independent deity sometimes seen as the ultimate manifestation of Shakti or the Great Goddess, is also portrayed in different contexts as the fiercest aspect of female deities, whether as righteous anger cosmically manifest, or as the destroying warrior-goddess and demon slayer. As John Stratton Hawley notes in the introduction to *Devī: Goddesses of India*, Kali represents a sort of mediating figure between “transcendent” and “consort” types of goddesses, going beyond them and revealing “what can happen when the powers of illusion, natural forces, and energy exist in a pure form.”⁶¹ Depending on local practice and devotional context, as well as on individual devotees, the connection between Parvati and Kali can be acknowledged, emphasised, downplayed, ignored, or denied – and, naturally, the resulting practice will be altered as a result of either (or a combination) of these theological interpretations.

⁶¹ John Stratton Hawley, “Prologue: The Goddess in India”, in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 9-11.

Another aspect that complicates somewhat the study of Indic goddesses is a plurality of narratives and practices, some of which do not “fit” with other narratives and practices — a fact that seems to be of little concern for devotees, but which occasionally poses challenges for scholars. Mark Edwin Rohe recounts a particularly characteristic anecdote that illustrates this, wherein he asked two pilgrims en route to Vaisno Devi’s temple about the identity of the goddess they have come to worship. Though the two were close friends and have taken this very pilgrimage together before, they held varying opinions on whether or not the goddess was an independent deity, a form of the goddess Durga, or somewhere in between. Curiously, it was not until the question was posed by Rohe, that the two had discussed the matter between them in any depth, and so they were mutually surprised by the other’s response.⁶²

Yet, this challenging simultaneity and plurality is both infused with very specific cultic elements associated with goddesses (as well as *the Goddess*), and it is in and of itself a hallmark of the Hindu goddess tradition. As Diana Eck aptly notes regarding Indian modes of thought, “If something is important, it is important enough to be duplicated, repeated and seen from many angles.”⁶³ Thus, the ubiquity of goddesses becomes inherently meaningful, a key conceptual paradigm. Secondly, goddesses embody and manifest a range of religious and cultural attitudes towards the feminine, sometimes translating into attitudes towards real women as well, which can be both empowering and restrictive, depending on the context. The worship of goddesses is not divorced from socio-economic and political factors and circumstances, and differences across caste, class, ethnic and linguistic groups, and geographical regions are significant. As a result, among other issues, both Indian and Western authors pose the question of whether the Hindu Great Goddess *is* a feminist⁶⁴ — that is to say, are goddesses empowering role models? Does goddess worship create more empowering, respectful and egalitarian attitudes to women? The

⁶² Mark Edwin Rohe, “Ambiguous and Definitive: The Greatness of the Goddess Vaisno Devi,” in *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (Albany: SUNY, 2001), 55-76.

⁶³ Diana Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 60.

⁶⁴ Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl edited *Is the goddess a feminist? The politics of South Asian goddesses*, a great compilation of essays, such as “Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist” by Rita Gross And “Is Shakti Empowering for Women” by Kathleen Erndl. Also see the work of Brenda Dobia, Lina Gupta, Stephanie W. Jamison, Madhu Khanna, Rachel McDermott, Kartikeya Patel, Santanu Patro, Hillary Rodrigues, Suchitra Samanta, Neela Bhattacharya Saxena and many others, some of which is discussed later in this chapter.

answers are, predictably, variable, and this too is an important factor to keep in mind, especially when I will be moving westward and examining the changes that have given rise to the Western goddess movement.

2. Typologies of Indic Goddesses

To begin making sense of the unity and multiplicity of the Goddess, it is necessary to delve deeper into several models or typologies of Indic female deities. Specific patterns of sexual/marital relationships between gods and goddesses are strongly associated with traditional pairings prevalent in various sectarian streams. For example, Vishnu and Shri/ Lakshmi or Krishna and Radha each illustrate various balances or potentialities of power, which are then reflected in particular expectations, worship, and devotions from their devotees. Similarly, relationships that portray the goddess as dominant may imply that it is the feminine principle that is the ultimate sacred reality, and iconographically this position is most associated with Kali and Shiva, such as in images where Kali is depicted as relatively bigger than, and standing upon, her prone consort.

One early model of distinguishing between goddesses who are seen as independently powerful and those mainly acting as consorts or intercessors with their male counterparts was articulated by Lawrence Babb, who classified them either “small”, or “big”, based on their iconography and imagery. Babb postulated that “small” goddesses, controlled by male gods (and literally smaller than their counterparts in icons and statues), are generally beneficial and auspicious; “big” goddesses, however, are uncontrolled and thus threatening and possibly malevolent.⁶⁵ While helpful on the surface, this approach is very limiting. First, it fails to address the widespread popular worship of goddesses such as Durga and Kali, who are undoubtedly fierce in myth and “big” in iconography, yet are addressed by their devotees as all-merciful, benevolent mothers who grant boons and liberation. Secondly, it is important to note, that even so called “circumscribed” goddesses can be, and often are, worshipped as powerful

⁶⁵ See Lawrence A. Babb’s “Marriage and Malevolence: The Uses of Sexual Opposition in a Hindu Pantheon”, *Ethnology* 9.2 (1970): 137-148, and *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

intercessors.⁶⁶ Thirdly, Babb's typology formulates the moral qualities of goddesses from the male point of view *a priori*, as if no alternative to being "controlled" or "out of control" exists. As Frédérique Apffel Marglin notes, such a typology excludes the intermediate category of the "lover but not wife", embodied, for example, in Radha, who appears to oscillate between the two poles. Marglin further challenges Babb's typology, arguing that what is threatening about "big" goddesses is not so much their sexuality per se but their celibacy, a state that introduces ambiguity to the channelling of their energy, *shakti*. Thus, *shakti*, the feminine force that animates the universe (including the male gods), is neither malevolent nor benign, but has the power to be both or either, the power of *both* life and death.⁶⁷

The Great Goddess (Mahadevi or Devi), as revealed in the sixth century text *Devī Māhātmya* central to Shakta philosophy and practice, stands apart from either the benevolent and the potentially dangerous goddesses, or rather, she encompasses them all.⁶⁸ This is the earliest Hindu text in which "ultimate reality is understood to be feminine: Devī, the Great Goddess"⁶⁹, and it remains one of the most popular, widely read, and influential Sanskrit texts to this day. It is often referred to as the *Durga Saptasati* (*Seven Hundred Verses to Durga*), since Durga is seen as the pre-eminent manifestation of Devi in the text. At this level the Goddess has no consort at all,

⁶⁶ For example, Vasudha Narayanan's research in a South Indian Shri Vaishnava community reveals that despite orthodox notions of Shri's secondary role to Vishnu, many devotees see her as his equal, and even as the "supreme being who both creates the universe and subsumes it into herself". Notably, this community accepts not only Sanskrit texts, but also Tamil songs and a collection of documents collectively known as the Pāñcarātra, a factor that may influence their reading of Shri. (Narayanan, Vasudha. "Shri" in *Devī, Goddesses of India*, 90).

⁶⁷ See Frédérique Apffel Margalin, "Types of Sexual Union and Their Implicit Meanings" in *The Divine Consort*, ed. Hawley and Wulff (California: Graduate Theological Union, 1982), and "Female Sexuality in the Hindu World" in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* ed. Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret R. Miles (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 39-60.

⁶⁸ *Devī Māhātmya* is a part of the *Markandeya Purana*, a treatise on the greatness of the Goddess. The *Mahatmya* consists of over 700 verses (hence the name *Durga Saptasati*), and lists over 200 epithets of the goddess. See John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature*, (New Delhi: Rupa, 1982, first published 1878), 88.

⁶⁹ Thomas Coburn, "Devī: The Great Goddess" in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, 32.

and is rather the source and dissolution of all things.⁷⁰ The three central qualities of Devi are *shakti*, *maya*, and *prakriti*, discussed below in greater detail. Though these traits are common throughout various strains of Hinduisms, the way they are formulated in the *Devī Māhātmya* (abbreviated below as *DM*) paves the way for the Shakta worldview and Kali devotion specifically.

Another example that stands outside the married/ independent (or controlled/ uncontrolled) discourse on goddesses is the divine relationship of Krishna and Radha – seen as a model for a devotional relationship as well, exemplified in the *bhakti* movement. While Krishna is widely regarded as an avatar of Vishnu (and so part of the Vaishnava sectarian affiliation), some believe him to be the ultimate divinity, and he is worshipped as a youth delighting eternally in *lila*, the free play that manifests the universe, transcending the bonds of dharma. In this context, Krishna is not seen primarily as king or husband, but rather as a lover, and indeed he is approached by many of his devotees from the position of Beloved, such as in the ecstatic devotional poetry of the fifteenth-century mystic Mīrā Bāī, which epitomizes the attitude of *bhakti* as a devotional movement. Necessarily, Krishna’s relationship with Radha is not one of marriage, and Radha is considered to be not “his own” but rather “another’s” (whether or not this means she belongs to another man, herself or even to no one, is unclear). Free of the structures and expectations associated with married life in a society governed by dharmic laws, Krishna and Radha vacillate between periods of bliss, infidelity (at least on Krishna’s part), jealousy, and reconciliation. Donna Wulff in her study of Sanskrit sixteenth century plays as well as modern Bengali *kirtan* (devotional song) tradition shows that both Radha and Krishna are equally emotionally involved, entangled even, in the dramatic relationship, and both have moments of bliss and anguish, anger and remorse. While Radha can be seen at times as representative of the devotee, with her unwavering devotion of Krishna even at times of anger, Wulff writes that:

⁷⁰ Once again, it is necessary to note that the usage of Devī has several meanings – while sometimes referring to *the* Great Goddess (also called Mahadevī), *devī* is also a designation of a female character as *a goddess*. The initial confusion belies the interconnected nature of these concepts, and the bleeding of boundaries typical of Indic goddesses much more so than of gods. Lynn Gatwood’s use of “Devī”, discussed in the following paragraph, is her own and while it is close to the Hindu sense of “devī”, she utilizes it mainly to illustrate her typology of Indic goddesses. Elsewhere in the paper I use Devī as synonymous with Goddess.

“Krishna himself serves as a model for the wonder that the devotee should feel at the depth of Radha’s love.”⁷¹

In this study, however, I am more interested in the complexities of goddesses who are potentially dangerous, or whose dominance and fierceness are evident, often provoking ambiguous reactions from various layers of Indian society and sectarian traditions. Lynn Gatwood in *Devī and the Spouse Goddess* also examines sets of goddess traits and argues for a unique reading of the types of female divinities encountered in Indian traditions, based on the idea that the very understanding of the feminine principle in Hindu religion and culture is of a dual nature. Either type is a complete concept, which may or may not carry moral or ethical implications, and which roughly corresponds to a division of perceptions of the feminine along Sanskrit versus non- or pre-Sanskrit ideologies, and high (or upwardly mobile) castes versus low caste socio-economic and religious realities. Gatwood postulates a feminine principle she calls “Devi”, which is represented by goddesses who are not subject to divine male control and whose area of influence extends to both domestic and cosmic spheres. The other type, defined by various forms of control (divine male precedence or dharmic laws), Gatwood terms the Spouse Goddess: her freedom is circumspect, and her benevolence entirely depends on her adherence to her prescribed female role. Spouse goddesses that for some reason become malevolent or inauspicious (and each has the potential to become so), are seen as entirely separate deities which Gatwood terms “Spouse-Goddess-out-of-control”, such as Alakshmi, the reverse of the auspicious Lakshmi. In addition, the “quasi-orthodox” yet control-free pan-Indian Great Goddess (manifest as Durga, Kali, Shakti, and so on) is in a category in and of herself.

While both Devi and the Spouse Goddess have two “sides” to their nature, which Gatwood terms “ethical bipolarity”, the manifestation of this characteristic is very different for each, and the symbolism of the deities coalesces into social realities for human women:

“The two sides of Devī reflect natural forces of creation and dissolution, while those of the Spouse Goddess reflect a moral duality consisting of danger or malevolence on the one hand and insipid benevolence on the other. Devī’s unified monistic bipolarity permits her to remain one deity who operates both creatively and destructively, or mercifully and angrily... By contrast, the Spouse Goddess’s bipolarity is separated or dualistic, meaning that her positive and negative aspects divide the goddess into two separate deities... Like

⁷¹ Donna Wulff, “Rādhā” in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, 129.

the Spouse Goddess, the high caste woman requires close control of her potentially insatiable sexual desires, while the low caste woman mirrors Devī in remaining relatively free from such control”.⁷²

Unfortunately, while Gatwood’s analysis provides one with an interesting model, it remains highly problematic. First, it seems to neglect the male perspective of goddess worship, as though goddesses in India are mostly “women’s deities.” A visit to any temple, be it a temple to a specific goddess or one where altars to many goddesses are present, dispels any such simplistic divisions. Although many ethnographers note that men and women differ in their general behaviours when worshipping, or have segregated roles in various ritual contexts,⁷³ they equally *worship* goddesses.

Secondly, Gatwood’s persistent association of the Devī archetype with the lower-caste woman is likewise problematic, since in many areas of India the fierce-looking but undoubtedly auspicious Shakti goddess⁷⁴ (manifest regionally as Durga, Kali, Chandika, and so on) is equally approached and worshipped by both high and low caste groups. To bracket Bengal, Assam, Orissa or Kerala from the so-called status quo, as Gatwood does, is not helpful because these geographical areas, besides being prominent places of goddess-centred devotion, also often designate a *style* of worship now found across India, rather than a strictly ‘local’ practice. This suggests to me that goddesses in India, regardless of how they fit (or do not fit) in the various suggested typologies, possess a set of theological, soteriological and even social characteristics that together coalesce into the category of the *divine feminine*. This is expressed to the fullest in the notions of *shakti*, *maya*, and *prakriti*, which I move to examine below.

⁷² Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess*, 4-5.

⁷³ For example, in Sarah Caldwell’s account of Mutiyettu dancers and possession in Kerala (*Oh Terrifying Mother*) we find a possession-drama in which the possessed actors are exclusively male, and women observe the drama worship the goddess from a distance; though, in other regions, it is women who most often are ritually possessed (see Kathleen Erndl, June McDaniel, and others). Diana Eck also notes, in various places, that male and female worshippers she observed in Benares during the autumn Durga Puja festival differ significantly in their comportment, enthusiasm, and general involvement in the proceedings (for more details, see *Darsan*, as well as *Encountering God*).

⁷⁴ I am using the expression “Shakti goddess” after Suchitra Samanta in “Manṅalmayīmā...”, meaning the pre-eminent deity within the Shakta worldview, which in various parts of India may be addressed differently.

II. Shakti, Maya, Prakriti: Power, Illusion, and the Manifest Universe

On the banks of the Ganges a nightly puja is celebrated to the goddess Ganga, famous for its elaborate *arati* ceremony⁷⁵ that has been performed, tradition has it, for the past five thousand years, ever since people have learned to worship the river as a Goddess. As one of the most sacred sites for Hindus, Varanasi is said to be the city of Lord Shiva, literally an “unforsaken place”, which he never leaves, even when he is elsewhere. It is also sacred to Jains and Buddhists, as the birthplace of the *tirthankara* Parshvantha⁷⁶ and, only a few miles away, the location of the Buddha’s first sermon at Sarnath. Not surprisingly, it is also a *tirth*⁷⁷ for a powerful goddess: Ganga, the sacred river herself. Nightly Ganga puja is both a joyous and solemn event, an elaborate public worship performed daily after sundown at several of the main *ghats*, most famously perhaps at Dasaswamedh Ghat.⁷⁸ It never fails to draw a crowd and patrons who sponsor the service. (The sponsoring of worship is a widespread practice in India and is seen as an especially devout activity, thus winning the sponsors a seat of honour and the privilege of participating in the ceremony.) Amid the clamour of music and the din of chanting, the rising clouds of incense, and the graceful coordinated movements of the beautiful young *pujaris*,⁷⁹ one sits entranced at the edge of the ghat. Out there, in the darkness, more spectators gather in boats on the river, which is both the *representation* and the *body* of the goddess.

An interesting interpenetration of physical and sacred space occurs: Ganga is both a goddess and the embodiment of the sacred river, as well as all rivers and all holy water invoked

⁷⁵ *Arati* — traditional fire worship or flame offering, a central element of puja that is so pervasive that it occasionally takes over the name of the ritual. In this case the offering of flame from various vessels is accompanied by chanting, music, bells, and other elements of a full 18-part puja.

⁷⁶ *tirthankara* — another title for a Jina; literally “ford builder”, one who takes souls across the ocean of samsara (the cycle of death and rebirth) by way of Jainism’s liberating philosophy.

⁷⁷ *tirth* — place of power, a holy site, also a “ford” where the divine manifests or penetrates the mundane physical world (see note above). I discuss this concept further in section IV.1 of this chapter.

⁷⁸ In Varanasi, the *ghats* are the platforms at the very edge of the Ganges, mostly with steps descending into the water. Some ghats that are associated with specific temples and sacred places have taken those as their place names, such as Assi Ghat or Jain Ghat, while others are called after famous cremation grounds, such as Manikarnika Ghat. In the case of such terms as Kalighat, the emphasis is on being placed by a river; i.e. Kalighat or “the steps of Kali,” is not along the Ganges, but used to be on the banks of Hoogly River (before the stream moved away from the temple).

⁷⁹ A *pujari* (s.) is a temple priest or initiate who performs *puja*, the term usually used for ritual Hindu worship.

in her name. At the same time the river, a giver of water and thus sustenance and life, as Ganga, is a physical manifestation of the life force that permeates everything that *is* – literally, as Pintchman puts it, a “fount of the universe.” Ritually speaking, to bathe in the Ganges is said to be akin to bathing in all the sacred rivers of the world, since its waters cleanse karma and bring liberation. In some versions of the mythology associated with Ganga, the goddess was a river that flowed in heaven, and through the interjection of Shiva she consents to come to earth, indeed falling continuously from the heavens, tangled and tamed in Shiva’s locks (iconographically, Shiva is often shown with a spray of water or a mermaid in his hair, to represent this). Conversely, and in a more goddess-centred worldview, she is Shakti herself incarnate, the puissant power that animates the world, embodied as sacred waters of compassion.

The idea that Ganga is both a local deity and the Goddess in Her universal form draws on the concept of Māhādevī: “Māhā” meaning “great”, and indicating a supreme, singular form. Tracy Pintchman writes that the first notion of a “single Great Goddess... of whom all goddesses are discrete manifestations” dates to as early as the fifth or sixth century CE, and becomes fully articulated in Puranic literature.⁸⁰ As Kinsley notes, Mahadevi in the Brahmanical textual tradition is homologized with three central principles: *Prakriti* (materiality), *maya* (cosmic illusion), and *shakti* (power). These identify Mahadevi (or Devi) as the force both creating and sustaining the universe. Importantly, these three principles are associated with the *fundamentally feminine* in Hindu thought in a sort of philosophical-cosmological-experiential continuum, bridging its supreme form as Great Goddess, on the one end, with human women on the other. Saxena identifies this as a gynocentric structure underlying Indian thought and culture, and she sees the figure of Kali in particular as the embodiment of a “Gynocentric universe, a woven matrix that values the feminine with such force that no patriarchal suppression has been able to undermine” – an approach I discuss in greater depth later in this chapter.⁸¹

As demonstrated by various authors in *Seeking Māhādevī*, behind more individualized or localized goddesses there always takes shape the *notion* of Mahadevi, the Great Goddess, whatever she may be named. Locally, she may mean a specific manifestation (Kali, Lakshmi, Vaisno Devi, Parvati, Durga, Saraswati, Bhagavati, Bhadrakali and so on) from whom all other

⁸⁰ Tracy Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: SUNY, 1994), 118.

⁸¹ Saxena, *In the beginning IS desire*, 45-46.

devis or manifestations are derived; she may also mean abstractly “*shakti*”, the feminine energy that imbues all living things, or she may mean “Shakti”, the personified deity of this cosmic force.⁸² Thus, the Goddess(es) as *shakti/maya/prakriti* is consistently equated with the material as well as being ascribed an active, creative role. This, as Pintchman points out, is especially curious in the context of other Asian traditions originating in India, including Buddhism, which mainly ascribe the female principle a material yet *passive* role. Pintchman suggests that this may be a result of Brahmanical Hinduism’s firm rooting in early Vedic materials, where this complex of associations with the feminine principle as active has been present from the start. She stresses that what makes the Goddess truly “Great” are the three cosmogonic principles listed above, and “certain kinds of equations that are made in the Puranic myths of creation”, which parallel the patterns found in Vedic literature, positing the Goddess as both the “impelling and material causes of creation”.⁸³ Such texts as the *Devī-Bhagavata Purana*, especially, elevate the feminine principle to its highest stage of manifestation, where the Goddess herself is identified as Nirguṇa Brahman and is equated with the Absolute, thus transcending the “lower” stages of manifestation she is accorded in Vaishnava and Shaiva contexts.

Historically, it is interesting that goddess worship is on the rise within Hinduism, rather than on the decline. Similarly, although many authors, such as Gatwood in the study mentioned above, criticize the “Brahmanisization” and thus the “taming” of goddesses, Tracy Pintchman posits that a Brahmanical paradigm and popular *bhakti* worship actively influenced one another. She notes that the ‘ascendancy’ of the Goddess in Brahmanic literature is seen following the postclassical and medieval period, when much of the Brahmanic tradition was challenged by the rise of *bhakti* devotion, and especially the introduction of worship of non-Vedic goddesses. Nonetheless, the initial theological and philosophical structure existing within Brahmanism has allowed for much flexibility and the almost natural incorporation of these new goddesses into the pantheon, and their further development into the concept of the Great Goddess. In fact, Pintchman writes: “it is most likely the case, therefore, that there was no recognition of the Great

⁸² Tracy Pintchman, ed., *Seeking Mahadevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (Albany: SUNY, 2001).

⁸³ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 186-188.

Goddess until she was constructed through the Brahmanical system's accommodation of non-Brahmanic impulses; in particular, her association with the three cosmic principles."⁸⁴

Though it is impossible to treat here each concept fully, with reference to their complex textual and ritual histories, I will broadly outline the key meanings and usage most relevant to the present project. Similarly, though they are teased apart here and treated separately for the sake of analysis, in practice, these principles are inseparable from one another and are understood to be in concert, coalescing into the reality that is Mahadevi. It is important to note that not all those who pay homage to a goddess or to goddesses in India understand the Goddess as Absolute, or conceive of the ultimate divine in female form. Even the more narrowly defined Shaktism, as June McDaniel demonstrates in her extensive work on goddess worship in West Bengal, is at times as difficult to pin down as Hinduism itself, for it includes a variety of voices, practices, beliefs, and lineages. At the same time, the notions of *shakti*, *maya*, and *prakriti* are present to some extent in the Indic understanding of *female deities* more generally. In this section, I examine these terms in order to begin mapping the complex web of cultural and devotional associations implicated in the worship of goddesses in India. McDaniel, posing the question "who is a Shakta?" (that is, who is a goddess worshipper) in her book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, writes: "A Shakta is a person who worships, loves, seeks power from, becomes possessed by, or seeks union with any regional or pan-Indian goddess, and he or she is not disqualified by caste, worship of other deities, initiations, or levels of education."⁸⁵ This is a useful definition, as it encompasses the many perspectives of those identifying themselves or others as Shaktas, and seems to me to extend naturally beyond India and describe goddess worship also in the neopagan, feminist spirituality sense. Yet precisely due to this rich plurality of practice and tradition, it is useful to begin with the three cosmic principles inherent in the notion of the Great

⁸⁴ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 193.

⁸⁵ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 19. Though I favour this definition for its inclusiveness, it is worth noting that some might challenge it as a little too inclusive; for example, a Śvetāmbar Jain possessed by a *kul-devī*, i.e. lineage goddess, while interpreting this as a normal and even honourable event is not likely to self-define as a Shakta because of it. On the other hand, there has been little research done on the compatibility of Jainism and goddess worship, partially due to the scholarly focus on the renunciate, *sramanic* path of Jain dhrama. Definitions such as "Jain", "Shaiva" or "Shakta" are inseparable from social, familial, and political connotations, and in different regions may be taken up or negotiated differently.

Goddess – because they are inherent in the notion of *any* Indic goddess, and especially one so versatile and paradoxical as Kali.

1. Shakti: Power, Energy, Creativity

Out of the three cosmic principles, *shakti* is perhaps the most primary, as it lies at the root of the very idea of worshipping a goddess (hence the term Shaktism), and it is fundamental to the understanding of the Goddess as the Absolute. Pintchman suggests that regardless of sectarian allegiance, the Goddess, a primal feminine force personified as a female deity, is represented as the “fount of the universe,” generating and sustaining all life. Even when ultimate reality is represented by a male divinity (Vishnu or Shiva, most often) the potential energy, or *shakti*, of that undifferentiated Brahman is presented in feminine terms. The varied levels of manifestation accorded to the Goddess in Hindu thought thus form three broad groupings of how *shakti* is understood in relation to the divine female. At the “lowest” stage, when the term is used to indicate the creative power of a male deity personified and manifest as a goddess, it results in a kind of dualism.

The enduring ambivalence of such a dualism in popular Hindu religiosity is wonderfully illustrated in the popular Amar Chitra Katha edition of the “Tales of Durga,” a comic strip interpretation of one of the central pan-Indian goddess narratives from the *DM*.⁸⁶ In one episode highlighted in the comic, “hundreds of shaktis” come to Durga’s aid in the battle against Shumbha, a demon who has been terrorizing the gods. The many “shaktis” are specifically noted to be the “inner force of various gods – issued forth assuming female form,” and armed with the

⁸⁶ “The Tales of Durga”, *Amar Chitra Katha*, #176, 1978. Original spellings retained. The copy I have and which I quote here is a 3-in-1 “Tales of the Mother Goddess” (#514, 2000, reprinted 2009) including also the “Shiva and Sati” and “Shiva Parvati” tales. ACK is a tremendously popular indigenous comic series created and edited by Anant Pai, and published in English, in several Indian official languages and other foreign languages. Curiously, the issue description for “Tales of Durga”, which is comprised of two episodes from the *Devī Māhātmya* broken up into three tales, is rather close to a Shakta worldview: “Goddess Durga is the fierce form of Devī who, as Shakti, is considered the personification of Universal energy. According to the Devī Bhagavata, the Universe is but Her manifestation. The worship of Durga is believed to be more than 4,000 years old in India.” The comic sequence itself, however, downplays most of the Shakta elements. See also Karlina McLain on the contradictions and complexities of this particular episode in the ACK Mythology series, in “Holy superheroine: a comic book interpretation of the Hindu Devī Māhātmya scripture”, *Bulletin of SOAS*, 71.2 (2008): 297–322.

weapons corresponding to those gods. Thus, Brahma gives rise to Brahmani, Vishnu to Vaishnavi, Maheshvara (a form of Shiva) to Maheshvari and so forth. Tellingly, however, an asterisk informs the reader: “each of these forms is considered to be an incarnation of Durga.” When the battle is almost over they all merge back into her, who then tells the demon: “I am alone. The goddesses you see are but different forms of myself.”⁸⁷ This exemplifies the ‘unity in multiplicity’ of the goddess as discussed above, but it also presents a certain ambiguity and tension of the implicit Shakta elements with the overarching non-Shakta paradigm, a pattern that persists in dualist conceptions of goddesses, as we shall see below. As an intermediate option, Shakti is also seen as an *equal* counterpart with the male principle, most often Shiva but sometimes Visnu, their *mutual* union resulting in the creative generation and sustenance of the universe. This is most apparent in the “androgynous,” or “dual” manifestation of Shiva Ardhanārīśvara, a half-male, half-female form often referred to as a “Shiva-Shakti.” The ‘equality’ of the two principles varies depending on the context, but, interestingly, this does not change the meanings associated with the term *shakti* itself, which remains inherently feminine.

In contrast to this popular account, Thomas Coburn’s study of the *DM* reveals that the equation of ‘*shakti*’ and ‘feminine counterpart of a male god’ is far from being supported in the text of the *DM*. While the text indeed describes seven *shaktis* emerging from the male gods, Coburn stresses that at least two of those gods (Indra and Mahesvara, or Shiva) would have had long-established consorts associated with them, whose identity did not match these emergent *shaktis*.⁸⁸ In the case of Indra, his *shakti* is given the name Aindrī in the *DM* (and *not* Indrāñī, who was associated with him as consort from Vedic times, and who is named in the comic strip). Similarly, while Mahesvara’s consort Uma/ Parvati is called Mahesvari once prior to the *DM*, iconographically they are different figures. Coburn suggests that this stresses that a *shakti* does not have merely the relationship of a consort with “her” god, or that of a vehicle being controlled by him, instead, “she is far more fundamental, more internal to his identity, for she is in fact his power.”⁸⁹ Furthermore, Devi herself possesses a *shakti*, one who is “very frightening... gruesome and yelping...”, and is called throughout the text Caṇḍikā. Coburn writes that the word itself

⁸⁷ “Tales of the Mother Goddess”, ACK #514, 2000, reprinted 2009.

⁸⁸ Coburn, “Devī”, 38-40.

⁸⁹ Coburn, “Devī”, 39

probably means something like “the violent and impetuous one”, and prior to the *DM* has never before appeared in Sanskrit.⁹⁰ (As was already mentioned above, Caṇḍikā or Chandika has since become a popular epithet of Kali.) Coburn remarks that despite the proliferation of *shaktis* (referred to in the *DM* as “the Mothers”), the text “never loses sight of the fact that Devī is the primary reality and her agency is the only effective one,” especially so when she “absorbs” all the manifested *shaktis* into herself.⁹¹ The tension between this close textual reading and the popular comic strip present a contested territory, both religious and philosophical – though, importantly, manifest *power* is consistently figured in female form.

This brings one back to the notion of Goddess as Absolute. Within the denomination that identifies the Great Goddess as ultimate reality (Brahman) she is not only the creatrix, she is also the created; both transcendent and immanent, she is at once the undifferentiated True Reality, and the myriad of manifestations that is the material world. This view is best expressed clearly in the *DM*, which forms part of the *Markaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (ca. 300-600 C.E.), and by this point *shakti* is firmly associated with the terms *maya* and *prakṛiti*. Echoing Coburn, Pintchman asserts that in the *DM* the Goddess “transcends the universe and controls its rhythms. Yet she is also immanent, for it is said that she abides in all beings in the form of *śakti* and is described as the *śakti* of all that is.”⁹²

Though the cosmological and cosmogonic aspects of the term have developed rather late (in comparison to the age of Vedic literature), the paradigmatic notions of *shakti* are these: (1) consort/ creative power of a god, (2) the cosmogonic of a single supreme deity and (3) abstract universal force that pervades all creation coalesce into the notion of the Great Goddess through the cosmogonic power of *speech* (*vac*). As with *prakṛiti*, discussed below, one of the strands of meaning associated with *shakti* is grammatical: “the term *śakti* can be used to refer to the “power” of a case... the *śakti* of a word determines its ability to convey meaning in the context in which it is found.”⁹³ The connection between utterances and generative powers is pervasive in Hindu thought, and while it is too grand a subject to treat here, it is significant that *shakti*

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 40

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 39

⁹² Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 120-121

⁹³ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 105

connotes this type of power as well, linking speech and ritual. Perhaps the contemporary expression of the closely woven sense of power and speech is in the central role occupied by the chanting of mantras, singing of auspicious songs, and the recitation of the many names of the divine in Indic worship.⁹⁴

Another strand of meanings associated with *shakti* in the early Vedic literature is as the power of pure consciousness (*purusha*). Below I discuss the ambivalent pairing of *purusha* and *prakriti*, a gendered pair of concepts as well as supreme beings, in which *purusha* represents the male element. It is unclear, therefore, when *shakti* came to be understood as inherently feminine, which is its overwhelming characteristic in contemporary Hinduism. I would like to note, however, the proximity of these terms, bound as they are in conglomerations of meaning and constantly re-faceted and re-contextualized, eventually giving rise to what Saxena rightly identifies as a *gynocentric* worldview. If *prakriti* is a sometimes-unconscious yet energetic matter, then the association of *shakti* with consciousness comes full circle, granting the divine feminine principle all the powers of creation — both to direct and to embody it.

1.a. A note on shakti and Tantra

Pintchman's analysis indicates that *shakti* as a cosmological principle received its fullest articulation in Tantric literature and practice. Tantrism, as Pintchman writes, is most strikingly characterized by its incorporation of non-Vedic goddesses into the Vedic pantheon — a factor she cites as fundamental to the “rise” of the Goddess. Importantly, besides portraying Shakti as ultimate reality and supreme deity (in Shakta Tantra), or as the female pole of Brahman when it is united as a single, androgynous Absolute (such as in Vaishnava or Shaiva schools of Tantra), lower case *shakti* is often used to refer to the inner force or potential of the Tantric practitioner,

⁹⁴ While this vast and fascinating topic is beyond the limitations of this paper, Loriliai Biernacki's work on speech and tantra is an excellent starting resource: *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

the divine aspect within each person, which Tantra aims to cultivate and realize.⁹⁵ It is impossible to address here all the various dimensions of Tantrism (or the debate among scholars as to which texts and traditions precisely belong to it). Briefly, however, in Tantrism arises the “preoccupation with the divine power of the Absolute coupled with an emphasis on female symbolism” — a notion that effectively led to a written articulation and elevation of various goddesses (varying according to tradition and region) to the status of “unique, all-powerful mother goddesses.”⁹⁶ Secondly, as already discussed in chapter one, Kali’s role as the pre-eminent forms of the Tantric Goddess, and of in particular, has attracted Westerners to a greater extent than any other aspects of Hindu religiosity, significantly shaping the transplanting and appropriation of Indic goddesses in the West — and therefore is especially relevant to this project.

Even in its native Indian context Tantra is sometimes seen, despite the widespread popularity of some of its elements such as *yantra* use in meditation and healing, as a marginal, semi-magical, or solitary path.⁹⁷ June McDaniel in her study of Tantric Shaktism in West Bengal notes that while certain Tantric practitioners are generally held in high regard in the community as healers and teachers, others, and especially those practicing ‘left-handed’ Tantra or their female consorts, may be marginalized.⁹⁸ Furthermore, ritual tantric yoni/lingam worship that involves actual sexual acts (such as described in the *Kamakhya Tantra*), known as *chakra sadhana*, is illegal in West Bengal; if it is practiced at all, it is done in secret.⁹⁹ On the most part,

⁹⁵ Though there are many various streams of Tantra, not only in the Hindu but also in the Jain and Buddhist traditions, I use the term Tantrism here to broadly refer to a set of particular theological, eschatological and ritual characteristics, which include both textual sources and practice. For example, while Tantrism is often equated with Shaktism, and they do share many characteristics, texts and rituals, they are not the same, but rather we can speak of Shakta Tantra, as a branch of Tantric practice based in the Shakta worldview — as oppose to Tantric practices in Buddhism or Vaisnavism. Further on Tantric goddess worship, see Loriliai Biernacki, June McDaniel, Hugh Urban, and others.

⁹⁶ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 109-110

⁹⁷ Interestingly, one North-American *tantrika* I had interviewed had likened the general social perception of *tantrikas* in India to that of witches in the Western context, suggesting a somewhat precarious position on the margins of society, prone to misconceptions and stereotypes (Chandra Alexander, High Priestess at Sharanya temple in San Francisco, personal interview, 2010). Though certainly Tantra is more widely accepted and practiced in India, and its connotations are different there than in the Western context, the very comparison in itself is a telling one — a topic I return to in the forth chapter.

⁹⁸ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 117-119, 132-144

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 119

however, Indian *tantrikas* do not seem to be involved in such practices, and Tantra is used rather as a form of devotion with yogic elements — though often it is a solitary path of self-effort.

While Shaktas often approach the Goddess in the devotional mode of *bhakti* (love), in Tantric practice prayer and worship may be combined with very precise techniques, such as visualization, ritual, mantra, *yantra*, yogic practice, etc, aimed at achieving specific spiritual goals, leading, eventually, to enlightenment and liberation. The nature of these techniques, however, is often constructed around breaking taboos of social norms and purity laws in order to transcend them, such as worshipping at a cremation ground or incorporating meat and liquor in a puja ceremony, or engaging in ritualized sexual acts. Though all of these form a relatively minor and even negligible aspect of Tantra, nonetheless they dominate in the outsider's imagination of Tantrism. In fact, some of the texts discussing these particular aspects had catalyzed the Western imagination to the point where we can speak of an emergence of 'Western Tantra'.¹⁰⁰

In the Tantric traditions associated with the Goddess, Shakti is the female and primary polarity of the Absolute, since the male principle emerges from and can only act through Shakti. Sometimes Shakti is identified with a supreme form of the divine feminine, depending on the context, such as Kali, Lakshmi or Durga, while at other times she, along with Shiva, emerges from this Supreme Being. Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, exploring her understanding of Kali as Kamakhya or Desire, writes at length about the multivalent associations of *shakti* both in Hindu religion and in the Tantric worldview. She points out that within the Shakta fold internal lines blur, allowing for an ambiguity in which Shakti and Kali are “one without any contradiction”, and a further moment where both Shiva and Shakti appear out of Kali — Saxena calls this

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, the work of Hugh Urban and to some extent Rachel McDermott (“Western Kali”). Tantra, and especially the role of the female as an “object” exploited to further the spiritual ends of the male practitioner has been widely criticized by various authors, yet many others feel that a difference should be drawn between sincere practitioners and charlatans, as well as between spiritual seekers with even a rudimentary knowledge of the tradition, and those in the West led by false gurus on a search for a more exciting sex life. The popularization of such terms as “tantric sex” in common Western parlance is one example of a sensationalist and shallow understanding of Tantrism. Another example was voiced to me by an informant, in discussion of what the term had meant to her, as part of the Kali practice she was initiated into. She remarked that she would hesitate to adopt the term “*tantrika*” if only because of the social stigma attached to it in the Western mindset, and that on a personal level, she viewed Tantra as a sort of science, a tool-set that enables one to situate oneself in the universe and in relation to the divine in a hyper-engaged mode. Neela Saxena, similarly writes that while there is certainly the possibility of abuse and discrimination of women in the name of Tantra, and indeed women have been exploited under the guise of tantric ritual and worship, this is not a unique phenomenon to Tantrism.

“Kali’s pregnant nothingness.”¹⁰¹ In this sense, *Shakti* embodies the paradoxical nature of Goddess — at once potentiality and manifestation, or, to quote Saxena again, “She is *shunya* and *purna*, void and full, at the same time.”¹⁰²

2. *Maya: Form, Reality and Illusion*

The second cosmic principle associated with the divine female is *maya* — the illusory nature of the manifest world, sometimes said to be the result of the Goddess’ play or *lila*. Like *Shakti*, *maya* has many layers of meaning. Pintchman, in her detailed exploration of the development of these principles throughout Vedic and Puranic literature, notes the ambivalence inherent in these principles, expressed to the fullest in the ascetic traditions, where *maya* is seen only as delusion, that which “prevents one from realizing Brahman.”¹⁰³ In later literature, such as Advaita Vedānta, *maya* is also understood as our quotidian mental and physical reality, something to transcend through epiphany, if one is to attain *moksha* (liberation).¹⁰⁴ According to Pintchman, the earliest uses of the term in the Saṃhitās (Vedic literature, ca. 1550-800 BCE) range in meaning, including:

- (1) ethically neutral power possessed by the gods (*devas*) or demons (*asuras*), (2) a special ability of a god to create or assume different forms, (3) marvellous skill or capacity of achieving the marvellous, (4) divine ability and wisdom, (5) achievement made possible by supranormal or super-human skill and ability, (6) ability of the gods to interfere in worldly events, (7) cunning, design, or trickery.¹⁰⁵

The significance of the term is understood as that force which is used for the creation of a material form (whether human or not) — an act that demonstrates the creator’s “incomprehensible power.”¹⁰⁶ In this, *maya* is closely related to *Prakriti*, the principle of materiality, as well as to *Shakti*, the energetic principle. The later more negative connotations are associated with new meanings that the concept of Brahman takes on in Advaita Vedānta,

¹⁰¹ Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire*, 59.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 62.

¹⁰³ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 200.

¹⁰⁴ Pratima Bowes, "Mysticism in the Upanishads and Śankara's Vedānta" in *The Yogi and the Mystic*, ed. Karel Werner (London: Curazon Press, 1995), 67.

¹⁰⁵ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 88.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 88.

especially the developing notion of Brahman without attributes (*nirguṇa brahman*), which is given spiritual and cosmic precedence over the Brahman with attributes (*sagūṇa brahman*), conceptualized in the form of a personal god. Though Brahman takes form, through *maya*, for the sake of the worshippers, this secondary form is not “really real”, and so *maya* inhibits true understanding (and realization) of Brahman.¹⁰⁷

Ironically, it is possible that this emergence of dualistic thought gave rise, eventually, to the non-dual understanding of the Goddess, as both Brahman without attributes and Mahāmaya at the same time (the latter term used in early Buddhist accounts for the Mother of Buddha — expressing the connection with the maternal divine).¹⁰⁸ Similarly to how *Shakti* is both a creative and a destructive power, (as exemplified in the martial “Tales of Durga” mentioned above), *maya* is both “delusion” and the capacity to *reveal* universal Truth. Since the illusory nature of the universe includes the conventional perceptions of time and space, the principle of *maya* is most meaningful, for our purposes, as potentially reconciling the embodied and the transcendent, resolving the dualism of an inherently immovable but conscious male principle and the energetic but unconscious female principle. Saxena, in her study of Kali similarly proposes that the earliest Samkhya positing of duality, which influenced both ascetic and non-ascetic Indian traditions, was a necessary step towards non-duality, which in itself is imagined as a plurality, a multitude of forms (i.e. *maya*): “Non-duality is not homogeneity, sameness, or an easy universalism, but depends upon the recognition of duality and its flowering into a marvellous multiplicity, which is the hallmark of Kali’s *Lila*.”¹⁰⁹

Saxena writes that the “relative” reality of the world, as expressed in Samkhya, becomes “necessary” in Tantra. As Tantric thought “reads Samkhya unitively and Gynocentrically,”¹¹⁰ according to Saxena, so *maya* become the Goddess’s “creative principle”, and “emphasizes the reality of the lived experience”.¹¹¹ The reading of the Goddess as a duality (between her light and dark or male and female aspects), or else as a non-duality (as a monistic reality), is thus not a fixed dogma, and emerged in the negotiations the these terms, which acquire various implications

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 90-97.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 96.

¹⁰⁹ Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire*, 69.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 75.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 65.

depending on their devotional or philosophical context. For example, while Saxena acknowledges one may differentiate between the dualist *bhakti* tradition of Shaktism and the non-dualist tantric *sadhana*, “tantric elements pervade the Bengali Shakta worship.”¹¹² Ultimately, it is this very discourse of an oscillating, hard-to-grasp, ontology of the Goddess that becomes a defining characteristic of all goddesses, who at once conceal and reveal the truth of the world. Kali herself, while often seen as “cutting through illusion and ignorance” (symbolised by her necklace of severed heads) is understood in that moment to grant the devotee a radically new sense of self — a key characteristic of her philosophy I shall return to.

3. *Prakriti: Materiality, Embodiment, Primary Structure*

Pintchman writes that the term *Prakriti* does not appear in its *philosophical* sense until much later Vedic literature. However, it is found

in the Vedāṅgas, the ‘limbs’ or subsidiary texts of the Vedas, in both grammatical and ritual contexts. In these environments, the term has a technical meaning denoting the basic, uninflected, or unelaborated structure that can then be modified or embellished in different ways in other contexts. In the former case *Prakriti* means the primary, radical form of a word, whereas in the latter it signifies the paradigmatic sacrifice on which other sacrifices are modelled.¹¹³

This statement alone bears unpacking, as it readily reveals (or, chronologically speaking, foreshadows) the two basic associations of *Prakriti*: first, as malleable matter and fundamental structure (and eventually nature), and secondly its connection with Purusha — the primordial being and first sacrificial victim, whose body gave rise to the world (and even the castes, in some accounts).¹¹⁴ Inevitably, the links between ritual and grammatical structure, sacrifice and word,

¹¹² *Ibid*, 66.

¹¹³ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 62.

¹¹⁴ In other accounts, in particular in the Samkhya school of thought, Purusha creates the world and gives rise to *Prakriti* through speech (*vac*). As with many of the mythic episodes discussed here, there are varying versions which are more or less popular with different groups – my goal here is not in listing all of them or claiming that one is more “authentic” than another, but rather to note the patterns of meanings (and reversals of meanings) that become associated with the various terms, and by extension with the divine female in Hinduism.

bring to mind another context in which “the word was made flesh” — reinforcing the notion that ritual, action, and reality are homologous and interconnected.¹¹⁵

However, as Pintchman notes, we do not see much metaphysical reflection on the principle of *Prakṛiti* until its articulation in the Samkhya-Kārikā (ca. fourth century CE), though it is based on the term’s evolution through the earlier tradition. Tracing the development of the concept through Vedic and proto-Samkhya texts, Pintchman notes there are remarkable similarities between the later description of *Prakṛiti* and passages in the early Vedic texts which “postulate the existence of a primordial, undifferentiated matrix of water that forms the material basis of creation... Both are abstract, cosmic principles of materiality.”¹¹⁶ In the Upaniṣads the source of these primordial waters (*ap*) is alternatively said to be fire (*tejas*) or speech (*vāc*, at times equated with fire), and the waters in turn give rise to food (*anna*).¹¹⁷ This motif, Pintchman points out, “of a principle of creative energy or power giving rise to a principle of primordial materiality also has parallels in later Purāṇic literature, where... *śakti* gives rise to *prakṛiti*.”¹¹⁸ It is not clear if this collective association of waters, the earth (food), and materiality is already seen as inherently feminine, but it certainly becomes so in later Upanishadic texts, where the three qualities (*guṇas*) corresponding to the components above and represented as the three colours (red, white and black), are described as an “unborn female”, the object of enjoyment of the “unborn male” (*puruṣa*) who lies with her, and who, unlike her, possesses no qualities

¹¹⁵ The notion that speech itself has a sacred purpose permeates Hindu thought and practice, from such widely known examples as the syllable AUM, representative (among other things) of the beginning, duration and dissolution of the universe; to the mantras and root syllables associated with various deities used in meditation and invocation, to the association of the fifty skulls in Kali’s necklace with the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. (See, for example, Loriliai Biernacki’s detailed study of speech in gynocentric Hindu thought in *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra*, 2007, New York: Oxford University Press). Such notions, of course, are not limited to Hinduism and in fact appear in traditions and contexts too numerous to treat in this project, let alone a footnote. Importantly, many magical notions associated with naming, stating, and pronouncing have also filtered into Western goddess spirituality (borrowed from Western ceremonial magic, folk tradition, as well as feminist thought), possibly contributing to the modes in which Indic goddesses such as Kali have been appropriated and incorporated into the various practices.

¹¹⁶ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 65-66.

¹¹⁷ It is difficult to resist drawing the analogy, once more, between this context and the image of the primordial waters in the Biblical origin story, with “God’s spirit hovering”, just before the creation beginning through God’s speech. It is curious that though the two contexts are vastly different and come from distinct ritual and philosophical traditions, they seem to share this image.

¹¹⁸ Pintchman, *Rise of the Goddess*, 66-67.

(*nirguṇa*).¹¹⁹ Here we once again see an emerging dualism, which shapes Hindu conceptions of *Prakriti* as much as those of *Shakti* and *maya*, and which eventually give rise to non-dual conceptions of the Goddess as Absolute.

The role of *Prakriti* as the female counterpart of the (usually) male *Purusha* is likewise multivalent, and curiously, the boundaries often blur between them. While *prakriti* is mostly equated with nature in contemporary Hindu religiosity, sometimes personified as a goddess, *Purusha* is alternately identified with consciousness, the ‘Cosmic Man’, the true self, or the primordial sacrifice. Alfred Collins in his psycho-mythological analysis of *Prakriti*’s role in the Samkhya school, demonstrates that *Purusha* also acts as a male alter-ego for the ascetic practitioner. According to Collins, Samkhya, which is the philosophical worldview at the basis of yoga (each functioning as one of the six main *darshanas*, or viewpoints, of orthodox Brahmanical thought), posits that what we perceive as our self (ego) is actually a misconception, and the “real self” (*Purusha*) lies beyond.¹²⁰ *Prakriti* thus represents both the goddess who maintains the illusory world (in function analogous to *maya*), and, paradoxically, the one who may liberate one from it. Collins analyses the *Purusha* and *Prakriti* couple, noting that *Prakriti* acts both as a *pativrata* (devoted wife) and a *guru* (decidedly *not* a devoted wife, since she attacks *Purusha*’s “double” selfhood), ultimately saving her counterpart from narcissism and through her own sacrifice showing him his true nature.

It is interesting that even in this context, *Prakriti* “‘removes’ the ‘affliction’ that she herself brings”, i.e. contains both negative and positive forces.¹²¹ Collins compares this function to the way various goddesses are often portrayed as cutting off the heads of demons, noting that *male* demons in Indic mythology are demonic due to their narcissistic delusions of grandeur and a desire to rule the world; indeed we see this motif as central to the mythos of *Kali* and *Durga*, and in the characterization of the demons that *Durga/ Kali/ Cāmuṇḍā* is called upon to slay in the *DM*. The head symbolizes the deluded self (such as the iconic decapitated head in *Kali*’s hand), and it is cognate with the symbolism of the goat as the deluded “self-animal”, as discussed in the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 69-72.

¹²⁰ Alfred Collins, “Dancing with *Prakriti*: The Samkhyān Goddess as *Pativrata* and *Guru*,” in *Is the Goddess a Feminist?* ed. Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 52-68.

¹²¹ Collins, “Dancing with *Prakriti*”, 60.

previous chapter. I have often heard from informants that Kali's sword 'cuts through illusion', meaning such 'demonic' characteristics such as pride, jealousy, or fear. Similarly, in temples where Goddess worship still includes animal sacrifice, such as in Bengal, the sacrificial victim, most often a goat, similarly represents the 'base' aspects of the sacrificer, and the head is placed directly in front of the goddess.¹²² Collins emphasizes that Prakriti's essential function is to unite the split-personality Purusha, and he proposes an interesting reading of her apparently paradoxical actions, which he sees as glossed over and "sugar-coated" in Samkhya: "Prakriti is apparently enraged with Purusha for his failure to recognize *her* wholeness and selfhood and for treating her as merely a receptacle of objects sought by his desires... As he becomes increasingly demonic, the formerly sweet and self-effacing goddess becomes a warrior wielding a sword of discrimination that cuts off her mate's ahamkaric head."¹²³

The implication that Collins works towards is that it is Purusha who is a part of and subsidiary to Prakriti, a thought echoed in Shakta philosophy, and his 'forgetting' of it is the cause for his spiritual downfall. This is doubly paradoxical since Samkhya is the basis for the ascetic movement, in which renouncer-yogis (almost exclusively male) seek to renounce the world as well as women and family life in particular, as such things cloud their judgement and stand in the way of realizing the true self. In a subtle but significant way, it is ultimately the Goddess who is the model for selfhood here: "Prakriti, and Hindu goddesses in general represent an epitome of selfobjecthood but also penultimate selfhood; as such they represent the highest authentic state attainable by embodied beings... and are models for men as well as women."¹²⁴

It is interesting that the constellations of meanings attached to the terms *prakriti* and *maya* overlap here, and are carried over into their usage within Goddess-centric Indic devotion, albeit with somewhat different emphasis. Saxena goes even further in her exploration of Kali, and in discussing the Goddess as Shakti/Maya/Prakriti writes that the androcentric reading of

¹²² See, for example, Suchitra Samanta's ethnographic work on Kali worship in Bengal, especially: "The 'self-animal' and divine digestion: Goat sacrifice to the goddess Kali in Bengal" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (1994): 779-803 and "Maṅgalmayīmā, sumāṅgalī, maṅgal: Bengali perceptions of the divine feminine, motherhood and auspiciousness" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 26 (January, 1992): 51-75.

¹²³ Collins, "Dancing with Prakriti", 61. To clarify, *ahamkara* means the "assertion of I", i.e. the ego or the deluded self, and "ahamkaric" is used by Collins to indicate the "self-centred" double of Purusha, that which lacks the discernment of the true self.

¹²⁴ Collins, "Dancing with Prakriti", 66-67.

Purusha we have seen so far (a word now almost totally synonymous with maleness in Hindu popular usage) has similarly acquired its gender over time: “in the Vedic texts [it] meant one who has overcome evil.”¹²⁵ This is significant, because as the lines between Purusha and Prakriti blur, we can turn to the images of the martial goddesses who also ‘overcome evil’ in their battles against demons. Unlike Collins, Saxena reads the presence of “innumerable Purushas” not as egotistical male competition, but as “the mark of that eternal, unchanging principle within the human being, both men and women. Since there is a connection between the human and the ultimate principle, each human can break the illusory bondage within her or his psyche.”¹²⁶ Reading Samkhya from the point of view of gynocentric Tantra, Saxena sees the reconciliation of the “untenable” duality of *Prakriti-purusha* in the non-dual Kali: “Kali is *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* herself. She is *tamomayi*, all darkness and motionlessness. She stands on her Shiva aspect, which remains a *shava*, or dead body, until her touch awakens him.”¹²⁷

Though this is only an abbreviated breakdown of the three cosmic principles implicit in the Hindu understanding of the divine feminine, one can see the interplay of these principles in almost every single goddess narrative and cultus. As illustrated by the description of Ganga puja at the beginning of this chapter, the implication of this cosmogony is that all creation is inherently feminine, from the creative force, to its form, and to its manifestation. Implicit in this constellation of meanings is the homologous relationship between physical locations, landscapes, and singular dwelling places of the Goddess, as well as with all women as her “portions” or *amsa*. Moving from the textual and philosophical roots of the divine feminine in India, I will now turn to look at their manifestation in what is possibly the most central aspect of the Goddess for her devotees, as well as for this project: Her embodiment.

¹²⁵ Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire*, 73.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 75.

III. The Body of the Goddess: Pilgrimage, Protection, and Possession

If the material, fundamental structure of creation itself is understood as feminine, it is no surprise that the landscape of India itself forms the body of the Goddess, dotted as it is with pilgrimage places where her energy is thought to be ever-dwelling, referred to as *shakti pithas* – literally, seats of power – uniting in manifest form the notions of *shakti* and *prakriti*.

As mentioned previously with the example of Ganga, the goddess is inseparable from her physical form, yet she is *not limited* to it. For example, Ganga, though she has a specific site of manifestation, may be invoked in any water, either by mixing it with a few drops of Ganges water or through recitation of the appropriate mantras – and she is often so invoked in water used for puja. In the next section I discuss Ganga more fully, as a good example of *shakti* manifest in the landscape, her embodiment as a river a site of worship, pilgrimage, and liberation.

Clan or village goddesses can similarly be both symbolized and embodied as a pot of water (the auspicious *kalash*) which features prominently in goddess iconography. Such local goddesses are most often associated with a specific place or natural manifestation such as a rock, cave, grove, or even a person, and are often honoured in their non-anthropomorphic form as rocks or pots of water. These *kul-devis* or *yaksis* are most intimately connected with a family's or clan's well-being and property, and are invoked to protect and guard its members, and who must be appeased if neglected or angered. The question of whether they are distinct deities or are seen as 'splinters', or discrete manifestations of the singular and ubiquitous goddess reality is closely tied to the question of goddess worship in India as such, discussed in the beginning of this chapter.

Oftentimes, one goddess can be viewed and interpreted differently by different individuals, based on one's level of familiarity and personal relationship with the deity, their general devotional orientation, or their ancestry and lineage. What is important for this section, however, is the connection between goddess, place, and human women – which can be seen at nearly all levels of the continuum between universal and local incarnations of the female divine. Below I explore these interrelated forms of embodiment proceeding from the most monumental and cosmological (sacred geography, pilgrimage sites, and seats of power), to the communal

(protection and fertility of village and clan boundaries, lineages, and households), to the most individual and particular (individual women, female gurus, and saints). My aim here is to briefly explore the embodiment of the goddess in the world, as it is supported both by mythology and practice. Importantly, it seems that this very ubiquitous and radical presence of Hindu goddesses is the very quality that mediates and reconciles the dualistic and monistic characteristics in Shakta religion. As discussed above, Shaktism challenged the negative interpretation of Prakriti as the web in which Purusha is entrapped. In the mythological account of how various shakti pithas came to be, the identification of Prakriti with Purusha as the cosmic giant whose sacrificial body forms the universe is even more thoroughly complete. The power of the goddess becomes not only creative and destructive, but also redemptive. Kathleen Erndl, exploring goddess worship and pilgrimage sites of Northwestern India, writes:

Although Śākta theology has much in common with the formal philosophical systems of dualistic Sāṃkhya and Monistic Advaita Vedānta, it differs from them in its relentless exaltations of the material world. It is more thoroughly “world-affirming” than either of them. The Goddess is often identified with Prakriti, the matter-energy that is the basis of all creation. [...] Liberation in Sāṃkhya-Yoga terms is the isolation (*kaivalya*) of Puruṣa (literally, the male) from Prakṛti. This formulation is similar to the Greek (and subsequently Christian) identification of the male with spirit and the female with matter, with the devaluation of the latter. Śāktism turns this concept of Prakṛti on its head, giving it not only ontological and cosmogonic status but soteriological status by identifying it with the Great Goddess, who pervades the phenomenal world and saves all beings.¹²⁸

Unlike the monism of Advaita, which recognized only the reality of *Brahman* (or the Absolute), Shaktism identifies Brahman with the Goddess, and with her, the entirety of manifest creation. Whether she appears in her gentle (*saumya*) or fierce (*raudra*) incarnations, she ultimately transcends, or rather encompasses, all forms. Though there are tensions regarding this all-pervasiveness of the Goddess within non-Shakta streams of Hinduism, to some extent this *tendency* is present in all goddesses precisely due to their radical embodiment in the physical world, some examples of which I discuss below. As Erndl concludes, “The general thrust, the, of Goddess theology is to affirm the reality, power, and life force that pervade the material world.

¹²⁸ Erndl, *Victory to the Mother*, 31.

Matter itself, while always changing, is sacred and is not different from spirit. The Goddess is the totality of all existence.”¹²⁹

1. Sacred landscape: Shakti pithas, liquid shakti, and the dismemberment of Sati

As already mentioned, *shakti* is often manifest in the living cosmos as nourishing waters, also referred to at times as *rasa* (a complex term, also used to signify aesthetic-devotional enjoyment, juices, fluids, etc). Ganga, a goddess manifest as the most sacred river in India, is also the archetypal embodiment of *all* sacred waters. Importantly, Ganga’s manifestation on earth (*avatarana*) is seen as a continuous process, rather than a singular event, which allows for her omnipresence in mantra and ritual. Too long to recount here fully, the mythological accounts of her descent to earth are connected with nourishment and restoration, but also with the taming of her destructive potential in Shiva’s locks, so as not to shatter the earth with the force of her fall.¹³⁰ As Diana Eck points out, it is noteworthy that there is no ambiguity in the reverence of Ganga as Mother: “As she flows out upon the plains, she is Mother, and she is the perfect dream-mother: embracing, nourishing, and forgiving, without a trace of anger.”¹³¹ Ganga is likewise understood as *liquid shakti*, and often as the very *shakti* of Shiva as well, and sometimes identical with Uma/Parvati as his consort.¹³² Rather than an emphasis on power, with Ganga the emphasis is on mercy and compassion as the waters that nourish and liberate. It is through her, ultimately, that Shiva is able to become an agent of salvation in the world:

Śiva-in-action is indeed *śakti*, the energy that creates and nourishes all of the manifest universe. Without this energy, that One is unnameable, qualityless, and without expansion.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

¹³⁰ These narratives are most developed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*, and in such popular Ganga hymns and *mahatmyas* such as *Gaṅgā Laharī*, though there exist many folk variants of them. Diana Eck, “Gaṅgā”, in *Devī: Goddesses of India*, 137-153.

¹³¹ Eck, “Gaṅgā”, 149.

¹³² This view is expressed most fully in the *Skanda Purana*, reconciling the tension of other accounts, which describe the jealousy and anger of Parvati/Uma towards Ganga, when the former sees her rival tangled in her husband’s hair. The latter story is often performed in Bharatnatyam “Nava Rasa” performances, or the Nine Moods of the Goddess Parvati, describing her feelings for Shiva during their courtship; the jealousy and anger *rasa* is associated precisely with catching sight of Ganga in Shiva’s hair. These twin narratives coexist side by side within Hindu and Ganga devotion, and though they express contradictory views, they are in fact complementary. For more details, see Diana Eck’s chapter “Ganga” in *Devī: Goddesses of India*.

Śakti bodies forth the living cosmos, and the Gaṅgā is liquid *śakti*. Her fall from heaven to the head of Śiva is repeated countless times daily in the simple ritual act of pouring water upon the Śiva *liṅga*. The unutterable incandescence of the *liṅga* of fire is joined with the torrential energy of the celestial waters. Without the Gaṅgā, Śiva would remain the scorching, brilliant *liṅga* of fire; without Śiva, the Gaṅgā would flood the earth.¹³³

The event of Ganga's coming to earth is also significant in making the place itself a *tirtha* – a “ford” or “crossing place”, a liminal space where the earth rises up to give “ready access to the heavens.”¹³⁴ These are places, as Eck writes, where greater merit for prayers is accumulated, where one's wishes are heard more readily, and where more abundant blessings are bestowed. The root “*tṛ*” denotes “to cross over”, and in the case of Ganga is connected to the hierophanies of her continual movement: as she descends to earth, others may rise to heaven. It is not coincidental that to be cremated in Varanasi, the sacred city in the Ganges, and for one's ashes to be spread on the river, is considered to grant liberation from *samsara*.

There are literally thousands of *tirthas* across India, both those sacred to the Goddess, and those dedicated to other deities, such as Shiva's sacred Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas. Though *tirthas* are usually associated with a specific deity or saint, it is important to note that it is the place itself that is sacred; the divinization of landscape in India is a tradition of great antiquity. D.C. Sircar, who has conducted one of the most detailed studies of sacred goddess sites in India speculates that the worship of mountains as self-born *lingas*, of pools and tanks as *yonis*, and of a pair of hills as breasts, dates to the pre-Aryans.¹³⁵ Similarly, water coming out of springs in those hills would be regarded as the goddess's milk. Below I focus on pilgrimage and devotion at the *śakti pithas*, places of power and pilgrimage associated with the body parts of Devi, or Sati. However, it is interesting to add here that the whole of India bears the connotation of a sacred landscape, its compass points marking the pilgrimage routes, and Mother India herself is conceptualized as a goddess, Bharat Mata. Eck proposes that this embodiment of the divine in the land presents a unified national sentiment, perhaps more than any administrative or political organisation: “This network of *tirthas* constitutes the very bones of India as a cultural unit. [...]

¹³³ Eck, “Ganga”, 148.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

¹³⁵ D.C. Sircar, *The Śākta Pīṭhas*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1973 (2nd rev. ed.)

It's unity as a nation, however, has been firmly constituted by the sacred geography it has held in common and revered: its mountains, forests, rivers, hilltop shrines, and sacred cities."¹³⁶ Indeed, India's very national anthem is a litany of place names, presenting the glory of Mother India as a "living land."

The conceptualization of the land as goddess, and of goddesses as inexorably tied to the land is thus affirmed not merely textually, but in cultural and devotional practice. This is significant both for the understanding of goddess religion in India, and its appeal to Western seekers, as such embodiment of the female divine echoes and reinforces eco-feminist ideas and spirituality, approach Earth as Mother-God. Sircar outlines two legends associated with the creation of *shakti pithas*, the earliest version appears in the *Mahābhārata* account of the sacrifice of Daksha (Dakṣa), a king who neglects to invite his daughter Sati and her husband Shiva because of the latter's inauspicious ascetic and anti-social demeanour. Though Sati goes uninvited, she is gravely insulted by Daksha, and, according to different sources, either dies by *yoga*, or of a broken heart, or jumps into the sacrificial fire and perishes. The enraged Shiva races to the place, destroys the sacrifice and Daksha, though the latter is then restored to life, and affirms the superiority of Shiva over Daksha and all the gods.¹³⁷ Later, Sircar writes, an expanded version of the story appears, explaining the appearance of *shakti pithas* — an account encountered in such sources as the *Devī Bhāgavata* and the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, i.e. texts that are theologically goddess-oriented. In this later myth, Shiva is inconsolable following the death of his wife, and carrying her body on his shoulder (or sometimes head), roams the earth in a mad dance. The other gods, anxious for the well-being and balance of the universe, conspire to slowly remove the body from Shiva, and so Brahman, Vishnu, and Shani enter the dead body of Sati, and through *yoga* remove her body parts one by one. In another version, Vishnu follows Shiva and cuts the body piece by piece with his discus. Where those fell upon the earth, they become the *shakti pithas*, "holy seats or resorts of the mother-goddess, in all of which she is represented to be constantly living in some form together with a Bhairava, i.e. a form of her husband Shiva."¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Eck, "Ganga", 142.

¹³⁷ Sircar, *The Śākta Pithas*, 5-7.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 7.

According to Erndl, there are “4, 7, 8, 42, 51, or 108” *shakti pithas*, though most commonly they are collectively referred to as the Seven Sisters or the Nine Mothers.¹³⁹ Precisely *where* each body part fell, as well as the actual list of pilgrimage destinations, varies depending on the region and on the devotee’s favourite *pitha* or temple; however, the *yonī* (sexual organ) of the Goddess is invariably located at Kāmarūpa in Assam. Pilgrimages to such places of power is a great part of Indic devotion, and Erndl notes the curious inversion that the myth of Sati offers over the appearance of the Goddess in the *Devi Mahatmya* “in which the Goddess is put together through the efforts of the gods. Here she is dismembered piece by piece and distributed throughout the landscape. The places where her limbs fell, however, are alive with her presence and thus infused with *shakti*.”¹⁴⁰ The Goddess, as Prakriti, herself becomes like the primordial Purusha, who is dismembered by the gods to form the cosmos. This homology between earthly and cosmic geography and an anthropomorphic body is of great antiquity in India, and can be seen in many of its traditions.¹⁴¹ It is interesting, however, that the mythologies of each *shakti pitha* usually include a cycle of stories about a particular goddess, as well as about the *portion* of Devi which is associated with the place. There is no contradiction here due to the principle of unity in multiplicity, and the fluidity of goddesses does not preclude the uniqueness of each goddess and each sacred place. E. Alan Morinis, in his work on pilgrimage in West Bengal, had similarly observed that “The paradox in thought which makes this [multiplicity] even more complex, is the belief that even at the most lowly, form-bound level, the goddess is simultaneously her cosmic, formless self, and that in that cosmic, characterless aspect, she is still Durgā, Kālī, Tārā, Ūmā and the rest.”¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Erndl, *Victory to the Mother*, 34. Also, the purported numbers of *pithas*, besides representing actual count of various places, are in themselves auspicious and are associated with various numerological and symbolic systems. For example, 108 is one of the most auspicious and sacred numbers across Indic traditions, most commonly represented in the string of *japa mala* or prayer beads; 51 is associated with the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, also considered sacred (Kali’s necklace of skulls similarly is said to number 51 for this reason), and so on.

¹⁴⁰ Erndl, *Victory to the Mother*, 34.

¹⁴¹ In Jainism, for example, the rough outline of a Purusha as a man standing akimbo is the model of the cosmos, with the human realm in the middle, or stomach, area, heavenly abodes above it and the hells below, and the place of liberated souls, the *siddha loka*, outside the cosmos – figured as a half moon over the figure’s head.

¹⁴² E. Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: A Case Study of West Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 26

The primary goal of pilgrimage is of course *darshan*, the taking in of sacred gaze, though more often than not there may be other, more specific reasons, such as asking for or giving thanks for children or ailments lifted, giving thanks for passing the government exams, at the conclusion or fulfilment of a vow, and so on. To perform a child's first tonsure is also customary to do at a goddess temple, and often the same family will keep going back to the exact same temple, as thanks for healthy and successful births and offspring. In the next section, looking at lineage goddesses, I explore in greater depth the link between the goddess as radically embodied in the world and all matters concerning family, fertility, and fortune.

Keeping in mind the transnational aim of this paper, however, I would like to briefly discuss here a somewhat unusual pilgrimage, undertaken by a mixed group of Western and Indian goddess scholars. Two considerations stand out in particular: first, the perception of the earth as Goddess, punctuated with special places of power, which is so natural to Indic goddess religion, has been ardently embraced by Western goddess spirituality and is perhaps one of its more vivid characteristics. Since the rise of the goddess movement in the west, so called-goddess tours have grown in popularity, and currently are easily available from various internet-based companies and operators. These "tours" are much like pilgrimages, and often aim to take participants to areas in the West where goddess temples were discovered, or where the feminine divine is believed to have been worshiped, such as the monolithic temples on Malta, Ephesus and Çatal Höyük in Turkey, standing stones in Ireland and England, and so on.¹⁴³ Tours to India are also becoming increasingly more common, and therefore it is interesting to examine the various similarities and differences in goals and perceptions between Eastern and Western pilgrims — especially in light of my own work with Western Kali devotees, described in the final chapter.¹⁴⁴ Secondly, the *yatra* (pilgrimage) in question was undertaken by feminist academics, and their

¹⁴³ Even a simple search on the Internet will reveal a dozen or so companies and websites that offer organized Goddess Tours, or tours to discover the "Great Goddess". Some of these have been popularized and led by seminal figures in Western goddess spirituality, most notably Carol Christ's organized pilgrimages to Greece and Crete that are still offered annually (The Ariadne Institute, <http://www.goddessariadne.org/>). Many, if not all, tours are for women only, and stress the values of female friendship and bonding, self-discovery and "personal journeying", and connecting to Mother Earth.

¹⁴⁴ Chandra Alexander, the high priestess of the Sharanya Kali temple, had both travelled in India extensively (there she had received *dikṣa* or initiation), and also taken some of her students on pilgrimage — interestingly, also to *shakti pithas* in Assam and Orissa.

goal, apart from east-west dialogue and sharing of ideas, was to examine the *liberatory potential* of the Goddess for *women*, and specifically whether or not the Goddess is *empowering* to women (meaning both Indian and non-Indian women). Predictably, the answers to such a question are varied, but the very question serves to complicate the “uniform” devotional landscape that may result from the brief descriptions I have provided here.

The pilgrimage is described in the work of Brenda Dobia, whose group had set their sights on the famous Kamakhya temple in Assam of the Great Goddess as Desire, the site where the *yoni* of the Goddess is manifest in the form of a naturally occurring rock formation through which flows a sacred spring. Dobia writes of approaching the Goddess of Desire: “the desires with which (by negotiation) we embarked on the project and which underpinned our approach included the desire to meet the Goddess, to have our seeking be not only intellectual in its feminist orientation but experiential and personal, and to accentuate all these elements through our collaboration as women.”¹⁴⁵ She also stresses that “controversial to a feminist reading of such rituals are questions whether the divinization of the woman in this way is to her benefit or detriment.”¹⁴⁶ Dobia encounters various attitudes among the Indian women interviewed, ranging from positive or neutral feelings, to those of avoidance, resistance and even opposition. Madhu Khanna, for example, as one of the Indian scholars collaborating on the project, described her feelings about the pilgrimage process (which involves descending into a series of ‘womb’ cave-shrines) as “emerging from ‘the darkness of the womb completely liberated and rejuvenated’.”¹⁴⁷ On the other hand, the women in the household of the *pandit* who guided the group through the pilgrimage seemed shy and unresponsive, deferring to their husband’s expertise on the matter. Women interviewed at the Gauhati University were also ambivalent, some uneasy about ongoing animal sacrifice, and others angry about being “sexually harassed” by some of the temple priests, and over the “duplicity of men who espoused *Shaktism* but beat their wives.”¹⁴⁸

It appears that against the many Shakta texts and practices that postulate the respect and veneration of real women as representatives of the goddess (some of which I discuss below),

¹⁴⁵ Brenda Dobia, “Approaching the Hindu Goddess of Desire”, *Feminist Theology* 16 (2007): 68-69

¹⁴⁶ Dobia, “Approaching the Hindu Goddess of Desire”, 72.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 74.

there are broader influences of societal norms, inequalities in social organisation, and the behaviour of specific individuals that complicate matters. For the same reasons, some Indian feminists are weary of utilizing the goddess as an icon of women's power, and view her as a patriarchal tool, a reality idealized at the expense of real women. The exceptions to this attitude also come from Indian feminist authors, who stress the need to approach the goddess from a spiritual feminist perspective, in the stance of devotee or a devotional attitude that affords empowerment. Such voices include Vrinda Dalmiya, Lina Gupta, and Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, among others, and it is significant that their focus is on Kali specifically as a revelatory figure both in terms of social justice and in terms of personal devotion. It is also worth noting that feminist thought, in itself a Western construct, had been appropriated by some Indian scholarship and popular devotion regarding the goddess, thus further shaping and complicating the relationship between divine and human females.

2. Mothers who protect and possess: Kul-devis, yakshis, community building, and possession

Returning to the embodiment of Indic goddesses, the *kul devi* or *yakshi*, (i.e. lineage goddess) presents a more localized form of female divinity that is often a primary focus of worship and ritual for many devotees due to her intimate connection to and influence upon one's own community or clan. Sometimes such local goddesses can grow and become regional or pan-Indian figures, as is the case with Vaisno Devi whose following in the Punjab Hills has grown from a local shrine to a national pilgrimage site.¹⁴⁹ As already discussed in chapter one, in some regions the presence of the goddess is more ubiquitous than others (such as can be seen in Samanta's description of the Kali's cult in Bengal). Indeed, Kali's image and mythos is so closely tied to Bengali regional identity, that her figure has been appropriated by various nationalist-Bengali groups throughout different historical periods, thus complicating her paradoxical nature

¹⁴⁹ Vaisno Devi is especially popular in Northwest India as the gentle aspect of the mother goddess (and complimented by Kali as the fierce aspect). For more details regarding her cult see, for example, the work of Kathleen Erndl, *Victory to the Mother*, and Mark Edwin Rohe, "Ambiguous and Definitive: The Greatness of the Goddess Vaisno Devi" in *Seeking Mahādevī: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess*.

of a Dark Goddess who destroys, as well as a Mother who loves unconditionally.¹⁵⁰ Though my interest here is less political and more concerned with the mythic, devotional, and cultural associations embedded in Indic goddess traditions, the two realms are hard to separate. Even in the Western context, Chandra Alexander, a Western priestess of Kali, calls her a “goddess of social justice” in many of her papers and interviews, drawing on the rich tradition around Kali as goddess who accepts all, regardless of their caste, gender, or creed (I return to the significance of these associations in the Western Kali tradition in chapter four).

Even outside the Shakta tradition, goddesses are associated with “world-affirming” goals and desires such as family health, fertility, success in academics or business, and protection of property. They are intrinsically associated with community building — regardless of whether or not ultimate reality or the Absolute is also perceived as a divine feminine. Kartikeya Patel writes of the Indic goddess cult as one that stems from the understanding that the embodied world is feminine in a fundamental way, thus manifested as a female divinity, and conceptualized through women’s “own true nature”, which reflects the workings of the world as a whole. Patel writes that religion, or “dharma”, thus defined in terms of the feminine is particularly geared towards achieving collective social goals: “a beneficial direction given to the members of a society to maintain a lawlike structure in the cosmos and to attain the fruits of some collective action geared towards maintaining continuity and orderliness in the society.”¹⁵¹

Communication with the goddess, especially in matters relating to the well-being of a family or a community, healing, prayers for resolution in difficult situations and so on, often involves sacrifice (whether in form of vegetarian or animal offerings, or personal vows), as well as ritual goddess possession. In the case of Kali specifically, as already discussed in the previous chapter, the sacrificial victim represents an “animal-self” of the sacrificer that is “cooked” and “digested” through offering to the goddess, and becomes a blessing bestowed by her, ingested

¹⁵⁰ For example, the association made by British administrators of Kali and the mostly mythical ‘Thugees’ cult, had backfired, in the sense that she was then taken up as a goddess of liberation and resistance by Bengali rebel groups. For a detailed account see Cynthia Ann Hume, “Wrestling with Kali: South Asian and British Constructions of the Dark Goddess”, and Hugh Urban, “‘India’s Darkest Heart’: Kali in the Colonial Imagination”, both in *Encountering Kali*, ed. by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal.

¹⁵¹ Kartikeya C. Patel, “Women, Earth, and the Goddess: A Shākta-Hindu Interpretation of Embodied Religion”, *Hypatia* 9 (1994): 73.

back when returned to the sacrificer as *prasad* (literally, ‘divine grace’). Samanta suggests a homology between the ‘self’ (*jīva*) of the sacrificer and the sacrificial animal (*paśu*), and over many lifetimes, the act of offering to the goddess is instrumental in achieving union with divinity and liberation. This ultimate union with the goddess echoes her ongoing embodiment in the world, and in her devotees; as Samanta notes, the distinctions between sacrificer and Shakti are “ambiguous”¹⁵², and thus more permeable.

This interpenetration of divine and human is continued and expressed even more starkly in the phenomenon of goddess possession. While goddess possession is too vast a subject to treat here at any depth, it is important to stress its ubiquity in the devotional landscape of India. Often ritual practitioners of the goddess (such as male or female priests and healers) are called to their vocation by an experience of possession; other times, family members may become possessed when there is something wrong in the family, or when the goddess must be appeased. The embodiment of the goddess thus affects the embodiment of her devotees and hierophants, and as her blessings may become manifest in their lives, so she herself can become manifest in their bodies.

Interestingly, one need know nothing at all about the goddess (in terms of sacred lore and complex rituals and mantras), other than be “called” to her service. In her study of goddess worship in the Punjab area, Erndl discusses two village healers from two different villages, who both were called to the worship of the goddess through possession. Both serve her by seeing visitors three days a week, communicating with the goddess and healing. Erndl points out that despite “living in the shadow of two great temples”, where daily worship of the goddess in various forms is clearly manifest, neither healer knew much about goddess myth and custom prior to their passions, and both were ‘initiated’ into their duties to the goddess through a series of visions, possessions, and negotiations with the goddess.¹⁵³

Possession itself has been described as a melding on one’s consciousness with the deity, a sort of radical empathy that leads to insight and power, and is often the result of *bhakti* rather than yogic or tantric *sadhana*. Sarah Caldwell’s study of a Kali possession/drama ritual in Kerala

¹⁵² *Ibid*, 780

¹⁵³ Erndl, “Goddesses and the Goddess in Hinduism: Constructing the Goddess Through Religious Experience” in *Seeking Mahadevi* ed. by Tracy Pintchman (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 199-212

is an interesting case in point.¹⁵⁴ Exploring performance and possession within a localized form of Kālī, called Bhagavati (an epithet akin to Mahadevi), Caldwell’s work illustrates once again the tensions between the local and the pan-Indian goddess worship. Though Caldwell’s subject is not a lineage goddess per se, the themes of anger, vengeance, hurt, trauma, injustice, and ultimately reconciliation and healing, are common to many possession rituals. Secondly, and important for my purposes here, Caldwell touches upon the experiential aspects of possession, as well as the social and gendered stratification of worshippers, performers, and priests. Thinking about the implications of such an embodied practice within goddess worship, this helps to contextualize possession, and the reality of the Goddess for devotees.

*Muṭiyēttu*¹⁵⁵, the subject of Caldwell’s work, is a distinctive South Indian art form that is also spiritual possession: a re-enactment of the story of Kālī’s battle with the demon Dārika and his eventual decapitation (which is a local version of the Devi’s battle with the buffalo-headed demon, as recounted in the *DM*). Watched, prepared, staged, and performed by members of the community, *muṭiyēttu* is a nexus of music, art, dance, and stage performance (though locals would likely object to the use of this term, seen by them as too secular; the ritual is perceived as made sacred by the religious intent of the actors). It also raises interesting questions of gender, as the performers, i.e. those being possessed by the fierce mother goddess, are always male. What makes this study particularly unique and illuminating is its negotiation of the scholarly, academic voice with the personal voice of field notes and journal entries, written both by Caldwell and her field assistant, and at the time of their writing not intended for publication. Identified by the author as the “subtext” layer of her research, these passages often differ significantly from the “official” voice of the scholar, and present a fascinating study in their own right. At times poetic, at times troubling and disturbing, these personal notes blend seamlessly into the text and enrich the reader’s understanding of the subject matter in ways that formal scholarly narrative cannot.

Goddess-worship in Kerala is usually singled out of the pan-Indian context as having distinct and entirely local characteristics. Most notably, unique to this region is the instituted role

¹⁵⁴ Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, violence and worship of the goddess Kālī* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁵⁵ A note on transliteration: diacritical marks used in this section follow Caldwell’s usage, since they reflect one of the local dialects of Kerala, rather than the Sanskrit spelling.

of the oracle, present in every Bhagavati temple. The oracle, or *veliccappatu*, “embodies the goddess before her devotees in daily worship,”¹⁵⁶ and although only Brahmin priests may perform puja, the oracle is never of Brahmin caste, mediating between the inner sanctum where the image of the goddess is enshrined and the non-Brahmin devotees, who may only stand outside the shrine (all temples are constructed in a way that maintains an unbroken line of sight between the two). Also important to the ritual is the sense of space, sacred and constructed, delineated through ritually executed colourful sand paintings, or *kalams*, which form the stage of the drama. Caldwell, who had been present at numerous rituals, describes one particularly intense *muṭiyēttu*, which conveys at least part of the emotion, feeling, confusion, and revelation contained in goddess possession, which is often lost in the academic and scholarly discourse. Below is a greatly abridged excerpt of one of her “subtext” passages, recorded during the second half of the performance, when, after twelve hours of preparation, Kāḷi (an actor possessed by the goddess) takes the stage:

Fireworks punctuate the empowering of Kāḷi, along with more ululating. The men standing around her respond with more shouts. She takes blessings from the drums, and begins a spinning dance... Everywhere there is fire. [...]

This truly is a beautiful setting. The colourful curtain, the flaming lamp, the singing and drums and the tall coconut trees rising up behind like silent listeners, witnesses and participants in this drama of good and evil. The wife of Nambūtiri’s younger brother (whose home we stayed in overnight) asks me as Kāḷi enters the stage, if I know what is the meaning of *muṭiyēttu*. I ask her to please tell me. She says it is a way of teaching *dharma* [righteousness] to the common person, who is unable to distinguish good from evil. Her words pierce my heart. [...]

Kāḷi is on one side of the curtain and Dārika is on the other. They can’t see each other but they are doing parallel movements: threatening, sticking their tongues out... Kāḷi attacks Dārika very vigorously. The two men holding the curtain have to really hold her tight... The fight is more intense now, and Kāḷi chases Dārika fiercely around the temple ground... No one knows where they will go now. The audience has to get up out of their way. After some time as the drums get more and more frenzied, Kāḷi begins to falter and swoon, shouting and screaming. Sofia [my three-year-old daughter] becomes quite wild watching this. She wants to imitate everything and is making quite a scene, twirling and spinning.

There is a lot of shakti in this place. Intense humidity, dense coconut groves all around. A huge shout goes up as Kāḷi swoons. Here they say when the possession is

¹⁵⁶ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 11.

authentic, the nose of Kālī on the muṭi¹⁵⁷ will sweat. The torches flare up with fragrant green light. As I watch Kālī twirling and spinning to the torches and drums, I feel like crying. Heat and emotion crowd my heart. I feel love, sadness, happiness, longing — something very powerful is happening to me. It is the goddess who I am to fathom now, not the remote male ice gods of the Himalayas, but the intimate, earthly females of the forest, earth, and tree. As she spins I feel my own soul spinning with her. I am fascinated and dizzy, empty and expectant, hot of heart — feel I mustn't get too close or I could become lost.¹⁵⁸

This passage helps illuminate, at least cursorily, the complex matrix of sensorial, devotional, cultural, and experiential factors implicated in goddess possession, and in the embodiment of the goddess as living, real, and present to her devotees. The question of gender is interesting, because while Shaktism prescribes the veneration of women as embodiments of the goddess, examined in the section below, it is quite possible for both men and women to be possessed by her (and in some contexts, like *muṭiyēttu*, it is predominantly the province of men). This brings again to mind the question of power, empowerment, social and gendered norms. Saxena argues that empowerment through the goddess is possible for any devotee, male or female, but does require some education and discernment, engagement with rather than indiscriminate following of tradition.¹⁵⁹ It is also notable that possession remains largely a communal engagement with the goddess, despite its rich ground for personal engagement and transcendent experience. Communally constructed, performed, watched, and supported, it is a medium in which to explore devotion (as the woman says to Caldwell above, it “teaches *dharma* to the common person”), as well as solve family matters, pray for a good harvest, settle feuds, even ensure auspiciousness of other rituals. As all goddesses as ultimately one, so all members of a community are both part of the goddess, and of each other, intimately linked.

3. *Portions of Her: Women as the Goddess*

¹⁵⁷ *Muṭi* is the huge ceremonial mask the actor wears during the ritual, and its placement on the actor's head is greeted with ululating, shouts, and much excitement, as it marks the moment of embodiment when actor and deity become one, termed in the passage quoted as the “empowerment of the goddess”.

¹⁵⁸ Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother*, 91-93

¹⁵⁹ Saxena, *In the beginning IS desire*, 45-49

One of the most avidly pursued subjects in recent scholarship on Indic goddesses is the relationship between the divine and human females. As already glimpsed in Dobia's work, discussed above, both Western and Indian scholars are increasingly asking the questions: Are women empowered by the Goddess? Are *Indian* women empowered by the Goddess? Are Indic goddesses affirmative of women's justice, or are they tools of a patriarchal order which continues to oppress and segregate women? Is the Goddess, ultimately speaking, a feminist?¹⁶⁰ Saxena, from her dual position of scholar and devotee, argues that the Goddess, in her cosmic and monistic form of Kali, affirms neither matriarchy nor patriarchy, though she is at the basis of a gynocentric tradition and a vision of God as female, or God as Mother, unavailable and unknown in the Judeo-Christian West. It was her astonishment that her American colleagues, students, and friends, both believers and atheists, could not imagine God as a woman that compelled her to explore her own vision of Kali and the divine feminine. Saxena also draws one's attention to the complexity of social and cultural structures within India that shape women's lives:

... Although many Indian women's lives are filled by Devi, 'the self-manifested one', most of them, due to lack of educational opportunities, are denied access to the texts that proclaim an entirely different vision of women – as embodiments of Devi's energy. In addition, the patriarchal use of role models like Sita kept women captive within what Madhu Khanna calls the 'Theology of Subordination'. Many women in India have been mired too long in the external trappings of a sinister conglomeration of patriarchal and colonial legacies, of economic degradation and social denigration, chained by the twin monsters of illiteracy and poverty.¹⁶¹

Though Saxena advocates knowledge of Kali and her Tantric tradition as a way for women to "find their power within", she is leery of those who focus on the sensationalized sexual aspects of it, both in the Indian and Western contexts. Saxena reminds one that Tantra is not a monolithic tradition (and there are indeed many styles and streams of Tantra, as can be seen even from the limited discussion of Kali as a Tantric deity in chapter one), and for the most part it is a rigorous and disciplined practice, having little to do with unrestrained sexuality or instant gratification. A portion of Tantric practices, even within India, is indeed centred on sexual ritual — though it is

¹⁶⁰ This last question has guided a whole volume of essays on South Asian goddesses, *Is the Goddess a feminist? The politics of South Asian goddesses*, ed. by Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen Erndl, New York: NYU Press, 2000.

¹⁶¹ Saxena, *In the beginning IS desire*, 20.

unclear how much actual ritual goes on. McDaniel's extensive research work among Shaktas and Tantrikas in West Bengal shows that although some women indeed function as professional consorts, most of the independent female practitioners interviewed by her were not only celibate but even "insistently so."¹⁶² McDaniel found that most female practitioners interpreted the ritual as metaphorical and internal, and that celibate tantrikas, both male and female, held higher status in their community and were widely respected, unlike those who performed the actual sexual rituals. Women working as professional consorts are considered to be only a step above a prostitute, and usually function somewhat like a caste, i.e. a daughter may follow her mother's profession, often by necessity. A single consort normally stays with one male tantrika, who becomes her guru and supports her, and McDaniel found it was not unusual for a guru to also sleep with a consort's daughter — especially if she was the fruit of "failed" Tantric rites.¹⁶³

Successful and independent female tantrikas stressed that actual sexual ritual was rare among practitioners, and mostly unnecessary for women, viewing it as a tool primarily for men, who have a harder time controlling their desires and thus need to hone their self-discipline. One leading female guru, Gauri Ma, is quoted in McDaniel saying "*tantra sadhana* reveal[s] a person's 'inner history', giving the power to 'see inside', to watch the inner life of the spirit. The goal is to gain Shakti, to have her dwell in the heart... 'It is Shakti who enlightens you, who brings you to the highest states.'¹⁶⁴ Accordingly, the male and the female aspects are united inwardly, while the *panchatattva*, or the five forbidden things (alcohol, meat, sex, etc), are symbolic and representative of inner transformation. Some tantrikas in McDaniel's account were especially outspoken, citing their celibacy as a refusal to give away their *shakti*, accumulated by the hard work of austerities and recitations of mantras, to a man; in Tantra a transfer of energy during intercourse is postulated to be from the female to the male, a reversal of the Brahmanical idea that men lose power as a result of sex.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 113.

¹⁶³ In this Tantra the sexual *sadhana* precludes ejaculation, therefore, a pregnancy is usually a sign of lack of training or purity on the part of the female, mistake in ritual preparation, inability to control one's desires and so on. One *bhairavi*, or consort, born of an accident in her mother's ritual practice also felt compelled to follow in her footsteps, perhaps as a dharmic call (118), while others may be called to such a vocation by poverty, chance, and perhaps in some cases their own individual practice. For further details see McDaniel's chapter "Tantric and Yogic Shaktism" in *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 67-144

¹⁶⁴ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 113

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 121-122.

Ultimately, however, the focus of Bengali Tantra is not sex but *death*, the recognition of one's mortality, and, through Kali, its transcendence; Tantric Shakta texts prescribe three major roles for women: "as ritual incarnations of the goddess, as ritual consort for sexual *sadhana*, and as female gurus," though one see also female tantric and yogic renunciants, holy women, yoginis, and even tantric wives who practice ritually with their husband-gurus.¹⁶⁶ It is the first prescription of venerating women as incarnations of the goddess that encompasses and sustains all the others. It is often seen in Shaktism as the ritual veneration of girls (*kumari* or *kunya puja*) and even of married women (*stri* or *shakti puja*) as part of larger goddess worship contexts. *Kumari puja* is especially common at Durga Puja celebrations, during the annual festival for the Goddess, usually in October-November.

The reason for such reverential treatment, as Madhu Khanna puts it, is that "the women share with the goddess a *continuity of being*" (emphasis mine).¹⁶⁷ Because women are born with an inherent Shakti, they all belong to the "family" or the Great Goddess (though for puja worship, often girls and women of specific age are preferred, or a group of women representing various moods, ages, or castes). Khanna asserts that Tantric Shakta texts proclaim equality between men and women, and do not discriminate between women themselves, so that respect must be paid to all women – regardless of what other social conventions may be in place. In this sense, Shaktism holds a vast liberatory potential, both for Indian and western women. As Khanna writes: "Shakta Tantras... claim that all women, of all cultures, naturally assume the power and divinity of cosmic energy and that they are to be looked on as the goddess's physical counterpart on earth. An inseparable body unites the physical women with the cosmic as they both reflect one another."¹⁶⁸ Khanna cites such central Shakta texts as the *Tripurārṇava* Tantra and the *Shaktisamāgama* Tantra as exalting the attributes of women, as well as calling to respect and honour women in all circumstances and taking a firm stand against sexual abuse and violence towards women. Notably, Khanna notes that in such texts "for the first time in Hindu religious history, an attempt is made to actualize the divinity of women on the social plane and thus

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁶⁷ Madhu Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation in *Shakta* Tantras," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India*, ed. by Mandakranta Bose (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114.

¹⁶⁸ Khanna, "The Goddess-Women Equation," 114.

introduce an ethos of equality and reverence for them.”¹⁶⁹ The appellations of *Mā*, *Devī* or *Vīrā* towards women of all ages, in Shakta circles, protect women from being viewed as exclusively sexual objects, though the human body itself is not denied, and is revered as a miniature cosmos. In a reversal of orthodox perception, in Tantra women’s bodies, hair, and menstrual flow are perceived as pure (as oppose to polluted), bestowing good energies, and even worthy as offering to the gods (menstrual blood in particular). Similarly, women’s actions and behaviour are not restricted during the time of menstruation, in contrast to orthodox Brahmanical thought that prescribes all kinds of segregations for the woman, as she is seen as especially polluted at that time. Menstruation itself, according to the *Dharma Śāstra*, is mythologically explained as the result of transference of guilt from Indra’s murder of Vritra, figured there as an act of Brahminicide.¹⁷⁰ Ironically, the ‘boon’ women apparently obtain for agreeing to carry a third of Indra’s guilt is to “obtain offspring (if our husbands approach us),” and dwelling “at pleasure” with the husbands until the children are born¹⁷¹ — like menstruation itself, this is an explanation of women’s nature given away to some male power. Khanna notes that Shakta Tantra, on the other hand, challenges these perceptions and inverts the orthodox conceptions about the body, thus positing a potentially liberating religious and social ethic. Importantly, it is this very aspect of the Hindu goddess tradition, and particularly of Kali as Shakti goddess *par excellence*, which has been ardently seized upon by Western feminist spirituality. In the next chapter, I explore the rise of the Goddess movement in the West, and the blossoming of the Western Kali in the midst

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 116.

¹⁷⁰ The myth of slaying Vritra (Vṛtra) is actually much older, and was merely adopted in fragmentary form in the *Dharma Śāstra*. Briefly, Vritra was a serpent-demon of drought, controlling thunder, lightning, hail and storm, and withholding all the waters of heaven. Indra’s slaying of him releases the celestial waters, thus bringing life, fertility, progeny and wealth. In the *Dharma Śāstra* account, Indra is punished for the crime of murdering Vritra, presented here as a learned Brahmin; aware of the gravity of his crime, Indra is desperate to find someone to share in his guilt, and approaches the women to take one third of it upon themselves. Though an in-depth analysis of this myth is outside the scope of this project, it is interesting to note that the serpent, already connected with fertility, wealth, and progeny from ancient times, is first demonized in the original myth, so that Indra emerges as the supreme victor and benefactor of the world. Later, with a negative view of world-affirming and life-sustaining activities, the *Dharma Śāstra* turns the situation on its head and all those involved symbolically and physically in procreation, fertility, and so on, share in the guilt of “Brahminicide”. While Indra frees himself, women remain eternally bound by this guilt, “subservient to the mechanics of patriarchal manipulation” (Khanna, “The Goddess-Women Equation”, 118).

¹⁷¹ *Vaśiṣṭha Dharma Śāstra*, verse 6, quoted in Khanna, “The Goddess-Women Equation”, 117

of new age spirituality, feminist discourse, and increasingly individualized, embodied, and experiential religiosities.

3. THE DANCE OF THE GODDESS: KALI AND WESTERN FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

*“There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You
walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied...
remember, make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.”*
Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

Overview

In the middle of the twentieth century, strange things were happening to Western women. Sometime in sixties and seventies a new way of thinking and imagining emerged at the level of cultural phenomenon, rising up through grassroots movements, college dorms, libraries, pamphlets, craft fairs, art shows, songs, poems, novels, classes, workshops, esoteric societies, friendships, public discussions and private conversations, and as Carol Christ would say, simply through the dreams, fantasies, and thoughts of women.¹⁷² While it is not my aim in this chapter to focus exclusively on the history and emergence of feminist spirituality (or goddess religion¹⁷³ — as it is more commonly known by practitioners), it is curious to observe that the mechanics of this process are not entirely clear. These processes are shrouded in mystery in some places, and have a clear and precise genealogy in others; the fifty-odd years that have passed since the approximate inception of this movement give one an opportunity to survey the processes by which ideas infiltrate and get established in culture, permeating, transmuting, and transforming,

¹⁷² Carol Christ, “Why Do Women Need the Goddess,” in *Womanspirit Rising* ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992 (1979)), 276

¹⁷³ I have agonised over the lack of consensus in the literature in the use of lower or upper case “g”: some authors capitalize all Goddesses (rather like the Judeo-Christian God), some only capitalize when referring to *the* Goddess (or their Goddess), while others follow no apparent or coherent pattern. As a result, I have tried to come up with a system of my own. When I am talking about “goddess religion” I mean the general attitude, practice, or culture of spiritual/ religious feminism, which may or may not postulate “Goddess” as ontological reality, or may use various goddess symbols or figures to do so, and therefore I do not capitalize. Likewise with discourse regarding the goddess or goddesses in the abstract. However, I think capitalization is in order when speaking of Her in the ontological sense, or when speaking of specific concepts that are capitalized by convention and especially in the context of their usage, such as “Triple Goddess”, “Mother Goddess” or “Dark Goddess”. Whenever quoting from a source, I have left the original orthography intact.

so that at the other end of it, contemplating a surrealist painting by Carrie Ann Baade that bears the title “Our Lady Kali” (fig. 3.1), and wondering about the mysterious ways in which new mythic narratives emerge and solidify, one could say: indeed, strange things happened.

Strange things, as it were, happen to goddesses as well. In this chapter I finally turn westward, to the geographical and spiritual territories where Kali had reincarnated into a new goddess pantheon, attracted new devotees, and transformed into new forms. This chapter aims to contextualize her in this new landscape, as well as elucidate my methodology and approach to the study of the Western Kali. I begin with the latter, since precise theoretical considerations are necessary in



Figure 3.1 Carrie Ann Baade, *Our Lady Kali*, oil on copper, 2004.

approaching such a new and somewhat amorphous tradition as feminist and neopagan spirituality, consisting often of *practitioners* rather than devotees, lacking in centralized texts or visible centres of worship, and intensely individualistic. In this section I also discuss the wider implications of such research for understanding the changing spiritualities of North America.

Part two is an overview of the central concepts and attitudes characterizing Western goddess religion as a spiritual and ethico-political path. Here I also examine the use of Dark Goddess symbolism in some detail, as it is especially relevant to the place and role of Kali within neopagan and feminist religiosity. I am interested particularly in the ways in which the figure of Kali embodies such symbolism, and how this is reflected in the significances she holds for

devotees and practitioners, as well as in ritual contexts. Part three is dedicated to a sampling of ritual, devotional, and iconographic appropriations of Kali in Western goddess religiosity and related spiritual paths. Though I would have liked to include all the diverse instances of Kali appropriation that I have collected in over two years of research, this would be entirely unfeasible for length considerations. Moreover, web-based sources and spiritualities are fluid and ever-changing; some of the older links I have are no longer valid, while new web pages, images, and videos appear all the time, changing and evolving along with the tradition itself. Finally, in the last part of this chapter I consider some central critiques voiced on the subject of appropriating religious symbols cross-culturally, and of Kali appropriations in particular, as well as the responses to such criticism. This debate, long carried out both in academic circles and within the tradition itself, is as important to the evolving place of Kali in Western goddess spirituality as any exegesis of religious text, rituals or icons, since it is an active contribution to the developing theology of the goddess.

In this chapter, I hope to prepare the ground for discussing the syncretic tradition of Sharanya (Chapter 4), which emerged at the nexus of personal, historical, geographical, and spiritual confluences directly related to the greater feminist project and Kali's migration West. Furthermore, the ongoing engagement of goddess practitioners with Kali and other Indic goddesses affects the entire fabric of feminist spirituality, introducing discussions of Indian religion and the ethics of appropriation, questions of authenticity and authority, new forms of religious experience, and even new conventions of spiritual leadership and training. Thus the Western



1994 "Kali", acrylic on mahogany panel, 32" x 26.
Figure 3.2 Penny Slinger, *Kali*, 1994. Slinger is a prominent illustrator whose work includes the special edition 'Kali issue' of *Tantra Magazine* (screen capture, August 10, 2010)

Kali is by no means a passive image or a mere Other; through the voices of devotees and scholars alike she becomes a vocal and influential partner in dialogue.

I. Beautiful Stranger: Theoretical Reflections on Syncretism, Culture, and Genealogy

1. New Age, Speed & Syncretism: Kali as a Wandering Goddess of the Global Village

Where does Kali fit in the Western imagination? How can she be approached? Where does the study of her Western spiritualities begin? The answers to these questions have implications within the greater scope of the churning cultural waters and identity building process of contemporary Western society. For example, Kali can be found in the circles of New Age spirituality, in goddess worship and feminist ritual construction, and among some neopagan practitioners – a milieu I explore in greater depth below. She can also be found among Hindus living in the West, or expatriates from other countries who have retained their Indic roots and religious practices. At times these more ‘traditional’ groups and the neopagan or feminist spirituality groups intersect (such as at the Kali Mandir of Laguna Beach, which I will return to below), and certainly, as Rachel McDermott points out, an “Indianization” process is taking place and re-informing the image and practice of the Western Kali.¹⁷⁴ However, the Kali who had wandered into the pagan groves and into the goddess covens, though often presented as a revelation from the East, an old-but-new image of the Divine Feminine, had acquired a distinctly non-Indian flavour.

In the West, as in the East, Kali is many things to many people. Her Western incarnations range from semi-mystical Neo-Tantric meditation and the use of sex and sexuality in ritual form, to “bitch goddess of feminist reclamation,”¹⁷⁵ to vegetarian puja performed at a Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach, California, to Kali as embodying the Dark aspects of the Goddess, to Kali as an Arcanum in a Tarot deck. Kali appears, surreptitiously, among Isis priestesses performing a

¹⁷⁴ Rachel McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers,” in *Encountering Kali*, edited by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 276.

¹⁷⁵ McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers,” 289.

sacred snake dance in southern California, and as inspiration for an avant-garde tribal belly dance troupe in Seattle.¹⁷⁶ As Rachel McDermott puts it, Kali is travelling “into unknown territory on the electronic highways,” and in this new decentralized, “dis-embedded” public space she is conquering new frontiers.¹⁷⁷

The study of Kali in the West presents rather different challenges from those associated with the study of Kali in the East, and the foremost of them is her relative anonymity and ‘novelty’ in a culture still largely dominated by monotheistic Christianity of subtle and less subtle forms. Directly related to this is the second major difference between the Western and Eastern contexts – the way of ‘doing religion’ in the West, or the conventional mode of religiosity, centred in the West on belief rather than praxis. While institutionalized religion is still publicly visible, its import in the modern (and post-modern) world has become a matter of criticism and suspicion for a chorus of more secular voices; furthermore, it is easily ignored by those who are not looking for it.¹⁷⁸ Though new religious movements are some of the fastest growing segments of religiosities in the West (in terms of the percentage of growth; otherwise, they remain small

¹⁷⁶ Le’ema Kathleen Graham, a Temple of Isis priestess had referred to Kali in an online interview as an inspiration to her goddess-worshipping serpent dance, though this link is now defunct (her website is <http://www.goddesswork.com/>); more details on the Seattle bellydance troupe *Hands of Kali* can be found on their website, at <http://www.handsofKali.com/tr>

¹⁷⁷ McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers”, 289.

¹⁷⁸ Many authors have written on the “secularisation” of the West, though Peter Berger and Charles Taylor come to mind most readily. Of course, Berger’s central insight concerns pluralism rather than secularisation per se, arguing that pluralism undermines stable belief and thus “ruptures” the sacred canopy (a notion I tend to agree with more than the general “secularisation thesis”). Perhaps, the fact that Western society grows increasingly more pluralistic influences the kind of spiritualities that develop and thrive in this climate. Other authors, such as Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, have likewise argued that the West is not undergoing a process of secularisation so much as a change in how religion is “done”; the emphasis in religious life moving from the rigidly collective and institutional to the particular, individual, and personal (which might include loose, local, and fluid communities). While it is not my aim to discuss this subject here at any length, these considerations are indirectly related to the exploration of Kali’s migrations West, both in terms of *where* and *how* her new practitioners and devotees may be found, and, in terms of what such an explorations means in the context of contemporary North American religion as such.

minorities), paganism is still far from possessing mainstream cultural recognition.¹⁷⁹ Of all the neopagan persuasions, Wicca is perhaps the most widely known; unfortunately, it is imagined by the average person mostly in the way it was implied in the 1990s cult film *The Craft*.¹⁸⁰ At the same time, discrete spiritualities and religious realities are constantly being carved out, reclaimed, and appropriated. Thinking about Kali in the West is thinking about migrating deities and symbols and the process of their appropriation and transmutation in contemporary Western religious imagination; it is also thinking about the larger scheme of women's spirituality and goddess worship, feminist and otherwise, and about the intersection of a phenomenological approach and a social theoretical one.

Curiously, the tradition of the “wandering” goddess, as the title of this section suggests, is not a uniquely Western modern phenomenon. Perhaps Kali is so well-known in the West precisely because of a long-standing tradition of wandering in her own culture. Even in Bengal, a centre of Kali worship, the Kali of Kalighat is actually a refugee. June McDaniel emphasizes the tendency of folk Kali statues to be associated with specific places and locales, becoming “wanderers” when a statue is moved: “the protecting Kali of Dacca in Bangladesh was Dhakeshwari or Ramna-Kali... [she] is now a refugee, like the Hindus who were forced to move

¹⁷⁹ The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) for 2008, released in March 2009, shows steady increase in NRMs and “personalized or idiosyncratic” religious affiliations. The ARIS found that NRM practitioners comprised approximately 1.2% of adult US population in 2008 (2,804,000), an increase from 0.9% in 2001 and 0.8% in 1990. In comparison, the 2008 number of Muslims was estimated at only 0.6% or 1,349,000 (Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, “American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008) Summary Report”, Trinity College Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris/files/2011/08/ARIS_Report_2008.pdf retrieved August 6, 2012). In Canada, the 2011 census data shows “Pagan” (including Wicca) to be the fastest growing segment (281% growth from 1991), though in absolute numbers this only means 21,080 people or 0.1% of population. It was followed in terms of growth by Aboriginal Spirituality (175%), Islam (129%), and Anglicanism (121%). (Statistics Canada website, accessed August 6, 2012, <http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/products/highlight/Religion/Page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo=PR&View=1a&Code=01&Table=1&StartRec=1&Sort=2&B1=Canada&B2=1>).

¹⁸⁰ Some authors even argued that television shows and films that portrayed witches positively were responsible for a spike in neopagan and Wiccan numbers in the 1990s, especially among teens and young adults, and with the decline of such media portrayals, the growth of the tradition had slowed. (Helen A. Berger and Douglass Ezzy, “Witchcraft: Changing Patterns of Participation in the Twenty First Century”, *The Pomegranate* 11.2 (2009): 165-180, accessed August 6, 2012, doi: 10.1558/pome.v11i2.165). For more on the relationship between contemporary Witchcraft and digital and mass media, also see Berger and Ezzy, “Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48.3 (2009); Douglas Cowan, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Hannah E. Johnston and Peg Aloï, eds, *The New Generation of Witches: Teenage Witchcraft in Contemporary Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2007).

as she was during the Partition, and she has resettled in West Bengal.”¹⁸¹ West Bengal, already home to numerous Kalis, of folk, tribal, regional, and national scopes, easily accepted this new (and at the same time *not* new) Kali within its fold. And further, in these post-modern times of ‘globe trotting’, blurry horizons and borders, and parallel structures of syncretism, Kali becomes a willing, sophisticated nomad, like so many people living in this increasingly plural reality. In 1994 Kali has moved, or ‘wandered’ to Laguna Beach, California, under the auspices of its founder Elizabeth Usha Harding. As the temple’s website proclaims their close association to the Dakshineswar Temple of Calcutta, they readily recognize the motley composition of California-Kali’s new followers: “Kali Mandir has grown into a beautiful blend of sincere Indian and Western devotees from different lineages, as well as aspirants with no formal affiliations.”¹⁸²

The effects of such fluidity of symbols and deities, and the new relationships devotees forge in connection with them, are a challenge for scholars of religion studying the spiritualities of the (post) modern West. They also appear to be emblematic of the times. There is something acutely current in Kali’s spirit of wandering, something almost self-evident in the fact of her multi-form, manifold, personal and transformative nature that captures the spirit of the late modern approach to life. Even in terms of South Asian Kali studies there is a notable shift in attitudes, marked, as Sarah Caldwell points out, by a repositioning of the scholarly gaze to encompass more points of view and rejecting the idea of Kali as a solely “marginal” goddess, since such readings are based on a normative ‘centre’ embodied in elite textual and informant evidence rooted in Brahminical Hinduism, and not equally representative of Kali traditions across India.¹⁸³ Scholars as well as religious practitioners are discovering that there are ‘centres’ everywhere — centres of knowledge, practice, and worship. Similarly in the West, though Kali may seem peripheral from the perspective of the general public, she is central and significant in the lives of her devotees.

Another way to understand the wandering Kali and the general fluidity of ideas and images in the West is to turn to William Connolly’s notions of speed and micropolitics, and the

¹⁸¹ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers*, 233

¹⁸² “About Kali Mandir”, *Kali Mandir*, http://www.Kalimandir.org/?page_id=2.

¹⁸³ Sarah Caldwell, “Margins at the Center,” in *Encountering Kali*, ed. Rachel McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 249-272.

evolving nature of culture. The phenomenon of Kali worship in the West is but one manifestation of contemporary syncretism in the religious milieu, and while it seems that syncretic developments are present in all traditions and at all times, this is especially true for the late modern period, and perhaps is best exemplified by William Connolly's notions of "eccentric" (as oppose to concentric) "cultural lines of flow, connection, [and] flight."¹⁸⁴ Although Connolly mainly uses the concept of "eccentric connections" to illustrate the pervasiveness of micropolitics and the de-centralized nature of all political ties, ideas, allegiances, attitudes, and relationships, this, I think applies smoothly to notions of religious thought, feelings, affiliation, and imagining. The abundance of competing images, narratives, identities, revelations, relationships and 'scepticisms' create what Connolly would term a "fecund" environment, a moment heavy with possibility, where intersections of varying events, opportunities, and experiences collide and interact at various rhythms and social and cognitive levels.

Speed is another important aspect in a world "composed of asymmetries of pace [and] replete with ambiguity", revealing a simultaneity of stratified processes relating to culture, identity, the movement of people and objects, and even the making of political decisions.¹⁸⁵ Once again, though Connolly discusses the concept of speed in relation to moral ambiguity and political action, the model of stratified cultural processes "involving relays and feedback loops between layers of being operating at different capacities and speeds"¹⁸⁶ illustrates vividly the pervasive syncretism of the contemporary religious *mindscape*. Within it, not only is there an ambiguity of time, pace, and tempo — but also of *place*. The idea of a symbol or a deity being *indigenous to some place* becomes amorphous, like the identities of the millions of the world's immigrants. At the same time, stretched in this new way, its capacity of appealing to wider audiences in unexpected contexts increases exponentially.

How to deal with the multiplicity and simultaneity of these "layers of being?" How to understand religious life, or the ideas of community and affiliation? It seems to me that what really happens here is a transformation of 'place' into 'space', a space that may be privately or publicly occupied, delineated, defended, imagined, and shared with others. Consequently, it

¹⁸⁴ William Connolly, *Neuropolitics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 191.

¹⁸⁵ Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 142.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 142.

seems that any ethnography sensitive to this cultural milieu must adopt a *genealogical attitude*, which acts to compensate for the loss of ‘place’ as an anchoring of religious life, and replaces it instead with personal history. Conversely, one could say that a genealogical attitude is likewise a method used to recover the ‘place-ness’ of a deity; re-placing an association to the dwelling-place of the divine with the locus of the personal histories and meanings of the devotees, incarnate in places both real and imagined. This is congruent with the notion of *herstory*, discussed below, which spiritual feminists use to reclaim and re-imagine history in ways that empower women and re-insert them into a seemingly all-male narrative. Such a notion of placeness, as a result, redefines notions of community, anchored in a shared spirituality and worldview rather than only in geographical proximity. The advent of the Internet had facilitated such relationships to a great extent, often leading, in turn, to the movement of people and the emergence of communities in the physical geography. Using a genealogical method that explores personal and experiential factors helps uncover and understand these new forms of community and religious tradition.

Though the understanding of genealogy proposed here is different from Foucault’s method, it seems more suited to the constantly evolving virtual worlds of contemporary goddess religion. Similarly, my focus is not exclusively on virtual sources, though they do play a significant role, if only due to the de-centralized nature of goddess religion itself. Western goddess devotees and practitioners remain real people, and increasingly they meet and organize into real life communities (one such community I explore in the next chapter), yet these real-life events seem to be mirrored in, affected by, and intertwined with extensive virtual worlds – making it both easy and challenging to locate Kali in their midst. As demonstrated in the third part of the chapter, Kali’s wanderings in the landscape of Western *imaginaires* can often produce quite diverse portraits of the goddess. How are they united? How are they distinct? Using the genealogical approach one can dig around the surface of images to uncover the narratives and the personal mythologies of a practitioner or image, and examine the milieu they arise in. Operating in the complex, stratified, multi-level model of culture proposed by Connolly, the idea of a genealogy allows one to ‘make sense’ of the Western Kali.

2. *Abundant Practice, or, the Individualistic Practitioner Evading Statistical Capture*

I am ultimately interested in the experiential aspects of Western practitioners engaging with Kali, and it is impossible to approach those outside of devotees' own words and images used to relate their engagement. The task of an ethnographer appears easier when there are canonical or orthodox ways of engaging with a deity, even, perhaps, when there is a range of 'centres' or canons, as Caldwell suggests. This task seems more challenging when dealing with a decentralized tradition represented by a diversity of voices (though, I would argue that this might apply to any tradition, and the existence of 'canons' is at times more confusing than helpful). At any rate, this methodological challenge applies both to the specific study of the Western Kali tradition and to the broader study of feminist religiosity. Several questions, especially when one aims to describe the tradition, must be addressed: within a multi-voiced, pluralistic following, how should these voices be reconciled? Are some more authoritative, or more authentic than others? What constitutes someone's voice as authentic or authoritative? How to identify followers and practitioners, and once identified, how to access their experiences, practices, and devotional attitudes?

Contemporary neopaganism and goddess religion, apart from being rather amorphous traditions by definition, are also challenging due to the prevalence of the so-called "solitary practitioner," i.e. individuals who sees themselves as part of the path, and may share ideas and tools with other like-minded individuals, but do not participate in a stable community, or perhaps participate in more than one community. Even a brief look at the New Age or Wicca section in one's local bookstore reveals that solitary practice is a popular type of engagement in the tradition, based on the abundance of books geared towards the independent witch or pagan.¹⁸⁷ In essence, however, they are not much different than individuals in any other tradition who do not follow an orthodox, institutional form of religiosity; and in this regard I have looked to Robert Orsi for inspiration. Looking for an approach sensitive both to individual, intimate practice and to the social context of such practices, I have tried to apply what Orsi terms "abundant

¹⁸⁷ For example, titles such as *Solitary Witch: The Ultimate Book of Shadows for the New Generation* (2003) by Silver RavenWolf (the author of young adult fantasy novels and several other pagan guide books), or *Spells for the Solitary Witch* (2005) by Eileen Holland, etc, abound in the New Age section.

empiricism,” balancing the interpretive, or historical mode, with the experiential.¹⁸⁸ Orsi suggests that “theorizing religion,” to some extent, deals violence to the very religious traditions it seeks to “capture” and “explain,” and he adopts a different point of entry, which I find useful: the *unexpected*. He writes:

What strikes contemporaries as ‘bizarre’ or ‘deranged’ is the most fruitful place to engage a tradition because this is where a tradition speaks against the world as it is known by contemporaries... What I am searching for... is a radical empiricism of the visible/invisible real... To move across entails describing the ways that the real becomes real and the way it slips the bonds of expectation or of the allowable.¹⁸⁹

Orsi’s search for an empirical approach to intimate religious realities is consonant with Connolly’s multidimensional, stratified view of culture and identity. Putting their ideas together, although previously at the service of different projects, can help delineate a meaningful logic for approaching the many-armed, many-bodied, many-voiced dancing goddess Kali and her equally diverse Western and, really, non-Western devotees alike. Therefore, in exploring all the varieties of her appropriations loosely unified under the umbrella of goddess religion, I am not looking for canonical texts or images. Instead, I let the variety of these diverse expressions to accumulate into a ‘critical mass’, within which the phenomenon of the Western Kali can be glimpsed and explored.

Such an approach underscores the need to look at religion in terms of *relationships*, which may involve the devotee, the divine, other devotees, other people, and even the devotee’s own past selves and imagined selves. Orsi, in *Between Heaven and Earth*, explores the interpenetration of religious and secular realities at the level of emotions, associations, symbols, specific moments in time, specific personal experiences. He demonstrates that in order to “make sense” of seemingly “other” religious realities, such as devotion to a saint, one must penetrate it at the level of emotion, need, distress, or some other visceral *experience*. This can be gleaned even from Orsi’s own struggle with Saint Jude, whom he cannot pray to, but whom he seeks to understand if he is to gain access to the religious world of the people he is writing about — in

¹⁸⁸ Robert Orsi, “2 + 2 = Five, Or the Quest for an Abundant Empiricism”, *Spiritus* 6.1 (2006): 113-121

¹⁸⁹ Orsi, “2 + 2 = Five,” 118-119

this case, the women who pray to Saint Jude.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, to seek to understand the religious world of Western Kali devotees might mean seeking to penetrate imagined sacred landscapes and reconstructing complex notions of revelation, feeling, dwelling, communication, and presence.

In the case of feminist spirituality, and therefore of the Western Kali, the experience of presence can be internal as well as external, and often it is experienced, interpreted, and even sought out through the individual's own *body*. Goddess religion is a practice more than it is a belief, as Starhawk would say, since practice is something that allows an individual to engage with the world and the divine in an embodied, experiential way — and therefore little distinction is made between physical and transcendent types of presence. This further complicates the notion of 'abundant empiricism', making the boundaries between religious and everyday experiences rather blurry. In order to avoid over-theorizing the tradition, as Orsi warns, I had adopted Ann Taves' approach to religious experience. Rather than immediately labelling or seeking out the label of 'religious', I am interested here in experiences that are 'set apart' — what Taves would simply call a category of "special things", with experience being one of many such possible things. As Taves points out, this allows to tease apart the subjects of study (including experiences), and their designations (including those of being "religious", "mystical", "spiritual", "magical", etc), which may differ based on who, where, when, and why is making such designations. By treating experience as one of many types of "special things", I hope to approach more accurately the "moods and motivations," so to speak, of the actors behind them.¹⁹¹

Such an approach is in tune with the self-definition of contemporary pagans and spiritual feminists, who often emphasize practice, experiences, and motivations over belief in their formulations of religiosity. Curiously, this is also in tune with much of Hindu devotion as well, where practice, ritual, and communion with the divine is often deemed more important than intellectual understanding (especially since the Ultimate Reality, or Brahman, is seen as outside human grasp, realizable only through revelation; even in the Tantric path of self-practice, it is ultimately the Goddess who elevates the *tantrika* to a higher vision or understanding). Still, in

¹⁹⁰ Robert Orsi, "Have You Ever Prayed to St Jude?" Reflections on Fieldwork in Catholic Chicago," in *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 146-176.

¹⁹¹ Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 26-42.

speaking about individuals' devotional uses of Kali in the Western context, I more often use the term "practitioner" — which is the conventional term used within feminist spirituality or neopaganism, as well as in related scholarly literature. It emphasizes, once again, the experiential, embodied, and practiced ethos of the tradition, and refers to the idea that the God/Goddess (more usually, *various* gods and goddesses) are invoked and addressed, and actively "worked" with. The notion of a "magical working" is intensely Western, and has its own complex genealogy, from the court magicians of Elizabethan times, to the mystic orders of late 18th, 19th and early 20th century, to the abundant Wiccan literature on spells and magic lining the bookshelves at Chapters in the "Witchcraft" section. While the term "devotee" seems more natural and appropriate in the Indian or Indian-inspired context, speaking to the *bhakti* tradition and the concept of personal deity (*iṣṭa-devatā*), "practitioner" is really more like *tantrika*, in as much as it implies self-practice. Perhaps this is another reason why the Tantric aspects of Kali have acquired such deep roots within feminist spirituality, at least in her early forays onto foreign soil. At any rate, applying the notions of 'abundant empiricism' and 'special experiences' (rather than rigidly religious ones), allows me to look at a broad spectrum of Kali appropriations in the West and begin to untangle their shared and unique characteristics.

Finally, the elusiveness of goddess practitioners (be they solitary or not), coupled with the emphasis on experience and embodiment within the tradition itself, raises the question how materials found online are useful for the study of Kali in the imaginations and religious lives of Western spiritual feminists. Paradoxically, it is this virtual medium that permits and even encourages the sharing of experiences, as well as their associated imagery and mythic narratives, thus creating the very "relays and feedback loops between layers of being" that Connolly identifies as the framework of contemporary culture. While in chapter four I turn to look at a specific case study of a Kali-worshipping syncretic community in San Francisco and their particular mode of approaching Kali (which is located somewhere between Shakta Tantra and Witchcraft, hence the term Sha'can, cognate with Wiccan, coined by Sharanya's founder), in this chapter I use various sources, including the Internet, to establish a sense of milieu, in which to situate this and other communities. As with most active actors in this multi-armed and multi-voiced goddess tradition, the Internet presence of such prominent temples as the Kali Mandir and

Sharanya contributes to the evolving role of Kali in feminist spirituality. In a world where ideas and images are exchanged at incredible speed, virtual webs may be the perfect medium for the perception and creation of mythic narratives. Rather than take away from the ‘directness’ or ‘authenticity’ of such experiences, perhaps they can be viewed as merely another dimension of being, which perpetually informs and is informed by lived religious realities.

3. The Many Faces of Kali: A Few Brief Definitions

As already mentioned above, Kali, as ever, can be many things to different people. Though my inquiry focuses on the circumstances of Kali’s migration to North America, throughout the paper I refer to her as the “Western Kali”, since, much like in the case of the women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s or in discussing contemporary neopaganism, it is difficult to draw clear geographical or linguistic boundaries. I am using terms such as “the West” here for the sake of coherence, and I would like to emphasize that I am aware that this term glosses over regional, local, and individual differences. At the same time, I believe there is an overarching matrix or style that can be identified as a “Western” appropriation of Kali, as much as despite regional and local particularities, there are undeniably “Indian” modes of approaching the goddess.

Regarding online materials, I limited my queries to English-language sites, not only out of convenience, but also assuming that practitioners would similarly consume all information that was linguistically available to them. It is worth noting, however, that some online communities are more vocal than others, and some real-life communities are certainly more numerous and have a greater public presence than others. California, for instance, is uniquely poised as home to a variety of *publicly visible* neopagan and New Age communities, annual festivals, and well-attended national conferences, such as Pantheacon.¹⁹² It is also a place of interest for Kali studies

¹⁹² Almost twenty years running, Pantheacon is an annual conference occurring in the Bay Area for the diverse neopagan community. Its FAQ page succinctly describes its purpose and intended community: “We are a conference for Pagans, Heathens, Indigenous Non-European and many of diverse beliefs that occurs annually over President’s Day weekend. Well over 2000 people attend more than 200 presentations that range from rituals to workshops and from classes to concerts.” Accessed July 18 2012, <https://pantheacon.com/wordpress/frequently-asked-questions/>.

in particular, as both the San Francisco temple and community I had worked with, and the southern California Kali Mandir are located there, presenting an interesting contrast to one another. At the same time, in the Age of Information it is increasingly difficult to draw precise boundaries, as knowledge, images, myth, rituals, and symbols are rapidly and constantly shared over the Web, forming new conventions for concepts such as time, space, and culture. As a result, I tend to also use the term “Western Kali” as the tradition and practice of a deity emerging, in part, from such an interweaving of locales and relationships.

The nexus between goddess spirituality and Kali in North America also raises questions regarding potential devotees: *whose* Kali do I mean, when I talk about the *Western* Kali? As mentioned above, several broad groups with Kali-interests might be identified. Here I am not addressing the Kali who has been brought to North America by Hindu immigrants, or is approached by their second- and third-generation descendants in local Hindu temples, usually identical in form and practice to the more orthodox, “vegetarian-ized,” pan-Indian Kali.¹⁹³ Instead I am concerned with the Kali’s whose presence can be found in temples established in North America by non-Indians yet which closely follow Indian *style* of worship and practice, and in the Kali of syncretic and bold feminist spirituality. A good example of the former is the Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach, California, its *bhakti* style of worship modelled closely upon the Ramakrishna tradition of Kali based in Dakshineswar. Kali Mandir was established by Elizabeth U. Harding in 1995, a software journalist who was so inspired by the Dark Goddess Kali while on assignment in India, that she proceeded to research and write a book, which sparked interest in and worship of Kali. Upon coming back to California Harding first established a small virtual temple, and as the community grew, an image of Kali was installed in Laguna Beach by one of the main *pujaris* especially invited from Dakshineswar, thus founding the physical Mandir.¹⁹⁴ The latter is better

¹⁹³ This statement is based on the few Hindu temples I have attended in Canada and the US, and on the assumption that non-vegetarian aspects of puja, such as goat sacrifice, would be near impossible to carry out in the North American setting anyway, even if only out of consideration for the wider public’s reaction. Another issue is that such temples are usually dedicated to more than one deity and serve a diverse community of expatriates, and so a vegetarian puja is one way to harmonize worship.

¹⁹⁴ Harding’s book, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar*, had likewise become a resource for those interested in goddess traditions, which further complicates the syncretic nature of Kali in North America. It is also worth mentioning that the worship at the Mandir (as in Dakshineswar) is highly influenced by the mystical interpretations of Kali by Sri Ramakrishna, and differ, sometimes significantly, from Kali worship in Bengal or Kerala, leaving out much of the Tantric connections as well.

represented by some of the specific examples of Kali practice and devotion discussed below, as well as by Sharanya temple. This Kali, while still of Hindu origin, had been entirely subsumed in goddess religion (here I mean feminist spirituality and Witchcraft) as a manifestation of *the* Goddess, and especially as an avatar of her Dark aspect (or, in Jungian analysis, as another form of the Shadow archetype.)¹⁹⁵ Though the *scale* of this tradition and its public visibility are very different from the commonplace honouring of Kali and other goddesses in India, I believe the study of the Western Kali has far-reaching implications for the fabric of North American religious life as a whole. By drawing the parallels, as well as pointing out the differences between the two, it is possible to point to a greater shift in cultural-religious narratives that is taking place. The engagements of Western spiritual feminists with Kali are at a complex nexus of religious and cultural thought, including such themes as the re-evaluation of experience and embodiment as an organizing principle for knowledge, concerns regarding colonial and essentializing narratives, eco-consciousness, gender politics, and so on. By touching upon some of these briefly in this study, I hope to outline the far-reaching web of influences the phenomenon of the Western Kali points to, as well as suggest trajectories for further inquiry.

¹⁹⁵ For a good discussion of Kali as expression of the Shadow, as well as the healing potential of using her symbolism to work through trauma and intriguing connections to Alchemical symbolism, see Ashok Bedi's "Kali — The Dark Goddess" in *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*. I also make use of his work briefly in chapter four.

II. God is a Female: The Women's Movement, Goddess Spirituality, and the New Kali Ma

1. Intimations of a Tradition: Kali and the Goddess in Existing Scholarship

For many spiritual feminists writing in the heydays of the second movement, the Indic pantheon and especially its fierce and independent goddesses such as Durga and Kali, represented a much-needed powerful jolt of inspiration for Western women's spiritualities, capable of transforming an oppressive patriarchal theology into a nourishing and liberating *thealogy*. Hindu Shaktism seemed to offer many of the elements that feminist thinkers and theologians deemed necessary for the transformation of women's spiritual (and therefore social) lives: the honouring of the divine as female, the honouring of human women (at least in Shakta circles), and a rich ritual tradition of embodied praxes that allowed the devotee to glean first-hand experience of the divine. Kali, as other Hindu deities, first became known in goddess circles through various scholarly and semi-scholarly accounts, including early or contemporary ethnographies, folk-studies, memoirs, and translations of religious texts, such as Sir John Woodroffe's (aka Arthur Avalon's) translations of Tantric manuscripts.¹⁹⁶ Subsequently, Kali made significant appearances in influential theological articles, such as Rita Gross's "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess." Gross suggests that Hindu goddesses are good to think with: "if approached critically and carefully, and if intelligent selection and borrowing are utilized, the Hindu goddesses can be the greatest stimulant to our imagination and to our speculation about the meaning of the goddess."¹⁹⁷ Kali, in particular, is treated by Gross as a good example of a "coincidence of opposites" — a trait of Hindu deities that Gross finds crucially

¹⁹⁶ While Kali had also been known in the West also through colonial sources mostly as the ominous "Thuggee goddess", giving rise to scandalized accounts in Victorian gothic novels or early adventure series, these I rather leave out for now, since orientalized accounts of a goddess loosely reminiscent of Kali are generally not deemed very inspiring material by spiritual feminists – who are my focus in this chapter.

¹⁹⁷ Rita M. Gross, "Hindu Female Deities as a Resource for the Contemporary Rediscovery of the Goddess," in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, ed. Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 218

important to theistic imagery and regrettably absent or stunted in Western monotheism. Gross writes:

At its most basic level the coincidence of opposites is a coincidence of creation and destruction, of good and bad looked at from the point of view of the ego's needs and self-interest. This dimension of the Hindu symbol and the symbolism of the destructive goddesses and gods is quite susceptible to misinterpretation, to the painfully wrong conclusion that the goddess is demonic because she promotes death as well as birth. However, many commentators have begun to decipher this kind of symbolism, noting its realism and wisdom. Both poles are an inevitable part of experience; it is shortsighted to look only at increase, continuity, and well-being. Rather, this symbolism looks beyond the gratification of immediate needs to the necessity of death for life in a closed ecosystem.¹⁹⁸

Furthermore, Gross stresses that in Hinduism, the deities most associated with death and destruction — Kali and Shiva — are also closely connected to the ultimate goals of liberation and release, and though the processes leading there may be painful, they are in essence revelatory. This aspect of Kali is similarly manifest in Jungian psychology, where her symbolism is sometimes used to work through trauma, especially traumatic encounters with violence and madness, a theme in some ways connected to that of “angry dark goddess,” discussed below.

As the movement grew and attracted more followers and thinkers, Kali appeared more and more often in neopagan goddess compendiums (significantly, her name is included in the Goddess Chant, sometimes called the Witches Chant, which attained the status of anthem within goddess spirituality circles¹⁹⁹), as well in devotional poetry, spells, rituals, and art. Her myths and rites came to be discussed in theological and neopagan magazines, books, articles, and novels, as well as in chatrooms and on message boards and websites. These various voices and publications have thus perpetuated, redefined, added to and subtracted from the image and narrative of Kali — giving rise to a goddess closely related to, but not identical with, her Indian

¹⁹⁸ Gross, “Hindu Female Deities”, 222.

¹⁹⁹ Written and recorded versions of it now proliferate on the Web, and I am using Starhawk as a source for the credits. In *Dreaming the Dark*, she includes it in Appendix C (“Chants and Songs”) and cites words to Deena Metzger and music to Caitlin Mullin, as well as mentioning it was “sung by Charlie Murphy in the song ‘The Burning Times’ recorded in 1981 on the album *Catch the Fire*” Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). The melody varies a little depending on the performers, but it generally follows a simple rising and falling rhythm, meant to be chanted repeatedly. The words are simply a litany of the names of the Goddess: “Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna”, each goddess representative of a different aspect of the Divine Feminine. Different versions can be easily found on You Tube, for example: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDSu0-qDFQ8> (accessed July 20, 2012).

sister. Notably, as demonstrated in chapters one and two, the Indic Kali is similarly not homogenous; the very multiplicity of forms is a characteristic of the G/goddess, and this characteristic is common to both the Indian and the Western neopagan goddess traditions.

The natural fluidity of both traditions blurs the lines between the two, complicating debates regarding the authenticity or the ethics of religious appropriation. None the less, the phenomenon of the “Western Kali” has become pervasive and unique enough to have recently attracted the attention of Indologists and scholars of Hindu goddess traditions (studies which in turn further contribute to shaping her mythos). Rachel Fell McDermott was one of the first scholars of South-Asian traditions to turn her attention to the emergence of Kali in the West, first with sincere puzzlement over the strange forms she has taken in the imaginations of some women, then with a growing attention to the details, contexts, and religious goals that characterize the Western Kali. In an early article, McDermott is frankly bewildered by Barbara Walker’s “universal” Kali, when she quotes: “not only is Kali’s triple nature as Virgin, Mother, and Crone said to have influenced the triune concepts of the Celts, the Norsemen, the Egyptians, and the Arabs, but ‘even Christians modelled their three-fold god on her archetypal trinity’... Eve’s name [as well] is dependent on Kali, and Jesus’ conception of a law of moral consequence derives from Kali’s law of karma”; McDermott calls these statements “odd in the extreme.”²⁰⁰ In a later article, McDermott approaches the subject with a greater tolerance, it seems, for Kali’s metamorphoses. She lists references of Kali in pop-culture cameos (such as in an episode of the TV show *Xena: Warrior Princess* where Xena transforms into Kali inciting controversy with the

²⁰⁰ McDermott, “The Western Kali”, in *Devī* ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 298. (I wonder whether a Hindu Shakta, for whom Kali embodies the supreme form of God, might agree with Walker’s universalist interpretation of Kali as the origin of all things and at the root of all truths...)

Hindu community),²⁰¹ Kali as subject of art and poetry, and Kali on the Internet. Essentially, McDermott is questioning whether borrowing religiously across geographical, historic, social and linguistic contexts can be accomplished *meaningfully* — and this is what I hope to be able to answer as well.

McDermott identifies instances of Kali symbolism employed in multiple and greatly varying ways: as an icon of female empowerment; as a “guarantor of sexual pleasure”²⁰² (due to Kali’s association with Tantra, and a lay Western understanding of Tantra as a mainly ‘shocking’ or ‘liberated’ sexual practice); as a recipient of ritual worship; and as muse for artists, dancers, and performers. While McDermott lists many instances of Kali’s appearance in Western culture, including various goddess blogs and Dark Goddess references,²⁰³ as well as some Kali-oriented “New Age” rituals, she does not focus specifically on the connection between Kali and goddess religion. For example, she quotes the “Kali issue” of *Tantra: The Magazine* (a publication I have searched for earnestly, but was only able to find the cover art), which recommends that Kali be worshipped after midnight on a Tuesday, accompanied by a ritual bath, chanting of what McDermott identified as a corruption of Kali’s Sanskritic “root mantra”, and meditation.²⁰⁴ However, lacking the context of the possible practitioners and their goals in approaching Kali, this mention seems more like a curiosity, and less like a meaningful ritual. Likewise, while the debate between East and West is certainly interesting, and especially in the ways it informs

²⁰¹ As a personal aside, I actually found the episode in question (“The Way”, season 4:16) to be refreshingly sensitive to cultural and religious realities, its producers and writers clearly making an attempt to both entertain and educate their audiences – at least comparatively speaking. That said, it was a somewhat unconventional (in Hindu terms) portrayal of a human woman, even though she is a hero, becoming an avatar of the goddess in order to battle a demon king who had kidnapped two other characters, Xena’s friend Gabriel and the Avatar, a healer-saint who preaches peace, nonviolence, and equanimity. Though nominally set in India in the remote past, it is fair to remember that Xena is a work of fantasy, and so perhaps can be allowed a certain degree of artistic licence, especially when seeking to empower women and promote knowledge of other cultures and beliefs (as is confirmed by a statement made at the end of the episode by the main actors and the then-president of the Indo-American Political Foundation, Sunni Laghi). Curiously, in many ways the episode also recalls the appearance of Kali as the “wrath of the goddess” in the *Devi Mahatmya*, doing battle against demons who threaten the just world order.

²⁰² McDermott, “The Western Kali”, 298

²⁰³ Unfortunately, when I attempted to follow the web links in her notes, accessed anywhere between 1998 and 2002, I have discovered that many are no longer functional, as the Internet is an impermanent resource in constant flux.

²⁰⁴ To be fair, some Tantric texts on Kali indeed recommend such detailed invocations, including “midnight on Tuesday” – an excerpt taken, most likely, from the *Karpūrādi-stotra*, widely available in English translation as Arthur Avalon’s *Hymn to Kali*, already discussed in the first chapter.

Westerner's use of Eastern religious symbols, I am not sure that any criticism really "debunks the feminists' Kali of anger and power,"²⁰⁵ in the sense that Kali's authenticity, either as Kali of Kolkata or Dakshineswar, or as the Kali of San Francisco, is fully in the hands of those who invoke her, and whose lives she influences in some way. (I address some of these criticisms and the potential opportunities for growth, creativity, and understanding they present when mediated in a constructive manner in section four).

Unlike some early studies of the Western Kali, here I would like to approach her not as a 'curiosity' or as merely an instance of cultural borrowing in the post-modern universe of the information age, but rather as a *goddess* — a sacred reality taking shape in the lives and imaginations of some North American practitioners, most of them female, though not exclusively so.²⁰⁶ Below I discuss the emergence and general characteristics of feminist spirituality, as well as the characteristics and importance of Dark Goddess — a face of the Divine Feminine often identified with Kali in this context. Even this cursory treatment reveals lines of affinity, both intentional and serendipitous, between the Eastern and the Western Kali. These affinities are further strengthened by Indian feminist reclamations of Kali-centred Shaktism, such as can be seen in the work of Lina Gupta and Neela Bhattacharya Saxena. These resonances, it seems, have become more convincing for devotees and practitioners than any "rationalistic" explications of theology, giving rise to a spirituality uniquely suited to the pace and de-centralized character of Western culture.

2. Roots and Wings, Claws and Flippers: from Raising Consciousness to Living Theology

Cynthia Eller, writing of the roots of feminist spirituality, identifies three social trends of the late 1960s and early 1970s that have contributed to the emergence of a feminist spiritual

²⁰⁵ McDermott, "Kali's New Frontiers", 284.

²⁰⁶ Though much of early feminist spirituality is aimed at women, and at solving issues specific to women's experiences, identities, and socio-normative roles, it is important to note that there is an increasing number of men involved in goddess/ neopagan circles who are actively shaping modern pagan discourse. Furthermore, while images and narratives of the divine as female are certainly deemed healing and beneficial for women, many feminists argue that they are similarly good for men, who have been hurt just as much, albeit differently, by patriarchal cultural norms.

movement: “radical (secular) feminism; Jewish and Christian feminism; and neopaganism.”²⁰⁷ Neopaganism, she asserts, was “nearly tailor-made for spiritual feminists’ needs,” a fertile ground to receive the concerns and aspirations that came out of the first two; secular feminism experimenting with ways to think about women’s experience, women’s needs, and women’s places in patriarchal societies, while Jewish and Christian feminism contributed theological critique that, taken to its further limits, necessitated the construction of an entirely different spirituality altogether. Eller identifies consciousness-raising (CR) groups as the “seedbed from which feminist spirituality sprung,” but more than that, CR were the grassroots vehicle through which feminist ideas were disseminated and reified, establishing networks of contacts, and lending a sense of community and solidarity to the movement as a whole. Several organized lobby groups (such as National Organization for Women and New York Radical Feminists) have taken an active role in shaping the format and content of CR meetings, preparing discussion topics and helping organize groups. According to Eller, at the height of its momentum, an estimated 100,000 women in the US took part in CR, however, she also notes that despite the similarities between CR format and that of later spirituality groups (or perhaps even covens), these play a larger role in feminist spirituality’s “origin myth” than they had in practice. She speculates that the choice to align themselves, genealogically, with CR rather than with countercultural political demonstrations, reveals something about the aims and spirit of feminist spirituality:

CR was a place where women looked into themselves... The move was inward, particularistic, but the discoveries were broad, even universal. In choosing CR to encapsulate a myth of their origins, spiritual feminists are seeing in CR a pattern that is essentially that of a religious quest: an inner journey, shared with other seekers, that reveals insights of cosmic importance reaching far beyond the bounds of any one individual experience.²⁰⁸

This is an elegant description of the ethos of feminist spirituality, with its focus on a deeper, holistic understanding of the self, the world, and the web of relationships between them.

The leap from interest in women’s issues and dissatisfaction with religious symbols offered by Judeo-Christian monotheistic and androcentric traditions, to the emergence of the

²⁰⁷ Cynthia Eller, “The Roots of Feminist Spirituality” in *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, identity, and Empowerment* ed. Wendy Griffin (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000), 25.

²⁰⁸ Eller, “The Roots of Feminist Spirituality”, 28

Goddess is not a great one. This is perhaps why neopaganism was so “tailor made” for feminist spirituality’s needs, as Eller notes, for the Goddess had already emerged in it. For space considerations, I cannot go into much detail regarding the socio-historical factors and circumstances of the pagan revival movement. However, it is not surprising that the notion of a feminine divine which was being formulated within revivalist pagan movements appeared to early spiritual feminists revelatory. That early Goddess of Gardnerian Wicca, a figure still somewhat vague yet with salient general characteristics, allowed for the sacralization of women’s bodies and located much of the tradition’s meaning-making in the immanent universe; she was perfectly suited for the nascent goddess movement.

Three major concepts punctuate both feminist thought and feminist spirituality in particular: **embodiment**, **herstory**, and **reclaiming**. These have deep resonance and meaning within the movement, and perhaps better imagined as located in the centre of a large mind map, connected to other ideas such as “history”, “will”, “power”, “women’s bodies”, “men”, “goddess”, “rights”, “equality”, “motherhood”, “sex”, “anger”, “menstruation”, “magic”, “weaving”, “dreams”, “desire”, “love”, “freedom”, “sisterhood”, “becoming”, “nature”, “education”, “activism”, “responsibility”...

Reconsidering the relationships between concepts within the movement amounts to a re-imagining and a re-structuring not only of societal norms but of an entire mythological plane of thinking. The sacred stories of any group can be said to postulate both “roots and wings,” providing a meaningful past and a trajectory for the future. When thinking about the project of second-wave feminism, I realize that many of the women involved in the movement felt alienated from the “roots and wings” available to them, finding their experiences marginalized, and more akin to having “claws and flippers.”²⁰⁹ Many of the prominent authors of the second wave note that in patriarchal culture they have been denied both *roots*, in the form of a meaningful place in history and religiosity, and the subsequent equal opportunities in society (even linguistically, until very recently, “man” meant humankind, and “he” meant “him”, “her”,

²⁰⁹ I use this expression here after an anecdote told to me by a friend, whose relative, observing both her and her sister, had quipped that unlike other kids, instead of “roots and wings” they’ve developed “claws and flippers.”

or “them” equally); and *wings*, in the form of freedoms that come with egalitarian treatment and human rights, as well as from equal access to the sacred. As a result, proverbial “claws and flippers” have become a real and concrete part of the experience of femaleness in Western culture, and the feminist project (both secular and spiritual) included the recognition and validation of the needs, realities, and experiences of *women*, individually as well as a group, and of the various ways of being female, and being *human* — whether it involves roots, wings, claws, or flippers.²¹⁰

The central concepts of embodiment, herstory, and reclaiming (all of which I elaborate upon below) help illuminate the project as one of female **empowerment**, a goal central to feminist spirituality, whether or not it is clearly articulated. Acknowledging and listening to one’s *body*, telling *one’s story* (or *herstory*, the history/ies of the Goddess, rising up through the memories, dreams, and fantasies of generations of women), and *reclaiming* lost or silenced realities, histories, spaces, and concepts — are all central and guiding principles of feminist goddess religiosity. Moreover, over the years, some archetypal components of herstory have become so pervasive, that elements of it have transmuted into cultural knowledge, half-

²¹⁰ It is important to note that I do not mean to suggest that the feminist project is aimed solely at women, or had involved only women (although the majority of prominent authors are indeed female). Though the movement has been dubbed “women’s lib”, most feminist authors would agree that men can be just as “trapped” by patriarchal power structures, and, consequently, they equally benefit from existing in an egalitarian, just society, perhaps precisely because individuals are defined by the relationships they construct and maintain (a possible exception could be separatist feminists, or Dianic witches, who would claim any reconciliation between the sexes is impossible). Similarly, the focus on female experiences and female empowerment is central to the project not as a discarding of male experiences, but as a corrective to the over-privileged status of male experiences standing in for *human* experiences, and as a filling-in of lacunae in male-dominated socio-historical and religious narratives. Secondly, I quite consciously avoid here the discussion on whether or not second-wave constructions of femaleness are essentialist, both for space considerations, and also because it seems any simplistic reading of a person or a group is essentialist in some way, and in my opinion the feminist project, rooted as it is in a specific time and place, on the most part problematized and complicated simplistic readings of women as well as of men to the extent possible at the time. It is not surprising that as feminist ideas have trickled down into culture, new goals and new approaches more relevant to the new situation arise and need to be articulated - but the discussion of post-feminism or third-wave feminist thought is outside the scope of this chapter.

articulated in contemporary art, literature, cinema and even advertising, and have become almost immediately recognizable.²¹¹

In her 1979 article “Why Women Need the Goddess” Carol Christ discusses the phenomenological, psychological and political aspects that touch precisely on the key concepts described above, and the way they give rise to goddess consciousness in women’s lives. Using Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of religion as a “system of symbols... moods and motivations...” as a starting point, Christ argues that even women who have accepted and internalized the ideological claims of feminism, without a suitable alternative, in times of crisis revert to the symbol systems of “male God religion,” and as a result *implicitly* mistrust sources of female power, in themselves as well as in other women, deferring instead to male power or status.²¹² It is not difficult to see how such an underlying current of doubt, represented by dissonances on intellectual, emotional, and symbolic levels, would undermine the entire project of women’s liberation. The Goddess, Christ maintains, an ancient symbol functioning as a *source*, and filtered through modern women’s experiences, represents “the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power.”²¹³

Christ identifies four areas where the political and psychological effects of changes brought about by the Goddess are most visible: female power, the body, will, and women’s bonds and heritage. Psychologically, the symbol of the Goddess helps counter patriarchal notions that female power is inferior and dangerous, thus creating new “moods”, to use Geertz’s phrase, while politically, it helps affirm new “motivations” by promoting women’s trust in themselves and other women. The symbol of the Goddess likewise affirms female *bodies* by challenging cultural taboos (such as those surrounding childbirth, menstruation, or aging), and striving to overcome Western dualisms (spirit/body, mind/flesh, sacred/profane = male/female). The Goddess helps in

²¹¹ Starhawk for example, very succinctly articulates this “narrative”, or series of images and associations, in her article on Witchcraft and women’s culture in *Womanspirit Rising* (being as she is one of the main contributors to the imagining, shaping, and recording herstory). I do not go into an explication of this narrative here simply for space considerations, and also because variations on this theme are nearly inexhaustible. However, echoes of this narrative are now so common in Western culture as to be puzzlingly obvious: from Neolithic mother goddess cults (historic and not so much), to popular novels and their films version, such as Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *Mysts of Avalon*, herstory is in fact a reclaiming and a re-mythologizing of history.

²¹² Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” in *Womanspirit Rising* ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 274.

²¹³ Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess,” 277

naming and *reclaiming* the female body and its cycles, sacralizing its various stages as various aspects of the Goddess (Maiden, Mother, Crone), and drawing life- and body-affirming parallels between women's personal, *embodied* experience, and the greater scheme of Nature or the cosmos as a whole (the turn of the seasons; birth, death, and rebirth; forces of creation and destruction, etc). In terms of will, the Goddess becomes "the personification of the energy that flows between beings in the natural and human world," reinforced by the imagery of circles, chanting, and dancing.²¹⁴ Magic is understood here as energies directed by willpower, and, because of this immanent and pervasive quality of the 'energy', there is also a communal aspect to it. Christ intriguingly writes of will being only achieved "when it is exercised in harmony with the energies and wills of other beings."²¹⁵

The discussion of will seems especially important, since here the Goddess acts to counter women's learned tendency to devalue their own wills, and even to view their wills as sinful expressions of selfishness, vanity, or pride. Valerie Saiving first discussed this from a theological point of view, claiming that certain Christian concepts of sin really only take male experience into consideration. Saiving argues, for example, that men are encouraged, socially, to lead a life of competition, achievement, and self-realization, and an excess of these can indeed be considered "sinful" — translated, in Christian terms, to "pride", "gluttony", etc. Women, who are socially conditioned to sacrifice their personhoods and ambitions for the sustenance of others, and are much more than men are encouraged to exorcise the sins of pride and vanity in Christian rhetoric, are in fact prone to the "sin" of too much inertia, of self-negation and self-dissolution in others; to never realizing their full potential — precisely because, in effect, women are discouraged twice, first by society and again by theologians.²¹⁶

Finally, according to Christ the symbol of the Goddess affirms and reinforces female bonds and women's heritage, giving a voice and prominence to women in Her sacred stories and myths. Christ recalls Virginia Woolf's statement in *A Room of One's Own* that the very words "Chloe liked Olivia" are (*still* are) rare in literature, because women's relationships go unnoticed

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 282

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 284

²¹⁶ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View", in *Womanspirit Rising* ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992), 37-39. Originally this essay appeared in 1960, in *The Journal of Religion* (University of Chicago Press).

and unrecorded, apparently of little interest to most authors. The lack of positive images of women's relationships with other women, in turn, is internalized and perpetuated by women as further distrust of female power and companionship, thus reinforcing oppressive patriarchal structures.²¹⁷ Therefore, the lack of female-centred narratives and images is in part meant to be supplanted by the symbolism of the Goddess. The primacy of symbols is in fact key to Christ's argument, perhaps proportionally to their primacy in spiritual life and religious thought: "symbols have a richer significance than any explication of their meaning can express," which is by no means a call to replace one dogma with another, but rather a call for women to develop their own *theologies* through "remembering and inventing," as per Monique Wittig's often-quoted phrase.²¹⁸ While "remembering and inventing" is criticized by some as lacking in 'authenticity' or socio-historical grounding, it is good to remember that spiritual feminists set out to address precisely those gaps in socio-historical narratives (in so far as history is written by the victors, or by men), and to remedy the silencing of women's voices and experiences. As for the question of authenticity, if the term "inventing" seems too trifling for a matter of *religious truth*, would it be different to use terms such as "intuition", "vision" or "revelation"? So many feminists and theologians have written that the Goddess has 'risen' through the dreams, fantasies, and experiences of women that it is impossible to mention them all. Gross, in the article cited above, refers to this phenomenon as the "second coming of the Goddess."²¹⁹ Similarly, Christ, in discussing the importance of Goddess as a symbol, perhaps encapsulates this sentiment best of all:

²¹⁷ On a related note, I was introduced by a friend to a convenient tool that measures this lack of portrayal of female relationships in media, especially film, called the Bechdel Test. Sometimes it is referred to as Bechdel/Wallace test, and it first appeared in the comic strip by Alison Bechdel *Dykes to Watch Out For*. This simple test measures a film's compliance with these three co-dependant rules: 1) the film has to have at least two women in it, 2) who talk to each other, 3) about something besides a man. A surprisingly small number of films pass this test.

²¹⁸ Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess", 279. Wittig's one-liner from the feminist novel *Les Guérillères* (1969, translated into English in 1971) has become an aphorism in feminist spirituality and second wave literature more generally. The work is fairly modernist in structure, and the quotation is from a scene where a character urges a crowd of women to remember a primordial time of freedom and power. Here is a longer version of the quote: "There was a time when you were not a slave, remember that. You walked alone, full of laughter, you bathed bare-bellied. You say you have lost all recollection of it, remember. The wild roses flower in the woods. [...] You say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember, make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent." Wittig, Monique (trans. David Le Vay), *Les Guérillères*, 89 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

²¹⁹ Gross, "Hindu Female Deities", 117, 225, 227

I believe we are living in a revolutionary time when new religious symbols are being formed by a process of syncretism and creativity that includes discovering new meanings in biblical and nonbiblical symbolisms, tapping the unconscious through personal and communal dream and fantasy work, trusting intuition and poetic inspiration, *and even bringing the process of symbol creation to consciousness*. It is my belief that the work that feminists are doing to transform the image of God has profound but subtle and not easily observable consequences for social life (emphasis added).²²⁰

The notion of “bringing the process of symbol creation to consciousness” further emphasizes the participatory and active role women must take in the emerging theology, resonating powerfully with Wittig’s words. The ultimate goal of the process is not factual accuracy (it might be noted that most sacred stories would not stand much scientific scrutiny, in the conservative sense of the term), but rather the emergence of new *mythic narratives*. Much like some Christians or Hindus may regard a literalist interpretation of central Biblical or Vedic narratives as irrelevant due to the moral, spiritual, and symbolic *truths* articulated therein, so herstories, “remembered and invented”, are valued for the system of symbols they offer women, articulating mythic pasts and futures which are hopeful, constructive, and inspiring.²²¹

It is not surprising, then, that **experience** is the normative organizing principle in feminist spirituality and its efforts to (re)construct a new tradition. In this context experience is *embodied*; it needs to be named, addressed, and articulated. Although personal, it has power to reveal broader truths. Even phenomenological experiences of the divine are mediated through the senses, including such intentional approaches as visualization, drumming, chanting, trance-work, meditation, dance, art, sacred images, and so on. Likewise, spiritual feminists often draw a distinction between *belief*, which can be doubted and so it is uncertain, and *experience*, which is real and certain in ways that belief is not. For many, the Goddess is not something one needs to

²²⁰ Carol Christ, “Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology”, in *The Book of the Goddess Past and Present: An Introduction to Her Religion*, ed. by Carl Olson (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 231

²²¹ There is, of course, a caveat to this activity, and the questions of moral and ethical responsibility that arise from it – such as regarding ‘borrowed’ or ‘appropriated’ symbols. Yet, in a tradition based on experience and plurality of valid viewpoints, far-fetched narratives would naturally soon prove impractical and superfluous. As for moral responsibility, Starhawk makes an excellent case for the “ethics of immanence” (which she calls “the ethics of magic”) in chapter 3 of *Dreaming the Dark*, that seem to strangely anticipate by nearly a decade William Connolly’s theory on Neuropolitics and agonistic respect, and I discuss some of these below.

believe in, precisely because she can be *experienced*.²²² Starhawk, goddess theologian par excellence, has written abundantly on goddess religion and ritual. In the *Spiral Dance*, an important text for Witchcraft and goddess religion alike, she writes:

People often ask me if I *believe* in the Goddess. I reply, “Do you believe in rocks?”... The phrase “believe in” itself implies that we cannot *know* the Goddess, that she is somehow intangible, incomprehensible... In the Craft, we do not *believe* in the Goddess — we connect with Her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all.²²³

This connection between the immanence of the Goddess, and the female body, is an important and crucial one. Eller writes: “one of the reasons the goddess is so readily experienced by spiritual feminists is that *she is taken to exist within each individual woman*” (emphasis added).²²⁴ (This formulation is almost identical to the Shakta view that the Goddess is incarnate in human women, who are her portions, or *amsa* — one of many serendipitous similarities between the traditions which have made Hindu goddesses, and Kali in particular, so attractive to spiritual feminists.) At the same time, such worship of the divine within oneself (or as one’s *peer*, in a sense) is not reducible to solipsism, and most of the women interviewed by Eller assert that they view the Goddess as a *divine presence*: “she existed before they were born, before they

²²² I am not sure myself how sustainable this argument is, since belief is often validated through experience and vice versa. However, in feminist spiritual thought experience is usually something one can point to, describe to others, and which is, importantly, shared. While the level of “shareability” is contentious for some more mystical experiences, such as visions or dreams, other embodied experiences — menstruation, sexuality, childbirth, being in nature, etc — are both personal and collective, individual and relatable at the same time. Once again, this notion of whether or not any personal experience at all can be adequately understood by another individual, or whether a person’s experience is inalienable, is a question long debated in feminist, as well as widely in philosophical and theological circles. It is important to remember, however, that much of feminist thought and spirituality emerged as a reaction against the dismissal and silencing of women’s experiences and bodies, and their exclusion from the category of “human” in Western society. Experience as an organizing principle, as later feminist work shows, has the advantage of correcting, adding to, evolving, and honing feminist ethics as early issues are addressed and new problem areas are identified. For example, in third-wave feminism the lens of experience served as guiding principle for the inclusion of race and class as factors undermining a “universalist” feminist approach, and critiquing ‘essentialist’ second-wave definitions of femininity. While I agree that certainly not all women’s experiences can be generalized into a single “type”, this, to me, is not so much a critique as a natural development of a theory, since the tools and methods have remained largely the same. If anything, it strengthens the idea of the Goddess as existing in every woman, since it postulates an infinitely variable and diverse deity.

²²³ Starhawk, quoted in Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroads, 1993), 140.

²²⁴ Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 141.

became aware of her existence, and will continue to exist whether or not anyone notices her or not.”²²⁵

At once particular and universal, the Goddess has many faces, yet she is one. This ideology alone would make Hindu goddesses a natural resource for feminist spirituality, the Triple Goddess fitting organically with the idea of the Hindu Great Goddess or Mahadevi. The Goddess, often called “She of 10,000 Names”, is seen both to be comprised of all female names (i.e. all women),²²⁶ and to encompass *all* female deities, even though individual practitioners may choose one or several who hold most meaning to them personally. One salient expression of this principle that immediately comes to mind is the Chant of the Goddess, as already mentioned, a tune repeatedly intoned in a slow, circular melody: “Isis, Astarte, Diana, Hecate, Demeter, Kali, Inanna.” The repetition of the names of the Goddess asserts her reality and presence, inviting Her to dwell among her human daughters; such a chant would often be used in a circle, the most common type of ritual or worship among pagans and goddess practitioners, at celebrations, and so on.²²⁷

The close relationship between the immanence of the Goddess and women’s bodies likewise makes spiritual feminists resistant to static articulations of belief regarding the Goddess, perceiving such pursuits as “masculinist” and too similar to patriarchal theology (which does not stand in the way of theologians such as Melissa Raphael and Paul Reid-Bowen to try and

²²⁵ *Ibid*, 141

²²⁶ A notion widely expressed by Zsuzsanna Budapest, a prominent theologian. Quoted in Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess*, 141

²²⁷ Unfortunately, I cannot discuss here pagan ritual and practice in as great a detail as it deserves. A “circle” refers to the establishing of sacred space in which to address, honour, or pray to chosen deities or spirits, as well as to do any magical workings, meditation, initiations, and so forth. A circle may be cast by a single individual or a group, and it may be cast anywhere – circles, indeed, have been cast at homes and in nature, as well as in prisons and courtrooms, as Starhawk recounts in *Dreaming the Dark*. There are numerous ways to cast a circle, and most pagan and goddess practitioners would have a favourite or a personalised way of doing it. Furthermore, casting a circle can range from being a purely mental act to an elaborate ceremony, not unlike a puja. One popular group circle-casting style is to “ground” (i.e. tune into the earth and the elements, and clear one’s mind, locating a focus within – much like a preparation for meditation), and link hands one at a time, saying “I cast this circle hand to hand”. This can be done clockwise or counter-clockwise (pagans might say deasil or widdershins), depending on the group, the purpose of the working, or the occasion. Usually when the last pair of hands is linked the ritual leader will proclaim: “The circle is cast”. There is, however, a near-infinite number of variations to this theme, and the precise origin of the ritual is unclear, though some contend its predecessors are extremely ancient. At the very least, they are pre-20th century, and possibly associated with the European tradition of ceremonial magic. For example, a sorceress casting a circle with a burning wand is depicted in Waterhouse’s painting *The Magic Circle* (1886).

articulate it anyway).²²⁸ “Women must think through their bodies,” wrote Helen Cixous, an exercise that would lead, theoretically, to dismantling cultural understandings of gender in the process of liberation from its constraints.²²⁹ These constraints can also be seen simply as structure, which can be altered. The structure of religion, according to Wendy Griffin, “teaches us what it means to be human.”²³⁰ Griffin writes that the boundaries crafted by religious and cultural narratives in order to erect these structures of meaning are often, if not primarily, achieved through the human body (and especially, it seems, the female body). Precarious as these socially constructed boundaries may be, they delineate order from chaos, cleanliness from pollution, life from death, and even the sacred from the profane. It is tempting to remember Kali here for just a moment, with her caste- and gender-defying liminality, reversal of pollution laws, and theology of bipolar monism,²³¹ which encompasses and reconciles forces of creation and destruction. At the very least, these characteristics of her image seem to be the most appealing within the context of goddess religion. Yet, this same fierce Kali is the all-merciful Mother of the Universe, grantor of boons and of transcendence, a personification of Shakti who is both suffering and liberation from suffering. All this, once again, is communicated through a *female body*.

Griffin in her work talks about ‘Gaians’, members of diverse groups including ecologists, neopagans, witches, and spiritual feminists, who espouse an immanent, earth-based theology and work to re-structure the boundaries of the body in various ways, often through ritual or magical workings. She juxtaposes Descartes’ “cogito” with the Goddess’ more immanent, embodied, and integrated motto: “As you think, so you become.”²³² Griffin explores the idea of narrative as incantation in settings that combine religious ritual and “sacred theatre,” such as menarche ceremonies and initiations, bellydance that celebrates women’s bodies, and even such unexpected

²²⁸ See Melissa Raphael, “Truth in flux: Goddess feminism as a late modern religion”, in *Religion* 26 (3): 199-213, 1996; Paul Reid-Bowen, “Great Goddess, Elemental Nature or Chora? Philosophical Contentions and Constructs in Contemporary Goddess Feminism”, in *Feminist Theology*, 16 (1): 101-109, 2007.

²²⁹ Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in *New French Feminisms* (1980), as quoted in Wendy Griffin, “Crafting the Boundaries: Goddess Narrative as Incantation”, in *Daughters of the Goddess: Studies of Healing, identity, and Empowerment* ed. Wendy Griffin (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2000), 73.

²³⁰ Griffin, “Crafting the Boundaries”, 73.

²³¹ This phrase was coined by Lynn Gatwood in her study of Hindu goddesses *Devi and the Spouse Goddess*, and used to delineate a goddess who encompassed oppositions but was not dualistic, not split into two “sides”, but was fully integrated.

²³² Griffin, “Crafting the Boundaries”, 78

skills as a stilt-walking workshop entitled Women Walking Tall. Keeping in mind the goal of “deconstructing patriarchal religious metanarrative,” through various techniques goddess feminists “transform gender identity by subverting traditional meaning and representation of what it means to be female, simultaneously creating new definitions of appropriate gendered behaviour for women,” thus redefining the boundaries of the acceptable.²³³

Finally, although I have mainly discussed the Goddess so far as a *symbol*, this does not negate the possibility of *genuine religious experience* and Her ontological reality for those practicing goddess religion. On the contrary, I would argue that to some extent such experiences provide the strongest and the surest grounding for a tradition — especially for a tradition that claims to be not merely intellectual, but deeply experiential and even revelatory. Many of the criticisms directed at feminist spirituality, some of which I discuss at the end of this chapter, often neglect to treat this tradition as a *religious tradition*, addressing instead only its academic, scholarly, or philosophical aspects. As a result, goddess practitioners are often said to be careless with appropriations of “other peoples” symbols and narratives, or ignorant of socio-political contexts that these symbols and images are taken from (and at times this can be true). However, such rhetoric usually neglects a) to acknowledge that Western feminist spirituality or goddess traditions are *not* uniform, and b) that the uses of various symbols and narratives is not only rhetorical or intellectual, but often based in salient personal and communal experiences. Importantly, this is not a text-based tradition, though there are perhaps some central writings that are considered seminal or foundational, as well as images, symbols, phrases and practices that have become paradigmatic.²³⁴ Yet, it is far from having developed any sort of orthodoxy. It is not my goal here to argue whether or not such a spiritual path is ‘easier’ or ‘more difficult,’ but simply to treat it as a religious tradition and not merely a sort of rhetorical exercise.

²³³ *Ibid*, 85

²³⁴ Leaders, activists, theologians, and scholars such as Zsuzsanna Budapest, Carol Christ, Mary Daly, Marija Gimbutas, Rosemary Radford-Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Starhawk can be named as some of the pre-eminent foundational figures of the movement, though important texts may include fiction and novels alongside theological reflections or studies of goddesses and rituals. The already mentioned *Les Guérillères*, as well Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing* (1993) and Marion Zimmer-Bradley’s *Mists of Avalon* (1983) are just some examples of literature of this genre, which has grown exponentially in the last two decades.

3. *The Dark Goddess, the Great Mother, and the Angry Bitch from Hell*

The themes of anger and power are curiously interconnected in feminist discourse, and it has naturally influenced spiritual feminism as well. One answer as to why women need not only a goddess, but a *dark* goddess, is that women participating in the second wave movement who began questioning patriarchal social, political, and spiritual norms have found that they were *angry*. And anger, much like weakness or tenderness for men, is something women were not supposed to feel, or express.²³⁵ Women were also not supposed to be bad mothers, or reluctant mothers; they were not supposed to be independent and self-serving; they were not supposed to be, or to want to be, angry — let alone righteously so. All the things women were not supposed to be, in conjunction with all the things they *were* through fault of biology alone, their “leaking” bodies²³⁶ posing at once as sources of life and pollution and demarcating the boundaries of the worldly, fleshly, unclean and perverse from the clean, pure, and spiritual — created a cultural narrative that now appeared to many very limiting. The problem, for many spiritual feminists, is that there were no ready tools to break through such societal norms without stepping outside of society altogether; and for some the imagery of dark goddesses served in some way as a bridge between anger and frustration and a deeper sense of spirituality and positive action. Spiritual feminists further claim that the few Western symbols and narratives that help articulate and work through anger, pain, violence, and death are mostly inadequate, outdated, or even harmful for women (Saiving’s claim, mentioned above, that even the Christian concept of sin ignores female

²³⁵ This is a somewhat loaded statement, I know, yet I am treating it here as it appears as part of the development of second wave feminist thought. Whether or not such normative behavioural expectations have changed since the 1960s and 1970s, is up for debate. Anger as a socially acceptable (or not) sentiment is a particularly interesting case study even today. Laying aside social stereotypes regarding “angry women” and in particular “angry feminists” (or even “angry lesbians”), a derogatory construction that dismisses feminist claims on utterly irrelevant made-up grounds, such as sexual frustration, there is still the fact that very few images of “legitimate” female anger exist in Western society. Often, as I hear from colleagues and occasionally experience myself, a woman’s anger, or some strong reaction, criticism, a move to defend one’s views or position, is deemed “emotional” and as such invalid, irrational — a plain logical fallacy. It is not surprising then, that the image of Kali, an angry woman who is divine, is so powerful for spiritual feminists.

²³⁶ Although many have commented on the ‘leakiness’ of women’s bodies, I use the term here after Diane Purkiss, who examines women’s bodies as liminal spaces, their orifices bringing both life and death, and complexly woven into Western notions of witchcraft and motherhood. For further details see Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: early modern and twentieth century representations* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

experiences and thus perpetuates, rather than corrects, existing character flaws is a case in point), and therefore women, as well as men, need the *dark* goddess.

The theme of anger thus draws at once on two interrelated sets of circumstance: one, the personal and collective anger, frustration, oppression, and protest of women against the patriarchal structures, and secondly, the need for theistic imagery that includes and embodies those darker sides of human experience – anger, but also loss, trauma, death, etc. Gross, for example, warns against the reclamation of a goddess that is only nurturing, fertile, and mothering as potentially doing women a disservice, in essentializing them and locking them anew into rigid social roles. She points out that in Kali, as in Durga and other Hindu goddesses, we see a motherhood of God that is “basically metaphorical” yet omnipresent, and that female religious leaders often carry the title Mother as a signifier of their status, and regardless of whether or not they have biological children. Gross writes:

Motherhood in this case means something more subtle than the role of cosmic housewife and diaper-changer. It seems that any act carried out by a female that produces positive results of some sort merits the title mother. This should really not be so hard to grasp, since we use this language that way all the time in reference to God the Father, whom no one expects to be a cosmic universal inseminator.²³⁷

To take this thought further, the symbolism of the dark goddess presents an opportunity for spiritual feminists to explore theistic imagery that reflects those aspects of the “coincidence of opposites” which have long been silenced for women. All the dark goddesses (at least in the sense they are referred to in goddess spirituality) are indeed mothers in some respect, but much like God the Father, they are also more than that. Kali is perhaps a particularly interesting avatar for this ambiguous dark-woman-motherhood, especially in light of the *bhakti* tradition of Ramakrishna, which posits the relationship between Kali and devotee as a mother-child relationship, then turns Kali’s terrifying aspects on their head by appealing to her as a mother. Generally, however, this is not the mode she is approached in within goddess spirituality, though the epithet Ma is often there. Instead, it is those episodes from the *Devi Mahatmya* and other texts that portray the goddess as the manifestation of divine wrath, rage, and anger that are especially salient in this context.

²³⁷ Gross, “Hindu Female Deities”, 225

Lina Gupta, writing for “post-patriarchal Hindu women” and urging a feminist reading of Kali, echoes this sentiment: “The myth of Kali offers a story of a woman in plight. She is the personified wrath of all women in all cultures.”²³⁸ Gupta examines both scriptural and patriarchal elements in the stories of Kali, and concludes that, when stripped of patriarchal misappropriations, Kali embodies the central Hindu notions of power and liberation (*shakti*, *prakriti*, and so on), and defies narrow (orthodox) notions of femininity. She claims that Kali’s very nature is perceived as ambiguous and paradoxical because the type of femininity she portrays and the patriarchal framework used to interpret it are incompatible with one another. Rather than simply malevolent or bloodthirsty, Kali is heroic, powerful, valorous; the fact that these traits are not usually associated with females (whether human or divine) is what makes them suspicious or seen in negative light. Similarly, her nudity, independence in her relationship with Shiva, dwelling in cremation grounds, association with low-class peoples and undomesticated animals such as jackals and snakes, and so on, reflect a “rebellion against any structure that is oppressive in any form.”²³⁹ Finally, as Brahman, Kali is the Ultimate Reality of the cosmos, both creator and manifest creation, and she embodies all the opposites and reconciles them. Gupta argues that a critical reading of Kali narratives, identifying her powerful elements while noting where the stories are told from a male or patriarchal point of view, is essential if one were to move past a gendered-centred reading of Kali and make use of her a symbol of equality and liberation:

there is an interaction between a contemporary woman’s psyche and the mythic behavior patterns of the goddess, patterns that inform and play out in a woman’s life... By identifying ourselves with the ways Kali acts on the mythic level, with the actual and potential embodiments of Kali, we begin to find a transpersonal source of liberation within her character and nature. [...]

The dark goddess is perpetually present in the inner and outer struggles faced by women at all times. Her darkness represents those rejected and suppressed parts of female creativity, energy, and power that have not been given a chance to be actualized. [...]

In and through the dark images we learn to accept the equality of all names, forms, and genders, taken up as they are within the principles of Shiva and Shakti, and, finally, in the

²³⁸ Lina Gupta, “Kali the Savior,” in *After Patriarchy: feminist transformations of the world religions*, ed. Paula M. Cooney et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 31

²³⁹ Gupta, “Kali, the Saviour,” 32

One. Indeed, Kali is the emblem of two opposites that constitute a composite whole, a power and a wonder that goes beyond all distinctions.²⁴⁰

Though Gupta writes from a Hindu feminist point of view, and her position is more specific to India (she contrasts Kali's implicit messages to women with the orthodox view on the feminine encoded in the Laws of Manu), this portrait of Kali resonates strongly with feminist spiritual explorations of dark goddesses. It is in part due to such resonance that Kali's Western reincarnation also takes on traits of other dark goddesses, as I shall explore more closely in the next section. The nexus of anger, terror, darkness and potential freedom is powerfully represented in such myths as those of Ereshkigal, Hel, Sekhmet, Medea, Ceridwen, Hecate, and culminates in the Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess. Tanya M. Luhrmann, in her paper "The Ugly Goddess" recounts her experience living in London for several years and participating in various pagan and magic-working groups, and her meetings and conversations with women who have all chosen a "dark" or "violent" image of the Goddess as their primary source of spiritual practice and inspiration. Although not all witches or Wiccans are feminists and vice versa, many participate in the implicit goals of feminist spirituality, described by Luhrmann as "advancing a feminist political agenda within and through a Goddess-centred spirituality."²⁴¹

In her study Luhrmann discovered that the 'dark' aspects are mostly associated with the Crone, or the hag: "the practitioner is supposed to see this aspect of the goddess in old age, loss, pain, and sorrow, and also in irrational rage, lust, violence, menopause, and, sometimes, the experience of menstruation itself."²⁴² It is interesting that not all items in this list immediately strike one as necessarily belonging to one category, such the juxtaposition of old age, loss, and menstruation or lust; yet, they are similar in that they often remain absent from dominant cultural narratives. In this sense, the dark is not necessarily negative, it is also the hidden or invisible. After quoting a passage from Dion Fortune's *Moon Magic* for its vivid imagery of dark and veiled destruction and liberation (with a salient reference to Kali), Luhrmann stresses:

In this context the dark Goddess, the Crone, eats and destroys. She is... Kali child-eater and Clymnestra man-slayer, Medea, the Furies and the witches on their blasted heath. She

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 36-38

²⁴¹ Tanya M. Luhrmann, "The Ugly Goddess: Reflections on the Role of Violent Images in Religious Experience," in *History of Religions* 41.2 (2001): 119

²⁴² Luhrmann, "The Ugly Goddess," 121. It is curious that early depictions of Kali, in situations where wrath is the focus of the narrative, are much more hag-like: emaciated, ugly, with sagging breasts.

is darkness and despair. When I was in London a dog-eared book on the Goddess was passed from woman to woman... Called *Descent to the Goddess*, it focused on the most ancient of Persephone tales, the Sumerian myth of Ereshkigal and Inanna written on clay tablets in the third millennium B.C.... Many women spoke to me about the myth as the experience of being torn apart... they explained the experience of the myth as the experience of menstrual cramps so bad they couldn't think, of suicidal despair, of abortions, of madness, of losing their jobs and lovers, of discovering their hatred of their mothers, their culture, their selves.²⁴³

Luhrmann writes of three women in particular whose goddess spirituality centres on fierce goddesses, such as the Egyptian lion-headed Sekhmet or the Weaving Goddess, yet the understandings of darkness and their relationships with their deities are unique to each woman. While Frances describes her Ereshkigal-Inanna experience in terms of “peeling the onion down to the core” and encountering a “dark mirror, which is like a dark sister,” followed by putrefaction and rebirth, another woman, Rose, described the “dark centre” as a “hidden creative source.”²⁴⁴ Rose describes her dark goddess as “the Goddess of the abyss... the Goddess of creation,” as well as a symbol of her own creativity and source of confidence as a woman: “this was the part of me that society ignores, that is not spoken about. It is the part of me that menstruates. It is my hidden self... like a compost heap. It is the source of my ideas... all the parts of myself I have forgotten. It is like my own treasure trove.”²⁴⁵

Drawing heavily on the materials of a special issue of *Women of Power* dedicated to issues of darkness and dark goddesses, Luhrmann also concludes that these experiences are representative of many women who practice goddess religion, and in fact express a deep-seated *need* to reconnect, acknowledge, articulate, and perhaps even creatively express the dark. At the same time, she seems powerfully aware and somewhat unnerved about this dark goddess's destructive and violent sides: “the dark Goddess entails violence. Ereshkigal, the Black Isis, the wise woman, and the enchantress all destroy, and often in anger.”²⁴⁶

It is not difficult to see that Kali would fit well in this company, for her mythos abounds with tales of destruction, from the episodes of rage in the *Devi Mahatmya*, to folk tales of Kali

²⁴³ Luhrmann, “The Ugly Goddess”, 122-123

²⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 125-126

²⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 127

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 129

and Shiva's 'dance challenges', their wild dance shaking the worlds and threatening all existence. Kali as embodied anger of other goddesses is a powerful theme in this context — though at times, as Gupta suggests, these stories need to be read with attention to various voices, including masculine patriarchal ones. The episode in the *Vamana Purana* where Parvati takes offence to being called "Kali," or the Black One, and undergoes austerities to rid herself of this dark complexion and become "Gauri," the Golden One, is particularly telling. On the one hand, it speaks to orthodox Brahminical constructions of female auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, as well as of darkness and of light. On the other hand, it still gives a form to the destructive potential of Devi, dividing her into gentle and fierce aspects, and implying the unity of the divine feminine in a roundabout way. As Kali serves a stark reminder of the full potential of the Goddess, within feminist spirituality such images have taken on a new layer of meaning, representing a long sought-after symbol of feminine wrath, destructiveness, and anger, and thus validating these as part of a coherent personality — both human and divine. In the next section I examine a variety of appropriations of Kali within early and contemporary goddess spirituality. While not all those who approach Kali within goddess spirituality experience her as a deity of anger, and many focus on Kali's more universal characteristics, it is notable that such dark goddess theologies are more common in the West than they are in the Indian context.

III. Dancing on the Electronic Highways: First Glimpses of The Western Kali

*1. Kali the Terrible, Kali the Magnificent: A Digital Iconography of the Dark Goddess*²⁴⁷

While the goddess movement eschews central texts, its theologies are constantly taking shape in its iconography, a process made even more meaningful by the history of a movement rooted in glimpses of goddess cultures brought back by anthropologists, as well as in the imaginations, dreams, and fantasies of women. Within the nascent tradition images quickly became symbols, signs, and icons; even now, images are extremely powerful, and, I would argue,

²⁴⁷ In addition to the images presented and discussed in this section, see also Appendix A: Additional Digital Iconography of Kali

primary to this form of spirituality.²⁴⁸ Though images are elaborated upon in text, thought about, debated, interpreted, and coded with meaning, the experiential aspect of an image is crucial to this embodied religion. Be they historic or traditional images, devotional icons or artistic works, visions glimpsed in dreams and revelations, or a mixture of all of these, images are used to impart the tradition's philosophy, ethos, and significance. Here, I include in the category "image" not only literally visual media such as painting or sculpture, but also the vivid imagery used in poetry and theological writing, and even self-imagery. While I cannot explore this topic in any great depth here for space considerations, it is important to state that this may well be one of the reasons why the tradition is notoriously difficult to pin down; its most salient features are best evoked either non-verbally, or in almost exclusively descriptive prose. In this sense, it is very similar to Indic Shaktism, which is often most powerfully expressed through iconography, and practiced as devotion to, meditation upon, and entering into the images of the Goddess.

The iconography of the Western Kali is diverse and often unique to this context. Images of Kali are more ubiquitous in Western goddess circles than one might think, and as soon as one begins looking for her, she suddenly appears to be everywhere: in poems, art, images, costumes, dance, ritual, altars, blog entries, goddess chants, Tarot archetypes, and even in advertisements. Western representations of Kali run the gamut from being closely modelled on Hindu iconography, to bold theological and artistic explorations based on revelatory and visionary experiences, and moreover, they seem to coexist side by side and inform one another. Traditional images of the goddess, such as popular Bengali icons or historic manuscript illustrations (readily available through textbooks, neopagan literature, and various websites including numerous Hindu ones) are easily intermixed with contemporary art, created both

²⁴⁸ Notably, even the symbol denoting goddess religion — a female figure with her arms raised and a spiral etched in her middle — is a fairly new development, and the movement had seen many varied incarnations of this sigil until the "right one" had evolved by mutual consensus, combining the most salient features of goddess religion, and providing a multivalent, complex visual. To list but a few key characteristics, the figure is reminiscent both of the red clay Naqada "bird goddess" or "dancing goddess" (4000 BCE), alluding to the Goddess's ancient status; its overall triangular shape, the raised arms and elongated tapered legs, resemble a womb (uterus and fallopian tubes) — which is a symbol of the Goddess as Mother of All, and Creatrix of the Universe; the raised arms also refer to "drawing down the moon" — a central Wiccan ritual of invoking the goddess into one's body (usually to be performed by the High Priestess of a coven). Finally, the spiral is a central symbol for spiritual feminists, as once evoking the Goddess as progress-in-continuity and interconnectedness, as well as evoking her pre-Christian past, as the spiral also symbolises the sacred labyrinth. Many of these connotations are discussed at length in Starhawk's seminal treatise on goddess religion, *The Spiral Dance* (1979).

within and outside a devotional context. Also popular are Tantric images from texts and manuscripts, especially ones that highlight experiential, bodily, sexual, creative, destructive, and monistic themes, such the Mahāvidiyā Chinnamastā, a form of Kali depicted standing or sitting upon a couple having sex, holding her self-severed head in one hand, and three streams of blood sprouting from her neck to nourish two other goddesses standing at her sides and herself. This traditional Śākta image depicts the goddess, once more, as known through paradox, an all-encompassing reality that nonetheless can be approached experientially, and produce revelation.²⁴⁹

Another type of Kali image has to do more with popular culture than with religion per se, and at times these semi-commercial images and devotional images intersect, interact, and are used in various ways which can range from conducting ritual to selling t-shirts. Rachel McDermott discusses some instances of commercial use that have stirred up controversy, such as images of Kali on lunch boxes and toilet seats,²⁵⁰ and June McDaniel similarly writes on the various appropriations and misappropriations of Shakta Tantra in the West.²⁵¹ However, most of the examples discussed below are the result of my own research, mainly conducted on the Internet and in archives of pagan- and goddess spirituality-oriented publications. (The Internet, being the most readily available medium, is also significant as a source because it greatly contributes to the exchange of information and community building within alternative religious groups, leaving traces of this process on web pages, in forums, and in blogs.) I must stress that here I present only a *handful* of the more interesting or representative Kali sources I have encountered. Consciously, I mix well-known or previously documented examples with newer or more obscure ones, to illustrate the spectrum of their diversity. Similarly, I include representations that are both clearly devotional in nature (i.e. they were created with express

²⁴⁹ In Shakta Tantra, Kali is considered to embody all ten mahāvidiyās, and elsewhere as well she is mentioned as the first of the ten. For a contemporary Shakta's reading of Chinnamastā's see Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, "Mystery, Wonder and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidiyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman's Reading" in *Woman and Goddess in Hinduism*, ed. Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). A more syncretic source, demonstrating Chinnamastā's mythos entering into Western goddess spirituality can be found among the online resources of Sisters In Celebration, a web-based organization offering courses in theology and priestess training, at <http://www.sistersincelebration.org/Goddess/Chinnamasta.pdf>

²⁵⁰ McDermott, "Kali's New Frontiers", 283-284

²⁵¹ June McDaniel, "Shaktism and the Modern West" (ch. 5), in *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*

devotional intention or inspiration), as well as those which may be purely artistic, but potentially can be used in a spiritual context. More sources are listed in the “Online Sources” section of the bibliography, and undoubtedly *many more* are nestled in the shifting sands of the Web.



Figures 3.3, 3.4 “Maha Kali” (left) and “Kali Ruhidra” by Neng Yang (right)

As already discussed, Kali’s iconography in and of itself is a powerful revelation for Western goddess spirituality. Kali — blue-black, fierce, clad in severed human arms and skulls — is at turns shocking and captivating, depending on the eye that beholds her. Images of Kali immediately assert her presence; and they can be puzzling as much as they can be vivid and salient representations of the divine feminine. In the beginning of this chapter I briefly mention a painting by Carrie Ann Baade, entitled “Our Lady Kali” (fig. 3.1). Although it is not the first to come up on Google image search in response to the query ‘the goddess Kali’, it is a case in point how deeply Kali had penetrated into Western culture. Executed in a symbolist-surrealist style, the painting resembles a collage of two female divine figures, both Divine Mothers in their respective traditions: Mary (alluded to in the title), and Kali. The figure has Kali’s lolling tongue and four arms (with a fifth stigmata-marked hand on the side), and Mary’s sorrowful eyes and halo. She is puzzling, like many surrealist paintings, but she is also a symbol that is “stronger than any explication made of it,” to recall Carol Christ’s words.

Sifting through images of this intrepid deity, one is struck by their variety and diversity. While many of them are purely artistic interpretations, it is still interesting to behold their sheer scope of medium, style, and form. For example, a popular Kali image is a “furious”, or “battle queen” Kali. “Maha Kali” by an unknown artist (fig. 3.3), is a wonderfully fierce example, wrathful and chaotic. While she is attired closely following Bengali iconography (necklace of skulls, skirt of severed arms, dark, with wild hair), the rendering style and pose, catching the goddess mid-destructive dance, is unmistakably Western, as is the comic book superhero-styled Kali (fig. 3.4).

The Toronto-born artist L. Caruana paints a qualitatively different Kali, as part of his series on visions of the divine.²⁵² His work entitled “Ave Aum Ave — The Face of Kali” (fig. 3.5) is an unconventional Kali that deviates quite sharply from traditional Indian iconography, despite retaining some important symbolic attributes, such as the skulls, triangular Kali *yantra*, and snakes that decorate her body. Furthermore, the face of Kali is superimposed over a rocky landscape Caruana identifies as Malta, incorporating two Maltese Neolithic goddesses at the bottom, and two Madonnas whose heads are visible through Kali’s eyes; one is Mary with the newborn Jesus, the other is Maria Dolorosa holding the crucified Christ, thus deepening the layers of goddess

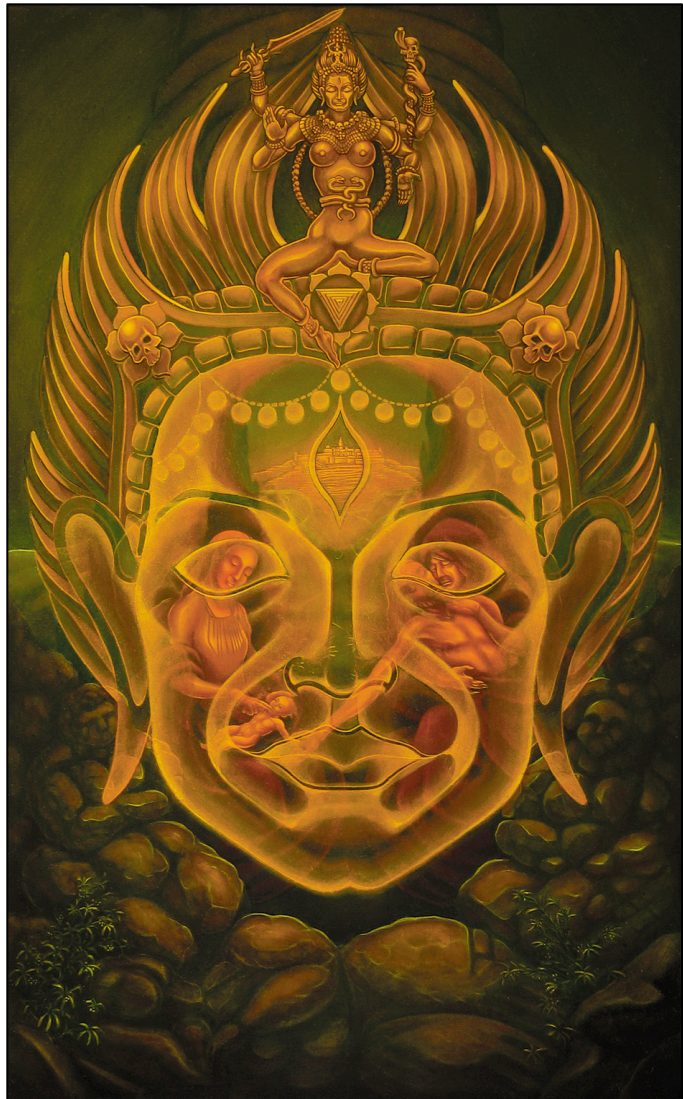


Figure 3.5 L. Caruana, *Ave Aum Ave — The Face of Kali*, 2004

²⁵² “The Visionary Art of L. Caruana”, accessed April 15, 2010, <http://www.lcaruana.com/index.html>

symbolism in the work. This identification of Kali and Mary, like Baade's piece above, is a curiously pervasive theme, mirroring the breakdown of the Goddess into gentle and fierce aspects, perhaps identifying Mary as a kind of Western equivalent of Parvati. Caruana's biography page stresses the personal and *experiential* nature of the artist's visions: "During his wanderings he has actively recorded his dreams and expanded their imagery through mythology. His paintings are inspired by memories and dreams, experiments with entheogens [*sic*], and the interplay of different cultural symbols and styles."²⁵³ Interestingly, Caruana is a male artist working with female goddess symbolism. This can be at times received with mixed feelings by spiritual feminists suspicious of men usurping and praying upon women's bodies and energies (a view much less popular now that it was at the outset of the second wave movement), and, on the other hand, demonstrate that Western goddess spirituality is not a path available exclusively to women.

Within the goddess spirituality milieu one particularly salient type of Kali image is found on Goddess cards, either in special meditation decks or goddess-themed Tarot cards (fig. 3.6, 3.7). These are important, as such cards are often used by practitioners as resources in their quest for the Goddess and herstory, often with accompanying books suggesting types of card reading and meditation techniques. Kali images are similarly included in many lists of the names of the Goddess (such as the Goddess Chant mentioned earlier), and in anthologies of goddesses compiled by authors within the tradition, such as those of Barbara Walker.

Thalia Took, an author of a Tarot deck and some books dedicated to the Goddess whose work can be found at her online gallery (including a "dictionary of Obscure Goddesses"), writes in her introduction to the Goddess Oracle Deck that although she did not originally intend to write an accompanying book of goddess tales, "the Goddesses would insist!", and so she is delaying the publishing of the oracle deck until the book is ready.²⁵⁴ Her illustration of the Kali card (fig. 3.6) is accompanied by a detailed description of Kali's mythos, iconography, and symbolism — far more detailed and well informed than casual or strictly artistic interpretations of Kali. At the same time, some aspects of the Western Kali mythos are, debatably, the results of either misunderstanding of certain aspects of Indian tradition or freehand interpretations. For

²⁵³ "Biography", accessed April 15, 2010 <http://www.lcaruana.com/webtext/bio.html>

²⁵⁴ "Goddess Oracle Deck", accessed April 25, 2010, <http://www.thaliatook.com/AMGG/goddesses.html>



3.6 Thalia Took, Kali card of The Goddess Oracle (currently unpublished, yet the images are available online).

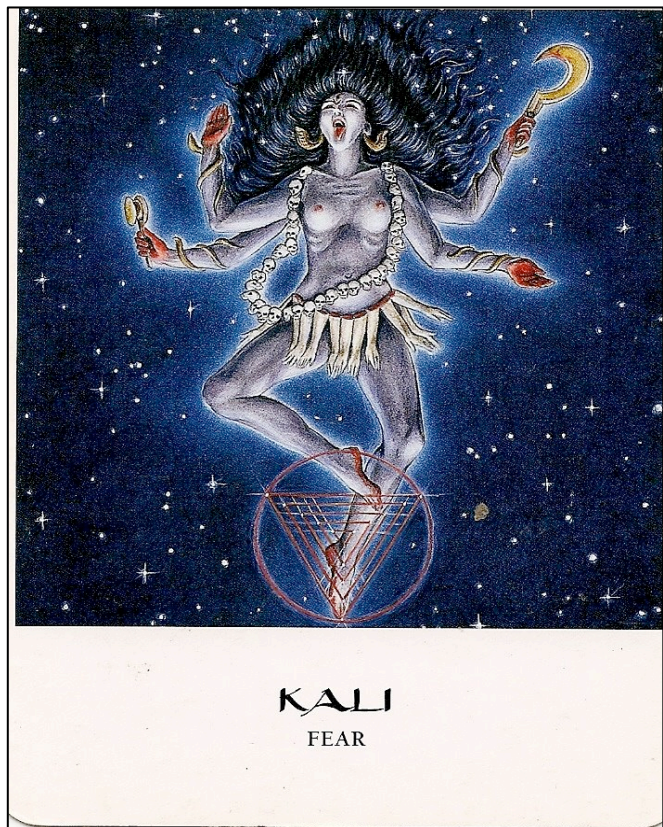


Figure 3.7 Hrana Janto, Kali card from The Goddess Oracle Deck & Book Set by Amy Sophia Marashinsky, U.S. Games Systems, 2006.

example, the association between Kali the goddess and Káliyug, the ‘depraved last age’ of the current time cycle according to Hindu eschatology, is a common perception within goddess circles, and many Indologists would see such facile equations as a result of shallow knowledge of the subject. While the two words look the same in English when written without diacritics, they are not the same in Sanskrit, and are in fact unrelated — a point McDermott asserts passionately in her critique of Western appropriations of Kali.²⁵⁵ To be fair, such confusion at times touches Indian devotees of Kali as well, and may simply be a case of multiple interpretations, rather than wilful miscommunication of traditional narratives.

Famous examples of Kali as part of the greater project of Herstory can be observed in such creations as Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* art installation, which includes a Kali plate and place setting (fig. 3.8), and Lydia Ruyle’s Goddess Banners. Chicago’s installation is so well known, both as an example of feminist art and as a compendium of significant mythic, historical,

²⁵⁵ Rachel McDermott, “The Western Kali”, 298

and contemporary female figures, that it really speaks for itself. Her plates in particular are interesting, since they are all designed in the form of vulvas, yet each so imbued with the colours, shapes, lines, materials, and personality of the character it belongs to, as to insist that even in their commonality as female there is infinity diversity.²⁵⁶

It is notable that the representation of Kali in form of the female sex organ is not unique to the West, and strongly suggests the form of Kali as Kamakhya, Goddess of Desire, whose sacred temple in Assam is constructed upon a *shakti pitha* where the *yoni* of the goddess is believed to be manifest in a natural rock formation. This location naturally attracts many thousands of



Figure 3.8 Judy Chicago, Kali plate from *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). Image through the Brooklyn Museum web gallery.

pilgrims from all over India, but in recent years it has become interesting to Westerners as well. Brenda Dobia, a Western feminist scholar, describes her own complicated relationship with the Goddess: “In spite of my insistent conscious resistance I suddenly and inescapably found myself

²⁵⁶ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79). The installation is currently on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum, at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and images of the various parts of this monumental work, including plates and place settings, banners, heritage floor, and so on, are available on their website: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php Over the years, there have been both supporters and critics of Chicago’s work, which was meant both to inspire and empower women. One criticism is that Chicago still essentializes women, who are represented solely by their sexual organs; on the other hand, when Chicago conceived of the piece, her aim was to normalize and de-vilify female anatomy, as well as celebrate women’s arts and spheres of influence. To quote the curatorial notes: “The equilateral triangle, interpreted by Chicago as reflecting the ‘goal of feminism—an equalized world,’ is also a centered form recalling ‘one of the earliest symbols of the feminine,’ and of the goddess. Once the shape of the table was determined, Chicago decided to place thirteen women on each side, or ‘wing’—thirteen to mimic the number included in *The Last Supper* as well as the number of women in a witches’ coven” (“Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: *The Dinner Party*”, accessed July 30, 2012, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/genesis.php).

mesmerized by an image of Devi.”²⁵⁷ Dobia’s journey to the Goddess, both spiritually, and as a literal pilgrimage to the sacred sites of India, had eventually taken her to Kamakhya — but not before she passed through Kalighat and paid her respects to Kali, a face of the goddess she had initially avoided, but which had eventually proved revelatory. In Shaktism one sees the collapse between all the forms of the goddess, and perhaps it is not surprising to see it in Western feminist spirituality as well.

Lydia Ruyle’s project is even more consciously educational than Chicago’s, and her banners are created so that they can be transported and erected at various locations around the globe, bringing local and foreign goddesses to the attention of wider audiences. Although she does not have a specific Kali banner, she dedicated a special series of banners to black Madonnas, in homage to the dark aspect of the goddess.²⁵⁸ Providing education, as well as inspiration, seems to be a unifying goal of much of Kali’s online presence in blogs and on various forums.

Blogger Patty Kennelly presents us with another image of Kali from a Goddess Oracle deck, this one intended rather for meditation than as a herstory. Kennelly, who describes her blog as “sharing my journey — trying to live my best life inspired by creativity, spirit and the goddess” and quotes Bernard Shaw: “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself,”²⁵⁹ echoes much of the principles of feminist spirituality discussed above. Her blog, dedicated to daily images of the Goddess (the website is appropriately named *Daily Goddess*), presents a meditation on Kali, image and text taken from the Goddess Oracle Deck by Amy Sophia Marashinsky (fig. 3.7). The words of the poem accompanying the image are especially powerful, addressed in the voice of the goddess directly to the reader or practitioner:

*I am the dance of death that is behind all life
the ultimate horror
the ultimate ecstasy
I am existence
I am the dance of destruction that will end this world*

²⁵⁷ Brenda Dobia, “Seeking Ma, Seeking Me”, in *Is the Goddess a Feminist? The politics of South Asian goddesses*, ed. by Alf Hiltebeitel and Kathleen M. Erndl (NY: New York University Press, 2000), 204

²⁵⁸ “Goddesses, Icons, & Herstory of the Divine Feminine,” accessed April 25, 2010 <http://www.lydiaruyle.com/blackmadonnaspagel.html>

²⁵⁹ *My Daily Goddess* blog, accessed April 26, 2010 <http://mydailygoddess.blogspot.com/2008/05/Kali-fear.html>

*the timeless void
the formless devouring mouth
I am rebirth
Let me dance you to death
Let me dance you to life
Will you walk through your fears to dance with me?
Will you let me cut off your head
and drink your blood?
then will you cut off mine?
Will you face all the horror
all the pain
all the sorrow
And say "yes"?
I am all that you dread
all that terrifies
I am your fears
will you meet me?*

This Kali is a “dancing” Kali, dancing her dance of creation and destruction, so entranced in it, that, in accord with popular Kali tradition discussed above, only stepping on the prone body of Shiva stops her from destroying the world. Kennelly condenses the central myth found in the *Devi Mahatmya*, and suggests a meditation on Kali that centres on facing one’s fears: “Wholeness is nurtured when you reclaim the pieces of yourself that you’ve given over to fear. Most fears are formless. By naming and witnessing the fear, you gain power. Wholeness is created when you learn to acknowledge your fears and walk through them.” Such meditation on an image is quite in tune with Hindu forms of worship, which commonly include visualization and meditation upon the icons and *yantras* of a deity. This image of Kali, however, is different from the traditional icon: Kali is dancing alone, clad in her wild hair and in the night sky, her face not the usual paradox of bloodied-tongue terror and serenity, but frozen mid-howl. She seems to float, or hurl, through the starry abyss of the cosmos, her strong legs point in the form of a triangle and are superimposed with her triangular *yoni yantra*. The guided meditation take the practitioner on a journey literally inside one’s heart, figured as an entrance onto a path that climbs up, until one reaches the “Plane of Vision.” There, the practitioner must “call one’s fear”: “You call your fear and it comes. When you meet your fear, ask its name and it will tell you. What does it look like? Notice any feelings you are having and breathe into them. Your fear asks

you for something and you give it freely.” Curiously, this vision does not include an encounter with Kali herself, but rather a Jungian-style self-exploration. While Kennelly does not explore her own experiences of Kali or of this meditation in her post, the very act of blogging about it seems to be part of a goddess-oriented practice.

In a more directly embodied sense, Kali often becomes the inspiration for many goddess-oriented dancers and performers, especially in Bellydance, probably due to her association with dance, and specifically ecstatic dance. One example is an avant-garde Bellydance troupe based in the north-western U.S., *The Hands of Kali*, whose founder Kendra Hayes has recently authored a book *Stomping Ground: Get to know the Goddess through Dance* (as advertised on their web page; the book is available at lulu.com, a self-publishing website).²⁶⁰ Another is Le’ema Kathleen Graham, dancer, choreographer, and priestess at the Temple of Isis, mentioned also in McDermott.²⁶¹ The association of Kali with dance within the goddess tradition is also so salient because this part of her mythos (which is strong in the Eastern context as well, but perhaps for different reasons) can be mediated in *embodied, experiential* ways — allowing one to approach the goddess in movement, sound, song, and *through* oneself. Dance, more generally, is probably the most natural form of ‘worship’ in the goddess tradition precisely because it is *participatory* devotion, a way of knowing the goddess that is immediate and active.

In addition to dance, musical explorations of Kali are likewise widespread in goddess spirituality circle, ranging from traditional *bhajans* to New Age-inspired tunes, such as Prem Joshua’s “Dance of Kali”, from his 2001 *Dance of Shakti* album (which is widely available on iTunes). YouTube clips dedicated to Kali are also popular, which are in essence simply slideshows of various images of the goddess or related imagery, set to appropriate music (either traditional chanting or modern arrangements). Since YouTube consists of user-uploaded content, it is not unreasonable to assume some of these were compiled and posted with devotion in mind, and the user comments suggest that others see these as devotional as well. For example, to the video “Kali, The Dangerous Mother” uploaded by gentman on February 20, 2007, one user, michaeldark, left this comment: “She is the blackness of space and time, forever unknowable but

²⁶⁰ *Hands of Kali*, <http://www.handsofKali.com/>

²⁶¹ McDermott, “Kali’s New Frontiers”, 280

also beautiful, and her physical form is a manifestation of the fury of the great Protectress, Durga Devi, when she sprung from Durga's head to help save us all from the demons that threaten us. That is why she is so ferocious, because she is the Mother at her most protective, and hence most angry. But she's our mother the same, and slays those forces that seek to harm us, including our own delusions and material attachments.”²⁶² Other users have used the comments section to this video as a discussion board for relevant theological and cosmological topics (such as whether or not the Kali Yuga age is directly related to Kali the goddess), as well as more political issues, such as the legitimacy of homosexuality from a religious (Hindu) point of view. In another similar video, “Dance of Kali” (set to Joshua’s eponymous musical piece), a heated discussion between Hindu and Muslim commentators was eventually moderated by the user who uploaded the video, warning that all perpetrators of hate speech will be banned from the page.²⁶³ These are but two examples of approximately 4,220 results generated by the YouTube search “Kali goddess”. Not only do such videos serve as forums for inspiring, sharing, and discussing devotional attitudes, they provide a diverse array of Kali imagery, a kind of *bricolage*, which is similar to YouTube videos of neopagan and goddess-oriented chants, hymns, and image compilations. Listening to the music and sacred songs, as well as viewing the icons of the goddess, becomes a kind of web-facilitated *darshan*, an embodied engagement with the divine.

Another, somewhat controversial,



Figure 3.9 Nicole Magne as Kali in 2007

²⁶² “Kali, The Dangerous Mother,” accessed August 3, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztUio3andAk&feature=related>

²⁶³ “Dance of Kali”, accessed August 3, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmHg_mA5ASg&feature=related

way of embodying the goddess is literally to “dress up” as her. It is hard to say if such performance-drama is or can be devotional in the Western context (I would hesitate to draw parallels with masked possession drama associated with Kali such as *muttiyetu*), but it is clear that some of the women experimenting with costuming are utilizing Kali in a very conscious way.²⁶⁴ While supermodel Heidi Klum’s Halloween costume generated much criticism from around the world and especially in India for her Kali costume, seen as a “denigrating” act,²⁶⁵ others have sported as Kali to express their appreciation for the goddess. Artist Nicole Magne, for example, constructed and worn a Kali costume for a Halloween party in 2007 (fig. 3.9); incidentally, this was before Klum made this into a public faux-pas, and she describes her decision along with providing a detailed how-to guide:

I've always had great love and respect for the religious art and architecture from eastern cultures, but especially for the Hindu Shakti (divine mother) goddess'. There is one goddess; Kali (she has several manifestations and names) who I took special notice of. She is the representation of life through death. The frightening, deadly destroyer aspect of female nature. I decided to pay tribute to her this year by constructing an elaborate costume featuring realistic, movable arms (orthography original).²⁶⁶

Magne, an artist from Winnipeg, is locally famous for her elaborate, show-stopping Halloween costumes. Though she is not using Kali in a ritualistic way (at least not overtly), her appropriation of the image is also not blaze or accidental; it is in fact rather in tune with the personal, individualistic, and embodied modes of approaching the divine within goddess spirituality.

A more vivid example of an embodied “Kali Project” incorporating art, self and spirituality can be seen in the work of Orryelle Defenestrade-Bascule, an Australian artist who

²⁶⁴ It is interesting to note that in the Indian context there are devotional occasions during which devotees “dress up” or perform as Kali, a vivid example being the annual festival of Bonalu in Hyderabad. Yet once again I hesitate to really draw a parallel between the two, since it is unclear if one could at all compare the the ritual context of the festival, and the meaning of “performing Kali” for Bonalu participants, with the instances of mostly artistic and personal actions described here. Nonetheless, it is curious that in either context there are instances of such literal embodiment of the goddess.

²⁶⁵ “Heidi Klum’s ‘Kali Act’ leaves Hindus fuming”, *The Times of India*, November 5, 2008, accessed August 2, 2012, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/Heidi-Klums-Kali-act-leaves-Hindus-fuming/articleshow/3677674.cms>

²⁶⁶ “Six-armed Goddess Kali Costume”, *Instructables blog*, accessed August 2, 2012 <http://www.instructables.com/id/Six-armed-Hindu-goddess-Kali-Costume/>. Originally, I had found this image on the artist’s blog Love Bone, but the link to it had since become obsolete. Luckily, nothing on the Internet ever disappears forever.



Figures 3.10 – 3.11 “The Kali Project” by Orryelle Defenestrade-Bascule

was inspired to create a Kali statue as a result of hir (the artist chooses to self identify with this gender-neutral pronoun) travels in India, an undertaking which triggered the involvement of other artists and the creation of goddess-oriented video and dance performances (fig. 3.10, 3.11). The website dedicated to this project details the emergence and evolution of the piece and the various engagement with it:

Inspired by travels in India last year ('05) and the constant housing of deity in sculptural forms there, upon return to Australia I felt inspired to create a life-size Kali statue. Other elements of my occultural [*sic*] work and play came into the piece also as it evolved, so that it is now Kali-Arachne, a deification of Fate as well as the cycles of death and birth. The idea of using snakes for hair (and real snake-skins to re-sew and stuff appeared as if on cue immediately following this idea) spawned a Medusaen aspect to the statue also, which has thus come to represent several primal Goddesses rolled into one. Clay is the perfect medium for this primal expression, being so earthy and ancient. [...] The clay face of the statue has been used several times as a mask to perform a dance about Kala, the Hindu God of Time and Eternity, emerging from Kali as the Void.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ “The Kali Project”, accessed August 3, 2012, <http://www.horusmaat.com/silverstar/SILVERSTAR5-PG44.htm>

Here the interweaving of divine and human embodiment is especially highlighted by the artist's conscious use of performance, body praxis, body art and even tattoos, all as part of "constantly reburishing [*sic*] hir Temple, that is the physical form seen as a malleable tool."²⁶⁸ The artist is also the author of several books on New Age, occult, and neopagan theologies, including *In Mata's Pyre*, an "illustrated journey of spiritual and material discovery" based on the author's travels in India and available for purchase online.²⁶⁹ Though this appropriation of Kali is atypical even in terms of the diversity of approaches within goddess spirituality, I find it useful here because it highlights both the eclecticism of the movement and the use of personal (spiritual) experience as an organizing principle. Furthermore, like many of the other images available on the Internet, this too enters the digital iconography of the Western Kali, and exists in dialogue with the traditional icons, Tarot cards, original artwork, and visionary representations of other Western Kali practitioners.

6. In the Courtroom, in the Garden: The Western Kali in Ritual and Devotional Contexts

Since online sources are sometimes ambiguous and their authors and uses are difficult to pin down, I would like to discuss several examples of the Western Kali encountered in specifically neopagan and goddess-oriented sources. Once again, it is not my aim to be exhaustive in this survey; that seems to me an impossible task, in light of the sheer scope of modern neopagan literature. Instead, I have chosen several examples that range in time period, use, imagery, and understanding of Kali, to demonstrate both the diversity and continuity of her appropriation into the tradition. The sources used here include print pagan journals and magazines, chapbooks, contemporary goddess spirituality books, as well as a handful of online sources whose neopagan affiliation and devotional appropriation of Kali was stated very clearly.

One of the first sources I have encountered in the course of my research was an article on Kali entitled "Working with the Dark Mother" which appeared in a 1998 issue of the *Green Egg*

²⁶⁸ "Orryelle Defenestrade-Basculé", accessed August 3, 2012, <http://www.crossroads.wild.net.au/bio.htm>

²⁶⁹ "India Travel Journals", accessed August 3, 2012, <http://www.crossroads.wild.net.au/kajuraho.htm>

Magazine for March-April.²⁷⁰ Contributed by Roger Paracelsu, a pagan minister and co-founder of the Iron Oaks coven, it related his experiences of drawing spiritual strength and inspiration from Kali during a nerve-racking legal battle with the city of Palm Bay, Florida, who had cited him and his partner on using their house as a church (where they held coven meetings).²⁷¹ This depiction of Kali is part mythic lore, part hymn, part inspirational account, part cautionary tale of the awesome power of the Goddess; likewise, he makes sense of this spiritual experience by relating Kali's iconography and symbolism with other Craft traditions such as the Tarot:

[In the courtroom] The hostility could be touched, like burning lava... My mind began to slide from reality to a world of spirit and back. Words came to my mind and I realized I was in an inner ritual space... She is the Goddess of Chaos and Creation... since we started the federal suit, our lives have been totally changed. I was in a near-fatal accident... Omi was nearly killed in another accident... Kali forces. Kali energy. Powerfully destructive, but like the Tower card, transformative.²⁷²

Paracelsu's account of the aggressive and "sneering" plaintiffs and the questioning of the attorney is interspersed with lines of poetry. Although they win the suit, and Kali is hailed as the protective spirit by whose divine intervention this victory was achieved, the author continually insists on Kali as a dual, complex figure. Kali here is experienced on a very personal, mystical level, and it approached in a typical neopagan or spiritual feminist way, such as evident in the notion of "working" with a goddess appropriate to the occasion in order to access certain powers or forces (in this case, to win the case). Kali is compared here to the Tarot Major Arcana card "the Tower", and her demon-battling aspect is smoothly psychologised, as symbolic of fighting either inner demons, or societal demons, such as discrimination, bigotry, closed-mindedness, and injustice. She is also the embodiment of "polarities and opposites", as Gross would have noted, and her power can be dangerous, revealing her 'darker' side. Kali is invoked here in a complex

²⁷⁰ Roger Paracelsu, "Working with the Dark Mother", *Green Egg Magazine*, March-April: 46-47; 50 (1998). Originally *Green Egg Magazine* was published in hard copy by the Church of All Worlds (1968-1976, and 1988-2000). In 2010 scans of some back issues were available online (I don't believe these archives are available now, though a few hardcopies can be found on Ebay). The article quoted here has been provided to me in private communication through an archivist as a scan of the original, sent electronically (2010). In 2007, *Green Egg* was re-launched as an e-zine under new editors and publishers. Functioning for a while as a blog, now the magazine is reinstating its issue-based format, and it can be found at <http://www.greeneggzine.com/>

²⁷¹ "Wiccans Fight Spooky Stereotypes", *Florida Today*, October 31, 1994. Reproduced unofficially on the Iron Oaks website, accessed December 2009 <http://www.ironoak.org/articles/bs941031a.html> (unfortunately the link is no longer active).

²⁷² Paracelsu, "Working with the Dark Mother", 47

web of relationships, directly with the practitioner, as well as indirectly within his relationship with his partner and their joint appellation to Kali.

Others have made sense of Kali by relating her to various aspects of the earth goddess symbolic complex. Although Kali is not immediately apparent as an “earthy” sort of goddess, Suzin Green writes of her associations of Kali with gardening, planting, and especially pruning in “Kali and the Hibiscus: The Dark Goddess in the Pruning Shears.”²⁷³ Illustrated by a familiar Bengali Kali with wild hair, lolling tongue, bloodied sickle, skirt of severed arms and heads, and necklace of skulls, this article is about a gentle growing thing: a hibiscus plant. The hibiscus is Kali Ma’s favourite flower (often seen offered at Kali puja and used in decorating Kali images in Indian temples), and Green tells the story of her hibiscus plant as though it was a person going through various stages of life. When the plant was infested by white flies and was unresponsive to any remedy, Green “heard the voice, clear, direct, without a trace of pity. *Cut it back. Remove everything but the lowest stumps. Leave only one leaf. Do not wait a moment longer...* I think of it as my *Kali* voice, when it speaks, I listen.”²⁷⁴ She pruned back the plant, singing a chant of praise to the Great Mother, and drawing a parallel to the story of Innana’s descend to the underworld (a theme often connected with Kali as well, as I have pointed out above). Even something like cutting back a plant can be a fierce act, especially if one considers all life, including the plant, as worthy of care and attention. For Green this has been a cathartic, as well as a metaphorical experience, the plant is symbolic and even continuous with herself, its ultimate recovery signalling that she, too, has learned discernment, pruned back the diseased parts of herself, and recovered. Green writes: “all is *Kali*, all is the Mother... She spits us out of her womb and eats us back inside, over and over again... we all one living presence of the Goddess.”²⁷⁵

Exploring Kali’s identification with the ‘dark goddess’ archetype, some Western visions of her are more sombre, and usually more internalized as well. Two poems found in a slender chapbook anthology explore themes of death, dissolution, pain, neglect, the ‘bad mother’, and

²⁷³ Suzin Green, “Kali and the Hibiscus: The Dark Goddess in the Pruning Shears”, *SageWoman Magazine* 41: 6-10 (1998)

²⁷⁴ Green, “Kali and the Hibiscus”, 7-9 (emphasis original)

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 10 (emphasis original)

even ambivalence towards the deity herself. Hectate explores some of these experiences in a poem entitled “Kali Ma”: “I am the crime/ that avoids street lamps”, “mine is the gaping mouth/ that utters no scream”, “brew poison tea/ to soothe a battered wife,/ exact my will,/ grant nothing,/ and take all.”²⁷⁶ These lines evoke a similar exploration of inner and outer trauma to those described by Luhrmann, and touch on the same themes of ‘denied’ or ‘buried’ aspects of female experience. Another poem, “In the Garden of Kali” by Kevin L. Donihe, also draws on the sensory associations with various plants, smells, and the earth, but with a distinct Kali flavour:

In the Garden of Kali

wafts the odour of honeysuckle
of rosewood

(step cautiously —
the roots here drink
from the memories
of divorced flesh/denuded bone
and at the core
of each flower lies
a calcium smile)

a true gardener knows
that for every death
there is a convulsive
yet equally beautiful birth

and in the garden of Kali
every grave opens
into a womb ²⁷⁷

Such interpretations of Kali retain much of her traditional symbolism, but with a palpable Western take on it. The themes of death, dissolution, and rebirth are phrased in such stark imagery as “every grave opens/ into a womb”, while nature imagery, so fundamental to Western

²⁷⁶ Hectate, “Kali Ma”, in *She of 10000 Names*, ed. Nancy Bennett and Laurel Robertson. This chapbook has been lent to me by an acquaintance, a goddess practitioner who has been collecting various neopagan and goddess-related materials for decades. It seems appropriate, since such personal, grassroots methods of sharing information about the goddess and the Craft used to be the main avenue for the spread of the tradition and the sharing of ideas before the advent of the Internet.

²⁷⁷ Kevin L. Donihe, “In the Garden of Kali”, in *She of 10000 Names*, ed. Nancy Bennett and Laurel Robertson

goddess spirituality, is used to frame the horrific appearance of Kali: “the roots here drink/ from the memories/ of divorced flesh/denuded bone”. As within her Eastern devotional tradition, when framed in meaningful, constructive, and experiential ways, Kali ceases to be ‘horrific’ and instead is an illuminating, revelatory figure. Ambivalence towards the goddess is also similar to the attitudes towards her in her own native context, for even the devotional poetry of Ramprasad Sen and Ramakrishna, Kali’s two most-revered saints, reveals grappling and pleading with the goddess, coy chastising and despair, self-surrender and love.²⁷⁸

IV. Women in Times of Rage and Peace, or, the Ethics of Reconstructing the Goddess

The aim of this chapter has been to review the central concepts of feminist/ goddess spirituality as it emerged in the West (and more specifically in North America), and to examine the way Kali, an essentially borrowed goddess, has been incorporated and re-imagined in this context. In the process, I have discovered that Kali’s presence is more ubiquitous than I had even imagined, and so for considerations of time, space, and practicality, I focused on Kali’s symbolism more than anything else. Therefore, I have left out such aspects of the Western Kali as her association with Tantra (especially Western conceptions of Tantra), Western ritual magic, Witchcraft and menstrual magic, converts to Hinduism, or the use of Kali as Jungian archetype — to name but a few. Even so, it seems this Kali phenomenon is but an example of a more general trend seen in the West of a flux of migrating, transmuted cultural symbols and mythic narratives, which raises a number of ethical concerns. The junction with spiritual feminism only intensifies this characteristic, since, as we have seen, it has a strong theological imperative to regard all female deities, as well as women in general, as aspects and manifestation of the Goddess. In some ways this deconstructs boundaries not only between the individual and the universe, or between the human body and divine natural environment, but also boundaries of time, history, tradition, language, place and race — since goddesses are found all over the world. Celebrated by some, such an approach has attracted criticism from others. It now seems a good

²⁷⁸ McDaniel, *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls*, 162-168

time to discuss those same questions of ownership and authenticity that I have refrained from engaging with until now.

“The joy of feminist religious syncretism” writes Cynthia Eller “is marred somewhat by the fact that when one borrows religiously, one is borrowing from someone (or some culture), and often without their permission.”²⁷⁹ The question of permission, for some, is nonexistent — on the grounds that, a) religion is a private matter (as it is lauded in the West, but to assert so would be rather naïve, I think), or b), that the freedom of religion means also the freedom to explore faiths outside one’s ethnic or historical heritage (this is a somewhat more solid argument). Many spiritual feminists weary of uninformed borrowing stayed firmly rooted within the traditions they consider fully ‘theirs’ — for those of Western descent these are the Greek, Celtic, Norse and sometimes Slavic pantheons. But what of those who feel *called* by goddesses of other pantheons? Gross, while suggesting Hindu goddesses as a *resource*, chooses her wording carefully, mindful that “a wholesale transplant” from one culture to another is impossible and unadvisable. She makes her position clear:

Hindu materials are easily susceptible to misinterpretation... even a favourable misinterpretation is unacceptable... Perhaps I am suggesting that some *real scholarly competence* with these materials is a prerequisite, but... approached critically and carefully, and if intelligent selection and borrowing are utilized, the Hindu goddesses can be the greatest stimulant to our imagination and to our speculation about the meaning of the goddess” (emphasis mine).²⁸⁰

Indeed, scholarly competence might be nice, but the academic study of a goddess and being inspired by Her in a spiritual sense, while often connected, are not really the same thing. Thinking back to all the examples of creative, personal interpretations of Kali listed above, it seems that “real scholarly competence” might dampen the mood, in the best case, and disintegrate the immediacy of one’s spiritual practice in the worst case, taking away the vividness of epiphany and revelation.

Curiously, the Hindu worldview can be flexible, consistent with the idea of worshipping a goddess by following her “call”, more than by studying her worship through observing others. For example, many Western scholars who have travelled to study Indian goddesses marvelled

²⁷⁹ Eller, *In the Lap of the Goddess*, 74

²⁸⁰ Gross, “Hindu Female Deities as a Resource”, 218

that their presence in shrines, temples, and pilgrimage routes was taken for granted by the locals. Kathleen Erndl in her study of the goddess cult in the Punjab remarks that this is due to a widespread belief that despite the Goddess's accessibility (she is worshiped by people indiscriminately of caste and gender, and grants her *darshan* to all), one would only be 'admitted' to see the deity if personally "called" by her. Therefore, they tend to see Western scholars, too, as pilgrims of sorts, rather than merely curious outsiders.²⁸¹ This is not to say that problems do not arise when misunderstanding or misinterpretation of certain religious symbols are used to form totalizing prejudices of an entire culture, or are internalized as beliefs regarding human females of that culture, and thus open-mindedness and respect towards the culture one borrows from are, I believe, essential.

But not everyone thinks that is enough. Eller writes of a paper by Andrea Smith circulated at the National Women's Studies Association meeting in 1990 entitled "Indian Spiritual Abuse", in which she accuses so-called "white New Age feminists" of "exploitative and genocidal practices", such as cashing-in on sales of promoting inauthentic items and symbols of Native American spirituality.²⁸² Accusations of romanticizing and orientalizing the *other*, from whose culture the religious images and symbols are looted by neo-colonial, are serious ones, and should not be taken lightly. On the other hand, perhaps lumping all "white" women, irrespective of class, nationality, language, personal history, etc, is not quite fair either. It also seems to me that this may be a political issue more than it is a question of spiritual or theological authenticity. Groups that feel politically and socially disadvantaged (as they often are), and struggling to re-assert or demarcate their identity, naturally feel defensive about their heritage being taken up unscrupulously or with wild modifications. It is perhaps best to be especially conscious and sensitive of such factors, whenever possible, especially if one's "private religious practice" informs one's public activities as well, such as giving workshops, lectures, creating art, selling t-shirts, and so on.

Another possible response to these criticisms, explored by some feminist scholars, is to collaborate with women from the culture that they feel so attracted to, creating a dialogue between two sides, and enabling mutual understanding and empowerment. An example of such a

²⁸¹ Erndl, *Victory to the mother*, 11.

²⁸² Eller, *In the Lap of the Goddess*, 76.

project is Brenda Dobia's collaborative pilgrimage to the temple of Kamakhya, the Goddess of Desire, in Assam. Sharing the journey with other Western and Indian feminist scholars, gave all the participants the opportunity to not only observe and engage in the tradition, but also to discuss, share, and reflect together, adding layers of meaning to the experience. Dobia writes of approaching the Goddess of Desire: "the desires with which (by negotiation) we embarked on the project and which underpinned our approach included the desire to meet the Goddess, to have our seeking be not only intellectual in its feminist orientation but experiential and personal, and to accentuate all these elements through our collaboration as women."²⁸³ Notably, the collaboration of women is in and of itself a goal of feminist spirituality, creating not only positive networks between women, but also giving rise to a shared experiential reality of the Goddess.

The competing approaches to the ethics of feminist goddess spirituality seem to subscribe, implicitly, to two very different conceptions of culture: one is an open, fluid world of plenty, and another is a world of clearly demarcated and finite truths, as well as resources. While not dismissing any of the serious criticisms levelled at sloppy, shallow, and ignorant approaches to borrowing, it does seem that if the act of borrowing is done with respect and integrity (both to one's own practice, and the tradition one borrows from), only in the world of finitude do the arguments against it hold. While I am not sure which one of these worldviews reflects more accurately the reality of our culture, I think that the attitude of plenty has strategical long-term advantages, such as fostering dialogue between groups and individuals, collaboration, consciousness of communities being interconnected and thus mutually reflective of one another, and so on. This view is consistent with the now familiar symbolism of the Goddess: Her circles, webs, spirals, roots and branches, and other forms of organic movement, are immanent and reflected in the 'open world' approach.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Brenda Dobia, "Approaching the Hindu Goddess of Desire," in *Feminist Theology* 16.1 (2007): 68-69

²⁸⁴ Perhaps such an argument similarly applies to two definitions of "religion" as well, the first being that religion is culturally located and is expressive of a particular culture in a specific time and place; the other is that religion is expressive of human needs more generally, and, if divine figures are real (as devotees claim), they may be accessible to persons not only of that specific culture. These considerations further complicate identity-based narratives regarding the 'authenticity' and 'ownership' of certain religious claims and figures – and merit their own discussion, which is unfortunately outside the scope of the present project.

Finally, scarcity-based discourses of “borrowing” eclipse the idea of spiritual quest and revelation, and the discovery, perhaps even in a previously foreign image, something of the intensely personal and the profoundly sacred. Rachel McDermott wrote that “Kali devotionalism in the West must take on its own indigenous forms if it is to adapt to its new environment,”²⁸⁵ and as can be seen from the various case studies presented above, the Western Kali seems to be coming into her own in ways that are unique and rooted in the social and devotional realities of her Western devotees.

Another way of conceptualizing the debate is to return to experience as an organizing principle, and to examine the issue of authenticity from within this paradigm. One of the key differences between Western and Eastern modes of approaching Kali perhaps lies in *decoding* the *experience* of the goddess, both in terms of *context* and *content*. Even such notions as empowerment and freedom can be entirely context-specific. Roxanne Kamayani Gupta perhaps puts it best when she contrasts her own expectations, desires, and constructions of Kali with those of Māyī, an elderly *pujarini* in a small Kali shrine that Gupta frequented in Benares, while conducting her own research on the Aghori sect. Though Kali Ma of that shrine is intensely meaningful for Gupta in a spiritual sense, she found that her vision of the goddess differed, at least initially, from the vision of Māyī, who had surrendered her life and selfhood to the service of Ma. Their relationships, both that of Māyī towards Kali and of Gupta towards Māyī, were punctuated with a motherly desire to nurture and protect, yet the two interpreted these relationships differently. Māyī, a priestess of the goddess, was not an embodiment of Kali but her absolute devotee and caretaker — perhaps against the expectations of some spiritual feminists. Throughout their relationship, Gupta supported Māyī with small gifts and sums of money, as well as with devotional acts such as buying garments for the goddess. Gupta also recalls getting involved more seriously on one occasion by expelling a young man who was abusing Māyī and exploiting her small temple for drug money, a situation that had enraged Gupta and almost led her to commit a serious act of violence. In fact, there is a moment of shame and realization in the narrative that resembles, perhaps unconsciously, the proverbial moment when Kali steps on Shiva in popular iconography, stopped in her tracks, her rage gone — Gupta, similarly, had looked at

²⁸⁵ McDermott, “The Western Kali,” 305

her would-be victim and felt pity for him and his already miserable existence. As a result, Gupta's understanding of the goddess is both personal, and anthropological, and she finds that straddling this divide between scholar and devotee, both Eastern and Western, is the goddess herself, who is greater than these distinctions. Gupta writes:

Kali might be better understood in a sense directly opposed to Western notions of empowerment as external agency. I would understand her instead in terms of surrender, a total acceptance of the external conditions in the face of which one feels powerless. This invokes an ever-present awareness of the human's inevitable surrender to time itself. For in the form of death, time swallows all. In that case, Kali's terrible ferocity represents, not an empowered agency *in* time, but the terror of a transcendent time *beyond* time, a time that envelops all temporality, past, present, and future. Within a Hindu framework, this surrender to transcendent inevitability, as in the case of Māyī, can look a lot like the egoless state needed to attain enlightenment. To the Westerner, it can look a lot like powerlessness.

The disjuncture of meaning between "Eastern" and "Western" readings of Kali, between "surrender" and "empowerment" [...] For me, Mā Kali will always be the "Great Mother," the timeless one, a deity so powerful that even *in* time, She is capable of resolving all conflicts — perhaps even the basic differences between indigenous and "Western" ways of relating to Her.²⁸⁶

What is notable in this reading is the understanding of Kali as a sacred entity greater than either her Eastern or Western incarnations, a divine reality to be experienced, rather than a cultural truth "owned" by one side or another. Some Indian feminist authors have similarly written about the need to "rescue" Kali (and other Hindu goddesses) from Brahminical and patriarchal interpretations, which likewise leave women disempowered by these very symbols of female power and potency.²⁸⁷ What is one to make of this multi-vocal discourse? While Kali is moving into an uneasy territory, somewhere on the intersection of popular culture and feminist spirituality, often the debate around her is that of authenticity, interpretation, and the 'rightness' of her worship. Tangled up in these debates are questions of power and identity. Yet, who owns Kali? Who own religious experience? Obviously, these are complex questions. I agree with scholars such as McDermott and Pintchman in that many of the Western appropriations of Kali

²⁸⁶ Roxanne Kamayani Gupta, "Kali Māyī", in *Encountering Kali*, ed. by Rachel Fell McDermott and Jeffrey Kripal (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 141

²⁸⁷ Some authors writing on this subject include Line Gupta, Madhu Khanna, Santanu K. Patro, and others.

are done without a deep knowledge of her Indic tradition (the very one that gives rise to her most salient iconography and sacred texts), and such appropriations often involve frustrating blunders and thoughtless generalizations. Yet, I am not sure this is enough to dismiss them as “inauthentic”. After all, as demonstrated in the first two chapters, India’s goddess tradition is likewise composed of a diversity of approaches and interpretations, even if it is underlined by a “gynocentric matrix”, to use Saxena’s at expression.

Importantly, a salient feature of Western Kali appropriations is *direct and embodied experience*, and it is around experience that I choose to organize my analysis. It appears that many of the men and women who appropriate Kali, while doing so consciously, are responding to a mysterious and powerful encounter with the sacred. Whether they practice closely following the Indic tradition or in some syncretic form seems to me merely a matter of personal choice; to claim that there is one single style or mode of worshipping the goddess appears to establish a power relationship, not much different from the one that Indian feminists criticize in their discussion of Brahminical “take-over” of goddess religion. In adopting an approach based on immanence and experience, I hope to penetrate the lived religious landscapes of Kali’s Western devotees past the discourses of borrowing and authenticity and into the reality of encounters with the goddess. Situated in the “ec-centric” circles of history and culture explored above, Western Kali spirituality nonetheless responds to real, lived religious realities. It is these very realities that I explore in greater detail in the following chapter, looking at a syncretic Kali tradition flowering at the intersection of Eastern and Western goddess narratives, and paving the future for revolutionary, embodied, eco-feminist religion.

4. WITCHES IN KALIFORNIA: KALI'S NEW FRONTIERS ON THE WEST COAST

Overview

It is now time to look at a case of lived Kali religiosity in North America: the Devi Mandir of Sharanya, a syncretic tradition combining elements of Shaktism, Tantra, and feminist Witchcraft. In my discussion of Sharanya I draw upon data collected through participant observation (attending Kali puja), a group interview, and in-depth follow-up interviews with members of the Sharanya community. I will also be supporting and supplanting it with materials from the temple's website and publications by Chandra Alexandre, High Priestess and CEO of Sharanya, who is a scholar and theologian in her own right. Since the sample size is rather modest, I do not purport to draw any definitive conclusions about this particular tradition or its devotees, as they too grow and evolve over time, as can be observed even from subtle changes to the website content, which I have following for over two years now. Rather, I am interested to present their voices and experiences as another strand in the multicoloured tapestry that is the Western Kali tradition, which reveal something about the *possibilities* of engaging with and experiencing the divine in the form of Kali in the West. I recognize that my time in California was rather limited (overall I had spent a little less than a month travelling and gathering data, not including the follow-up interviews conducted over the phone at later dates), so my main aim here is to present a snapshot in time of a living, vibrant, and constantly evolving tradition, and to suggest further areas of research and exploration. Despite these limitations, I believe this data provides a valuable glimpse into the experiential aspects of feminist goddess religion, and the spaces, geographical and devotional, that Western Kali devotees may occupy and transform.

In addition to the attending Kali puja at Sharanya, which is the focus of this chapter, I have also attended a much more traditional Kali puja at the Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach. However, I do not focus here on the latter, since my engagement there was very brief. I only mention it here, since having experienced both styles of worship provided me with a very useful

context, a sort of foil to Sharanya, reminding one that the phenomenon of Kali in the West, and even in California specifically, is diverse and complex.

When I had embarked upon data collection in California, I did not know what to expect, since very little research has been conducted in this area, and no ethnographic work that I know of. Though I came prepared with some preliminary questions, my central interest in conducting this research was to learn about the experiential aspects of practitioners' engagements with the goddess, and to learn how, if at all, the ways Western Kali devotees approached the goddess differed from her Indian context. Following this 'blank slate' format, and also for the purposes of brevity and structure, I have broken up the data used here into clusters, based on the type of information they contain and how I had arrived at these findings. I begin with the Kali puja I have attended, alternating thick description and excerpts of transcripts of my audio recording of the evening²⁸⁸ with a breakdown of the various steps and ritual elements. In this section I also draw on Alexandre's writing in elucidating the ethos and origin of the tradition.

Then, I move on to the group interview conducted following the puja and the two in-depth interviews. These follow-up conversations included topics such as the respondents' personal engagement with the goddess and goddess religion, special experiences, their arrival at Sharanya, previous religious and spiritual background, and individual practice carried out outside of or in conjuncture with participating in Sharanya training and events. Both of the interviewees had experience with Sharanya's priestess-training program, *Daughters of Kali*, and participated consistently in worship and celebrations, thus representing senior members of the community. In presenting their accounts I endeavour, as much as space limitations would allow, to let their voices guide the narrative. Following this exposition is a brief analysis section, in which I return to the material to make connections with Kali religiosity as discussed up until now, and outline possible trajectories for future study in this area. By presenting my findings in this manner I hope to create a rich and textured entry into the tradition, as part of the ongoing dialogue between scholars, practitioners, and devotees that is Western Kali spirituality.

²⁸⁸ All audio recordings were made with express permission of the participants, obtained beforehand. Excerpts, transcribed by me, are used here mostly as a narrative tool, to lend the voices of the practitioners the immediacy of a first-person account, as well as to serve as "thick descriptions" of the puja events. They are not intended as official statements of any kind. Also, no video recordings or still photography were taken, as it did not seem appropriate in that context.

I. Calling the Corners and Reciting Mantras: the Devotional Path of Sharanya

1. Kali Puja in San Francisco: A Syncretic Ritual Tradition

It was an act of serendipity that my research trip to California in the fall of 2010 coincided with the festival of Navaratri – the Nine Nights of the Goddess, an auspicious time to embark upon an encounter with Kali. Just a few days before attending Sharanya Kali puja in San Francisco I was visiting Kali Mandir in Laguna Beach and their annual Kali puja event, which reminded me strongly of goddess worship as I had seen it in India: elaborate offerings of flowers, fruit and saris, and many hours of joyful *bhajans*. The only thing that belied that Kali Mandir was located in California and not in West Bengal was a statue of Mary, located in the temple yard and included in the round of *aarti* which opened the evening, along with *murtis* of Gaṇeśa, Shiva, and others. Driving back from Laguna Beach to San Francisco, I wondered what would puja at Sharanya look like, if it would resemble traditional Hindu worship, and whether or not it, too, would be conducted primarily in Bengali.

Every month Sharanya hosts a public puja service at the Cultural Integration Fellowship in San Francisco, in addition to its annual Kali Puja event. However, this time I was invited to a smaller worship at Chandra's home sanctuary. We had spoken previously by phone and exchanged a few emails, and I had scoured the organization's extensive and detailed website for information. Although I still did not know what to expect in terms of ritual, I had endeavoured to wear red as per Chandra's suggestion: red is the colour of energy, a colour sacred to the goddess. At Chandra's I was greeted warmly and invited to sit in the living room, while finishing touches were put in preparing the sacred space in the altar room and while we waited for more participants to show up. Chandra's small urban apartment is dominated by the goddess: Kali is in the icons on the walls, depicted in both traditional and modern interpretations; Kali is in the books that line the shelves, and she is the souvenirs from India that are displayed everywhere. The atmosphere is warm and friendly, though I can feel it slowly turning both festive and solemn, that strange combination of emotions that often characterizes rites of worship. As the last late comers arrive, our small group numbers nine in total, including myself, and this is rather

appropriate, as nine is a number that is significant to the goddess, and especially so around Navaratri.

As soon as everything is ready, Chandra gets everyone's attention and requests we assemble in the living room. Her opening remarks are meant to guide the participants in preparing mentally and emotionally for entering a sacred space, and to help each person focus their thoughts and set an "intention" in one's 'heart-centre', the *saṅkalpa*,²⁸⁹ for the evening — a sort of spiritual goal to be worked at during this particular worship. This prepares the group for undertaking ritual actions through creating internal, as well as external, 'temple space':

[We are] entering into increasingly sacred space, the openness of our hearts commensurate with the surrendering of our ego. Letting ourselves find in this moment a sense of centredness, of grounding, the feel[ing] in our our heartbeat, the yearning toward the divine in our soul and the divine toward us, allowing our love for the divine to find and fan that flame in our heart centre, the coming together of our individual will, with Her will. Bringing from the centredness of that flame, rising, connecting to soul, into conscious awareness the 'what it is' of your worship tonight, the 'why you're here' of your worship tonight; an answer to your quest, your seeking, in the form of your own personal commitment, allowing that to be held and resonate, as you retain silence and enter into the space of worship. And as you enter, again mindful of the crossing of [unclear], that sacred threshold between one reality and another. Taking a breath, or touching the floor as you enter and honouring that sacred intention you just set for yourself. Jai Ma.²⁹⁰

Such an invocation of both human and divine will, and a conscious entry into a sacred mind space, differs significantly from both normative Indian puja and the puja I have attended at Kali Mandir, where the distances between deity, priest, and devotees are more rigidly maintained. Slowly, Chandra begins to chant "AUM MA", and the others join in, all the while entering the altar room and forming a circle. The space is small, but cozy; awash in candlelight and covered with images of the goddess, the colours red, orange, and dark predominate. It feels womb-like, and perhaps that is the intention. Assembled in a circle, the participants face not only the deity

²⁸⁹ Sanskrit — literally meaning "vow", "determination", or "oath"; a taking of a decision or a stance.

²⁹⁰ I had endeavoured to be as accurate as possible in my transcription, yet some lacunae and occasional confusion is inevitable when transcribing from an audio file, and whenever uncertain of a certain term or word, or else completing a sentence that may have been drowned out by music or other voices, I indicate this in square brackets, also used to note shifts in speaker and clarification of context. In some places I have also edited speech for clarity and flow (removing repetitive filler words such as "like" or "you know"), though on the most part it remains natural. Spelling of technical and Sanskrit terms and references for some of the chants were verified using *Kali Puja* by Swami Satyananda Saraswati (Napa, CA: Devi Mandir Publications, 2005), a volume of collected prayers, hymns, and rituals, which was recommended to me by one of my informants as an important resource to the tradition. All such excerpts of transcripts have been set off in the text with a different font and font size to make them easily distinguishable.

but also each other; a group of worshippers creates sacred space together, and for the duration of the ritual functions as a whole. Similar to the format of Witchcraft-type circle casting, Chandra acts as leader of ritual and carries out the principal actions of worship, but active participation is expected and encouraged from all those present. A conscious “working” with the energies of the ritual is also important:

If you're feeling at any moment disconnected, allow yourself to take a breath and find that flame at the centre of your heart once more. Allowing yourself to come back to the place of beginning for yourself, the place of the next turning for yourself. And taking a moment now to recognize the nine nights of Navaratri, the nine nights of the goddess. The sacred culmination with Durga, the inaccessible one, universal mother, vanquishing the great demon, and allowing ourselves to feel within our bodies that process on the microcosm. Allowing ourselves to feel into the place of connection to Universal Mother, to the place in us that holds infinite compassion for ourselves and the world, the place in us that's able to see injustice, conquer our own demons, be in the world in a way that promotes health and wholeness.

The embodied nature of the worship is thus encouraged and actively sought out, which is punctuated by the act of casting the circle and naming oneself in the presence of the goddess, and thus “claiming responsibility” for the worship (the act of naming oneself in the presence of the deity is also seen in Hindu goddess worship, as I had observed at a Kali puja I attended in Delhi²⁹¹):

And from this place beginning our worship in the casting of the circle, hand to hand. We cast this circle hand to hand...

Jai Ma. Our circle is cast. Allow ourselves to look around this room, this is our community of worship for the night, these are our brothers and sisters, our journeyers on the great journey. Jai Ma. [All:] Jai Ma... And in this space I'd like us to introduce ourselves, claiming full responsibility for the worship, each one of us owning by the pronunciation of our names, the utterance of those syllables into this circle, the willingness to worship Kali Ma, the willingness to take responsibility for our presence, and our relationship with the divine in this moment, however that might feel most appropriately manifest for us.

The next step is to “call the corners”, a Wiccan/ Witchcraft ritual which serves to ground the cast circle in a harmonious relationship with the elements, and to situate it in the living universe. Each “corner” is roughly oriented on a cardinal direction (sometimes these are marked by placing candles of the appropriate colour in that corner), and the Guardians of each direction are invoked into the circle, to lend their protection and wisdom to the ritual. In the case of the Kali puja at

²⁹¹ I had travelled to India on two separate study courses offered at the University of Ottawa in collaboration with ISSJS (summer 2010) and with the University of Mumbai (summer 2012). Though the focus of the courses was the study of Jainism and Indian religion more broadly, I had many opportunities to visit goddess temples and observe Hindu and Jain goddess worship.

Chandra's, this was a less elaborate affair, though the associations of the directions and elements were preserved. It was similarly a chance for others to participate; while Chandra opened with the north (earth), her three current trainees 'called' the other three. I find it interesting that Chandra begins with the north, though the traditional invocation usually starts in the east; sitting to the side of the altar, she was facing the same direction as the *murti* of Kali Ma, and Kali is said to face south (Daksina-Kali) because in Indic cosmology death dwells in the south, and Kali, as Eternity itself, faces and defeats death. This seemed to me like a conscious identification of the direction of the goddess as the primary one. Furthermore, the invocation is modified by Sanskritic mantras and application of *mudras* at certain time (more so on the part of *Daughters of Kali* trainees). Some of these Chandra explains as she goes along:

...whoever so feels inspired in whatever tradition, in any way that you feel comfortable to recognize those energies, we begin in the North. Welcome, spirits and guardians of the North, powers of the Earth, of our breasts and womb, of our full belly, of the caves and the cave dwellers, mama bear sleeping, of all the mothers who protect their young, of all the fathers who protect their young, of the relationships that move us closer as human beings, into relationships with one another, and with the divine... and would you welcome into our circle tonight powers of the earth, powers of the North, welcome! *Sva-ha*. [All repeat:] *Sva-ha*

[Chandra and three students]: *cha-hum-pat* [using special mudras]. *Sva-ha*

...the concretization of our invocation comes with these [unclear] mantras: *cha hoom pat* - and on "*pat*" we clap to solidify those energies. And [say] "*Sva-ha*", making that intention an actively engaged intention for the circle. So lets try it together..

After the corners are called, we move to a set of purifying actions, which integrate Shakta and Witchcraft influences. The format here is similarly more inclusive and the lines between priest and participant are blurred. Passing around a vial of sacred waters from the temple of Kamakhya, each person anoints the one seated to their left, placing a *tilak* with the ring finger of the right hand, and pronouncing "shanti rastu", or "peace be upon you". While the vial is passed around, Chandra reminds us of the connection between these waters, all the waters of the planet that "need healing", and the channels of energy, or "prana" in one's own body. While the rest of the group holds an AUM chant, Chandra and those who know the appropriate mantra chant together. This includes even those who are new to this format of Kali puja, or do not know the mantras, in participating in as equal measure as possible.

Following are invocations that are more usual to the Indic puja format, though these are often phrased in terms of “inviting into the circle” the energies of specific deities, ancestors or powers — a language often encountered in neopagan ritual. Tantric elements are also included, such as pronouncing the appropriate mantras and signing *mudras*. Though not all of the participants present knew these ritual actions, Chandra often invited everyone to “support” her with the holding of an “AUM”, joining in with a simple chant or refrain, and at some point even picking up rattles and help create a rhythmic musical accompaniment. Following each invocation, the group, led by Chandra uttered the *bija* (root) mantra of that particular deity, in a particular way elaborated below. Whenever possible, or whenever she deemed fit, Chandra explained the hand gestures and words spoken, and instructed the group how they should be held or pronounced, if it was appropriate. Like in many instances of Indian worship, the first to be honoured was Agni, Lord of Fire:

Raise your hands in this *mudra*, allowing this to be our sacred cauldron, a container of the flame, of our will, of the divine will, of our hearts, of His heart, welcoming in Lord Agni, Lord of Fire, the purveyor of ritual, he who gives us the grace of fire, the light that brings form into our awareness, that helps us be in the material world, the world of nature, of Prakriti; helps us cook our food, and gives us good things to eat...

...Allowing the *bija* of Agni, Ram, to come forward from your heart, we'll do this in four parts, spoken aloud, whispered, brought inside, and laying the foundation of Agni in this... Breathing in: Ram, ram, ram, ram, ram-ram-ram, ram-ram.....

The connection between Agni, fire, will, and the image of the sacred cauldron is particularly evocative, a rather organic blending of Eastern and Western associations. Next, the ancestors are honoured and welcomed into the sacred space. Following is Lord Gaṇeśa, remover of obstacles, and Chandra teaches a short mantra which is the refrain to a longer invocation. While one of the students present takes over for this part of the ritual, all join in on the refrain. After Gaṇeśa comes the turn of Shiva, however, before the strictly ritual sequence can proceed, the floor opens up for personalized sharing of practitioners’ own experiences with Shiva. A few people speak up at Chandra’s invitation, and I present here only short outtakes from some of the respondents:²⁹²

Well, since you asked... I gave myself to him, I took my own virginity many years ago, and he was the one I offered it to, because, such a rite of passage should not be something in the back of

²⁹² Given names have been changed, though I have retained the ritual names (if used), or if permission to use name has been obtained.

a Civic... I wanted it to be sacred, so... [...] And, he was very nurturing, and tender, and yes, it hurt, but he helped me through the process; and I'd been fasting all day, and I had a group of ladies with me to hold me through it, so, I have, as you said, an *intimate* relationship with Shiva, and deep love for him... (Sarah)²⁹³

I was in my altar room today... we drove up early, early this morning, and since our altar is a bit smaller than usual, I was going to bring two things... to just put on the altar, and, Shiva, he just wanted to come. And I kept thinking, oh, I'm trying to cut down on everything and he just wanted to come, and I kept going into my room, and finally, like, ok, he wants to come, so I brought him; he spoke to me tonight, and he was very excited about being here! So, Jai Shiva! (Maya)

I was once called Shiva... I love the fact that he's about transformation. And he's about the whole wheel of destruction, and rebirth, and he dances between the worlds, he's just a flexible guy, you know? And I just love that about him, he can flow in and out, and at the same time I think he has this, you know, Kali can dance on Shiva, and he's pretty got it together... I just feel very close to him, I feel he is very much in my heart, and I'm part of his energy... (John)

The aspect of Shiva most important to me, is the Nataraja, Dancing Shiva; and just an image to give to the group, in India there was a temple of a thousand *lingas*, and going in, it's completely black, and you walk it, it's very womb-like, so you walk in, and you go to your left and go almost in a square, and there's *lingas* that are six feet tall, and they're all black in the blackness, so you're walking in this labyrinth and on either side of you are these giant *lingas*, and there is a thousand of them... (Anna)

It is notable that of many these experiences are deeply embodied, and all are personal and immediate. The preferred form of Shiva is that which is transformational, a point especially stressed by the last two informants, and the relationship between individuals and the deity is framed in personal terms, whether concerning something so monumental as a defloration rite, or a simple “request” to appear on tonight’s altar — a theme I will return to later on.

Following these comments comes the now-familiar format of the invocation, wherein Chandra chants the sacred mantra and the others support her with an AUM, closing with a four-part uttering of the *bija* mantra, (*hraum*, in Shiva’s case). Then Chandra performs an *abiseik* for Shiva, which is accompanied by singing and shaking rattles that are passed around to all. Before

²⁹³ Later I had a chance to discuss this in greater depth with Sarah. The reference here is to an actual self-defloration rite, performed under the guidance of her spiritual guide and teacher, as well as other senior women from the neo-pagan and goddess practitioners community. Though it is an interesting and personalized ritual, I do not explore it here more fully for space considerations — and also because it is not directly related to the tradition of Kali in this case. In the following sections I explore the experiences of this informant in greater depth, looking at a more syncretic and eclectic approach to Sharanya’s Kali worship.

instructing the group how to proceed, Chandra pauses to draw attention to the flowers used in the ceremony, addressing one of the women who had brought them:

Chandra: And, these flowers are re-birthed, you want to tell how they are re-birthed?

Balipriya: About a year ago someone brought in some potted mums, they took the flowers off to offer to Lord Shiva, and just discarded the plant itself, so I took it home and I planted it, and these flowers are the result, so, they're doubly blessed....

This consciousness of plant life as living and worthy of care and attention recalls, in a way, the story of Kali and the Hibiscus plant discussed in the previous chapter, and, is part of the eco-feminist vision of Sharanya. For the *abiseik*, Chandra invites everyone to take lots of flowers, and explains that all will have a chance to add to the offering, a format at once similar to and different from *abiseik* rituals I have seen in some Hindu temples:

So, yeah, please take lots... [about flowers]. Once the offering is made, I'll invite you to add your flowers here, to the lingam-yoni that we have... and also, you will notice at the end of the offering I will take of the offerings with the ring finger of my right hand around the stone, and taste of it. So take in that blessing for yourself, if you desire. So lets begin by singing... you'll have to support me in doing the *abiseik* by singing along - it's really easy if you don't know it, you'll figure it out.

Shiva, Shiva, Shiva, sham-bô.... Haré, haré, haré, sham-bô... (x2)
Mahadeva, sham-bô.... Mahadeva, sham-bô.... (x2)

At the end of the ceremony all are invited to take some flowers for their home altars (so long as they can be disposed of within three days and “returned to the earth in a sacred way” — implying burial or burning).

At this point in the worship, it is finally time to call on and welcome Ma, who, as Chandra put it, can now “dance with all of these great energies”. It has been about forty five minutes into the evening, and the atmosphere in the room has become charged with potential. Having been sitting in the small altar room in the company of eight others, eyes adjusted to the low flickering light, and ears still ringing with the sounds of songs and invocations, one’s sense of time and space has been slowly altered. The quiet that follows all the joyous singing and frank sharing of experiences feels qualitatively different, as if some new threshold is being approached. Chandra taken this moment to remind the group of their intention for tonight and the reason why they have gathered here tonight — a worship in honour of Kali Ma:

Taking a moment to again find the flame in our heart and revisit our *saṅkalpa*, finding our breath, allowing the breath to flow freely from the toes to the crown of our head, lengthening as we inhale, from the crown of our head back to our toes, let the flow of active energy within us activated, awake and alive, moving and vibrant, tingling... Allow the feeling of your subtle body to express itself, perhaps as heat or tingles on your skins, perhaps in your mind's eye you see colours, whatever it might be for you... Allowing your awareness of the unseen realm to heighten... to be more real... beginning to take that *saṅkalpa*, that sacred commitment, the intention you've set, and bring it forward, continuing to surrender Ego and deepen into Self... Allow yourself to deepen into a knowing-ness beyond the rational mind, into higher mind and intuition of your true nature and your soul's purpose... Feeling that inner connection between you and the Divine Mother; between you and the Divine, as you see her in this moment... taking a breath once more front he toes to the tips of your head, lengthening, from your crown back down to the tip of your toes, deepening... Allowing our in breath to be the syllable "SA" and our exhale to be the syllable "HUM", therefore with each breath this waking meditation, "SA HUM", a statement of our connection to Her: "SHE I AM"

The main invocation in honour of Kali is the Kali Gāyatrī, led by Balipriya, one of Chandra's students. Later, when reviewing my notes and recordings, I was able to verify the words and the translation using *Kali Puja*, a worship manual recommended to me by one of my informants, who was also present at this worship. The Kali Gayatri is thought to be Kali's central and primary mantra: “*om mahākālyai ca vidmahe śmaśāna vāsinyai ca dhīmahi tanno Kali pracodayāt. Om* We meditate upon the Great Goddess Who Takes Away Darkness, contemplate She Who Resides in the Cremation Grounds (the ultimate form into which creation dissolves). May the Goddess grant to us increase” (emphasis mine).²⁹⁴

Repeating the Gāyatrī invocation three time, the group chants Kali's *bija* mantra *krīm* in the familiar fashion. Then we all stand up for *aarti*, which Chandra performs to our singing and clapping and ringing the bells in front of the small *murti* of Kali:

We bow in our worship, offering that *bija* mantra, the essence of the Divine Mother, into form, into Kali Ma, before us here in this room, *murti*, beginning to allow the vibrations of that force within us to be felt as shakti, within us, within this space, within this circle...

Om krīm kālyai namaḥ...²⁹⁵ Jai Ma! Jai Ma! Ja jai Ma!!...

²⁹⁴ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Kali Puja* (Napa, CA: Devi Mandir Publications, 2005), 45. Devi Mandir is a private goddess temple in Napa, California, allowing visitors only by appointment. However, they maintain a detailed website and their devotional literature is available both online and in some New Age bookstores.

²⁹⁵ Meaning: “I bow to the Goddess Kali Who Takes Away Darkness.” Transcription and translation found in *Kali Puja*, 65.

Chandra blows the ceremonial conch and we all clap and shout “Jai Ma!” and “Jai Kalika Mata Ki!”, ringing the bells furiously. The festivities are punctuated by Chandra’s infant daughter joining us in the temple room. Despite the efforts of her father (who is not participating in the puja), she was refusing to adhere to her bedtime. Oddly, the clamour of bells and cymbals and chanting voices, and wafting incense, seem to calm her down, and there she is, sitting very quietly on her mother’s hip and watching the proceedings with curiosity. Meanwhile, markers, paper, and the sacred substances (camphor, alcohol, etc) are passed around, as the group prepares for the next part of the puja, which Chandra introduces by keeping our minds on the intention inherent in the worship, the object of which, ultimately, is transformation:

Allowing the energy of our celebration, of Ma, to transition in this part of our ceremony into a deeper, internal, and more reflective stance in our relationship with Her and how that moves within us, the power of *prana-shakti*, the vital energy that flows as we've opened our puja in those *nadis*, in those sacred channels within us in our chakras, within the subtle body. And allowing ourselves to begin to align, a little bit more strongly, within us, beyond even the *sankalpa* that we set at the beginning, certainly starting at that place perhaps, but beyond that into a question of our soul's purpose. Allowing this worship, allowing our connection to the Divine Mother to help enliven and enlighten us... So, in this space we begin the transformational process with the welcoming in of the sacred substances. Each of these take us into a new level of consciousness, potentially of awareness, and we do have alcohol, we have beer and wine both. If you don't wish to partake of these sacred substances, you are welcome to just honour the presence of them for this transformational journey, and not partake of them...

We begin with camphor... Allowing this to awaken our *ajna* chakra, our third eye, the process of the inner sight, the allowing of the internal landscape to begin being revealed... from our left eye, inner to outer, to our right eye, inner to outer, requesting through this ritual act awareness of sacred sight. The paper and the pens are for the writing of a prayer, a wish. And these, in your own individual time, you can come up and offer them at the feet of our divine mother, and perhaps touching them to her heart, and to your heart, and taking them back with you, again for your altar. And allowing that prayer... *this* worship to be with you for the next few days. And by the third day, returning that prayer back into the earth, whether burning it or burying it, however it feels most appropriate for you to do so. So, as you're writing these prayers and deepening, we'll continue to pass the sacred substances, and we'll begin offering our sacred syllables of AUM MA once again to her...

... Begin with our wine blessing... hold an AUM with me. In times of old, long ago, a curse was placed on the process of wine-making, and through this mantra we remove the curses from the wine, we ask that it will be purified and aid in our transformational journey...

Next around come the Tarot cards, kept until now on the altar among other ritual implement, and as each participant takes one at random from the deck, Chandra suggests to keep in mind a question for Ma: “What do I need to know at this time? What will help my on my journey?” The

deck is a somewhat unusual round deck, one which I later learn to be Vicky Noble's Motherpeace Tarot, dedicated to the Divine Feminine. While the cards and the substances make their way around, Chandra prepares a small flame in bronze bowl, for the next offering:

We also offer *sharputdhara* as part of this process, taking a pinch of the sandalwood between your ring finger and your thumb, this mantra, the mantra that removes curses, from the Caṇḍī...

So, on "svaha" making the offering into the flame (...) From all the ways in which the feminine has been maligned, whether we do it to ourselves, internalize the oppression, or whether we take it in from the outside, this is a time to remove those curses. From this place of deeper awareness and presence...

One by one, participants throw pinches of sandalwood powder into the bowls, while Chandra and her students utter the mantra that destroys all curses. The scent of sandalwood, the heat of burning candles and of proximate bodies, the flickering red glow in the room, and the hour or so spent chanting and praying has now prepared the participants for some personal, meditative time with the Goddess. The intimate space and the close proximity of deity and devotee blurs the boundaries between these realms. The room seems to swim with presence. The camphor feels at once cool and hot on one's eyelids, tingling slightly; the dry red wine has left an astringent, spicy taste in one's mouth. One by one, folded pieces of paper are placed at the feet of Kali on the altar bearing their authors' wishes and prayers, and some participants bow deeply as they do so. Once everyone is settled back on their cushions, Chandra leads another round of AUM MA, powerful at first, then dying down to a solemn, whispered incantation.

In the smoky hazy of incense and fire, Chandra invites us to take *darshan* of Ma, and to experience this exchange in the most immediate and full way possible:

Allowing your gaze to capture her eyes, allowing her eyes to capture your soul, allowing for a moment the separation to disappear, realizing the space of your heartbeat which transcends the physical, feeling the movement beyond space and time, that original vibrational energy, love of the Divine that created you.

Beginning to chant the next invocation, Chandra leads up to the culminating part of the puja: the offering of sacrifice. Passing around a melon in lieu of animal victim, she none the less instructs the group to "release into it anything that needs to be transformed and offer that into the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. This is a sacrifice, a consciously chosen surrendering, a letting go, a freeing-up of space for good things to come." As the melon is passed from hand to hand, each participant pauses for a moment, holding it in his or her hands. The tempo and volume of the

chant build up furiously, and once the melon is back in from of Chandra, the crescendo of the mantra crushes over it along with a knife that cleaves it in half. Slowly, the words of the chant slow down and trail off, and a shift is palpable in the room. Quietly, Chandra speaks to this change:

...Taking a breath, finding again your *sankalpa*, feeling the energy that flows within you now, and drawing it out from the toes to the crown of your head, and from the crown of your head back down to your toes. Feeling the fullness of the vibrations within you, the fullness of your heart song in this moment. Jai ma!

The worship is finalized with the uttering of gratitudes, and going around the circle each participant has a chance to express his or her gratitude to whatever person or being, and for whatever event and circumstance. A final chant, supported by an AUM from the group, concludes the worship, as well as a prayer of gratitude to all the beings, ancestors, *devas* and *devis* present in the circle. Opening the circle, Chandra concludes with a familiar Wiccan saying, adapted for the worship of Kali in this context: “Jai Jai Ma!! Our circle is open but never broken! Merry meet, and merry part, and merry meet again! May the blessings of Kali Ma be forever in your hearts! Jai Ma!! Jai Jai Ma!!!” Reaching for a bundle of sacred red thread, she extracts lengths of it from the loosely knotted bunch, instructing the group as to how to tie it for one another, three and a half times around one’s left wrist. *Prasad* from the altar is also distributed around the circle — cookies and strawberries, cakes and ale — and the sharing and partaking of it is in part a Hindu, and in part a neopagan practice (in Witchcraft the sharing of cakes and ale after a circle is commonly thought to ground, refresh, and re-integrate practitioners into the mundane realm after a magical ritual).

2. *Crafting Sha’can: The Marriage of East and West*

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this Kali puja is its organic way of adapting a Hindu practice to the needs, expectations, and conventions of Western devotee-practitioners. Rather than merely incorporating Hindu deities into a neopagan or Wiccan ritual, as is often the case in spiritual feminist explorations of the Goddess, this is a truly syncretic Kali practice, incorporating Tantric Shakta elements (in particular the tasting of *abiseik* liquid, and offering of

camphor, wine, etc) and structuring them in a way accessible to Westerners who may not be familiar with Hindu conventions of worship. The format of the neopagan “circle” seems especially fitting in this context, allowing for a sacred space to be created regardless of being in a temple or not (I mean here literally a structure built on consecrated ground), and alleviating the hierarchies between participants and emphasizing personal effort and development. It is also important to note that Alexandre’s familiarity with Shakta Tantric Kali worship is firsthand, as she was initiated by a Kali priest, a Brahmin who is also a *tantrika*. As described in “Our Beginning” on the Sharanya website, Alexandre went to India in 1998 as part of graduate work on grassroots ecofeminist religion, and stayed to study the tradition of the Goddess as a result of powerful and transformative encounters. Already self-identified as a Witch and priestess of the goddess, Alexandre writes that her travels eventually took her to Puri, Orissa, where she sought out Kali in order to thank her: “It is Kali I need to see and no one else. That She is responsible for my getting through a political uprising in Digha at the southern end of West Bengal unscathed has been made perfectly clear to me.”²⁹⁶ Having come to see Kali of Maa BataKali Mandir, Alexandre’s experience proves transformative both for her and for the *pujari* who serves the Goddess at this temple, as he takes her as his student. She writes of her initiation, and eventual calling to return to North America, weaving together her roles as Witch and as Kali devotee:

Dikṣa, or initiation into Kali's mysteries is the next profound unfolding of my spiritual journey. The day comes on the August new moon, and I am thrilled when I realize it will be August 2nd, the festival of the harvest often called Lughnasad (or Lammas) in the earth-based Western calendar. It is as though Maa has answered my burning question: Can I do this? The synchronicity of timing does not escape me, and I feel She is telling me that I can have it both ways: I can be Her priestess as a Witch and a Hindu, walking as a Goddess worshiper wherever I may be in the world. To Her, I imagine, there is no distinction. [...]

My practice deepens after initiation, and on Her sacred day of Kali Puja some months later in October, I sit at the feet of the goddess in the temple, a spot that locals cannot come near. It is nearing midnight and the heat of the day lifting off the earth combined with the hot lamps that light Her image for passersby makes the sweat drip down my arms, makes my sari blouse feel even tighter than it already is, and makes me wish I couldn't see the bugs and ants crawling on my feet and ankles. I honor Her by pouring *ghee* (clarified butter) for the *homa* (fire offering) ceremony, and I remember

²⁹⁶ Chandra Alexandre, “Our Beginnings”, accessed August 22, 2012, <http://www.sharanya.org/about/history.php4>

that I am Shyam's first *chela* (student), a position of honor in the lineage tradition from which he comes.²⁹⁷

I tend to my responsibilities dutifully as the Caṇḍi Pāṭh verses resonate off the temple walls and expand into the night air. In moments of quiet, I think about the day Shyam said he'd been waiting for me, how he said his own guru had told him that one day, he would be bringing someone other than his sons to the path. I remember how Shyam said he had found the signs in my face the very first day we had met at the temple...signs telling him that I was the student to which his guru had referred. We finish our time together and he tells me the most important thing: "Go! Go back to your home land, America, and spread Mother Worship!"²⁹⁸

While designated as a registered Devi Mandir in California, Sharanya also identifies as a mission of the Maa BataKali Mandir, thus maintaining the link with its Indian origins. On the other hand, the link with Western goddess religion is likewise personal and intimate for its founder. During a group interview following the puja, Alexandre had commented that she is a hereditary Witch, inheriting this title realm of knowledge from her grandmother, who had self-identified as a Witch and brought her into the tradition. While the two paths of Kali worship and the Craft need not be automatically compatible, in the case of Sharanya's founder they are both based on direct and transformative experiences, and perhaps for this reason blend so seamlessly together into one path. The very term for this syncretic tradition — Sha'can — is a combination of the terms "Shakta" and "Wiccan", and though Alexandre is not self-identifying as a Wiccan herself, the term is useful in connoting "earth-based Western spirituality." Perhaps it is especially fitting that such a syncretic tradition would unite Kali Ma from the eastern shores of the Bay of Bengal and goddess religion of the western shore of North America into a single and powerful Mother deity.

Several other factors, aside from Alexandre's personal serendipitous experiences, contribute to the strong affinities between Shakta Kali worship and feminist goddess spirituality. Some of these I have already discussed in chapter three, and they are well illustrated by the puja described here and the manner in which Alexandre guided the group through the worship, including: honouring the divine in female form, regarding the divine as incarnate in the physical

²⁹⁷ It bears noting that this is a quite unusual arrangement for India, to be a first student and a foreigner, and to be seated at a place of honour where locals are not allowed. Unfortunately, Alexandre does not elaborate on the uniqueness of this situation in the Indian socio-religious context.

²⁹⁸ Alexandre, "Our Beginnings"

world and in human beings, respecting a variety of personal paths and approaches to the sacred, privileging an intimate and direct relationship with the divine, emphasizing individual practice and agency, and so on. The importance of direct and personal engagement with the goddess for her Western practitioners cannot be overstated; this theme has come back again and again in my conversations with Sharanya devotees, which I discuss in greater detail below. Similarly, the opportunity to commune with the divine directly, not through an interpretation of another's authority (noticeable especially in Alexandre's comments regarding ritual actions, such as "as is right for you", "as is appropriate for you in this moment", "honouring... in whatever tradition or way that works for you"). This deconstruction of authoritarian and dogmatic interpretations of worship are characteristic of Tantra, to some extent (at least vis a vis orthodox Brahminical religion), but are even more pronounced in contemporary forms of Western individual-centred religiosity. Using the format of neopagan/Wiccan circle-casting and invocation, the Sharanya tradition is able to translate Indian Shakta Tantric worship into the Western context of feminist goddess spirituality.

At the same time, aspects of Hindu goddess worship prominent in the practice of Sharanya Kali devotion are generally aligned with those aspects of Kali worship most often seized upon by spiritual feminists. In fact, feminism and eco-consciousness are clearly stated as aspects of Sharanya's tradition that are acutely relevant in today's society (one may recall here the use of a curse-lifting mantra to remove oppression of the feminine and the earth, as well as a few other earth-conscious remarks made during the puja, above). Alexander writes in an essay posted on Sharanya's website:

Ecofeminism understands our current planetary predicament to involve crises of the environment and spirit, crises that impact all of creation regardless of particularities; crises that will only be undone when women and nature, the marginalized and the oppressed, are no longer contained within a patriarchal paradigm. Goddess spirituality of the west is one counter-force that acts on multiple levels to undermine manipulative patriarchal identity branding and control. It is a subversive tactic in part because it can and does, as many of us have experienced personally, transcend national, political, and religio-cultural interests. With this, the goddess of the west (however envisioned) is today joining together with a goddess-centered spirituality of the east known as Shakta Tantra. [...]

The Goddesses of both these contexts, I believe, are coming together now at least in part to help establish an identity politic that transcends patriarchal gender valuations,

in order to finally break the bonds of the patriarchal paradigm that hold both men and women. [...]

Through SHARANYA's work in the world, we seek to develop an understanding of the Hindu fierce goddesses as they function to serve women and men in a rapidly transforming world. I therefore tend put my eye to the realm of Shakta Tantra where Mahakali (The Great Kali) of the Tantrick tradition is herself the triune vision of the goddess—Maid, Mother, and Crone, who supports all diversity in relationship.²⁹⁹

Notably, Alexandre identifies “integralism”, or the promotion of diversity and Trinitarian notions, as the unifying concept of ecofeminism, goddess spirituality, and Tantra, which all fight against the destructive life-negating and homogenizing structures of patriarchy. Sensitive to the issues of engaging with transnational religious symbols and especially ones that come from a tradition that despite an abundance of goddesses has retained many patriarchal constructs, Alexandre urges for dialogue between Western feminists and Indian feminists, regarding ecofeminism, Tantra, and spirituality. She argues for the work of Sharanya to be viewed as promoting specific action (both in the ritual, personal, and communal spheres), positively transforming and reclaiming the world around them: “unpathologizing and healing of relationships on all levels—between men and women, between the marginal and the normative, and ultimately, between our human species and the rest of the planet.”³⁰⁰ These goals, much like the goals and ethos of feminist spirituality, are organized around realms of embodied experiences, from individual experiences of female and marginal bodies, to the experiences of nature, and to the divine as *female nature*. If Indian religion indeed reveals an inner gynocentric matrix, to use Saxena's expression, then notions of *shakti*, *maya* and *prakriti* coalescing with Western theology may indeed give rise to a practice that redefines, and even universalizes goddess religion.

²⁹⁹ Chandra Alexandre, “Ecofeminism and Tantra”, accessed August 22, 2012, <http://www.sharanya.org/shacan/ecofeminismandtanta.php4>

³⁰⁰ Alexandre, “Ecofeminism and Tantra”

II. Approaching the Goddess: Responses from Practitioners and Devotees

In exploring the Kali of California in conversations with her devotees, I have been mainly interested in individuals' own path to Kali: how do they experience the goddess? How has she entered their lives, and what does she mean to them? The group interview following the puja had allowed me to ask these questions in a general manner, while two in-depth follow-up conversations with two of the women present that night illustrate the variety of meanings and contexts that converge upon Sharanya as a sacred space and foundation for practice. Due to space considerations, I cannot treat them here in as much detail as they deserve, so instead I present them as brief snapshots rather than as comprehensive portraits.

1. Informal Group Discussion: "It Is What It Is"

Still nibbling on *prasad* from the puja, I launch with the big question: What qualities of Kali Ma are the most significant, for an individual practitioner, or for society as a whole? What has drawn one here? This is a vast topic which requires much exposition and thinking, but I am curious to see what answers I get. After all, this is the crux of my inquiry, located at the intersection of conversations between scholars, feminists, mystics, and goddess practitioners. While it is impossible to address in one go, this question underscores the subsequent discussion, which begins, perhaps unsurprisingly, with a more localized inquiry: how does one practice embodied feminist Shaktism in the very tech-centric Silicone Valley? Most do not see any contradiction between the two. One respondent comments:

In one of our first conversations Chandra spoke of the methods and the path as a technology. So, for psyche, for heart, for developing the whole person, for carrying your truth out into the world in your daily life, on the mundane plane... it's all quite connected. In Shakta Tantra the world is not thought of as vile or profane, the world is thought of as part of the Divine existence... (Haravallabha)

Tantra is often thought of as a technology in the Indian context as well, a practical *marg* or path of self-effort, which may or may not be combined or not with the paths of devotion (*bhakti*), yoga, etc. To use Alexandre's apt expression, it is a "technological spiritual science" — a statement that at first glance might appear contradictory in the Western context, where 'religion'

and ‘science’ have a long and complex history of growing apart and becoming nearly antithetical to one another.

The comment regarding the secularization of the material world also reveals a juxtaposition of Tantric Shaktism with the monotheistic, Abrahamic traditions; an accent unique to the Western, neopagan, and goddess spirituality context. Others also seize on this point, which is important and revelatory: “the Divine as it is in the world, is *in* the world! So there is no separation, and, you got to take the object as the subject...” (John). Kali and goddess spirituality help reconcile this duality, both on a mythic, cosmological level, and on a personal, experiential level. For some, such reconciliation could be, in part, as simple as carrying on a meditative practice which helps achieve “withdrawal of the senses and just being still” (Haravallabha), but for others it reaches even deeper, helping mend a split between embodied experiences and guilt, and the weight guilt can have on an individual:

Well, for me... I was raised in a Christian home, and taking a very long path, found Sharanya, and have really felt connected to Ma, and connected to the *kula*³⁰¹ here, because it's not good or bad, you're not doing bad things, you're not thinking bad things... Cause I felt like, in my earlier religion that I was always doing something bad, I always felt guilty, you know, I didn't, I wasn't... I thought something I shouldn't think, or whatever, and in Tantra it's very, just like the sign [pointing to a decorative wooden plaque she brought with her] "It Is What It Is" — and it doesn't have to be a bad thing or a good thing, it can just BE. And so that helped me a lot to feel like, you know, I'm not a bad person, or I thought this thing, it's not a bad thing, it just is there. And for that purpose it was... it was so much, you know, a weight off of me, because I didn't feel like constantly, oh my gosh, I'm being good, I'm being bad, and it was more the "being bad" that was drilled into me when I was younger, and so, that's where a lot of the comfort comes for me. Also, when I first started coming, Ma scared the crap out of me, I couldn't figure out why I kept coming, But, I fell in love with Her, as a *murti* [*sic*] that I bought, and I opened up and just fell in love with Her... She takes me on Her path, which is my path, that She would like me to follow; and helps me as I go through hard things in my life, as I look at my shadows inside of myself, She's there. She will push me to look at them, so it's like, go look at this, and I get scared and she holds me. So, it's a beautiful dance between look at this dark stuff, look at this scary stuff, look at this stuff that you don't want to look at in life, and I will hold you while you look at it. (Maya)

The idea of Kali as both frightening and comforting is a recurrent one, and the notion of “holding”, like a mother or another compassionate presence would hold one, is repeated by another informant, as discussed below. This Kali is the Terrible Mother, whether the darkness she holds up for view is the internal “shadows” one faces inside oneself (in this sense she is the Kali

³⁰¹ Probably in the sense of “family unit” or “group”, as is used in South Indian Tantric Shaktism (my comments)

of Jungian archetypal analysis), or the terror of liberation and dissolution, “the terror of a transcendent time *beyond* time, a time that envelops all temporality, past, present, and future”, as Roxanne Kamayani Gupta had put it.³⁰²

Ashok Bedi, a Jungian analyst, had similarly been using images of Kali in his work with trauma patients. Kali, according to Bedi, appears as “a paradox within the psyche” (much like she is a paradoxical, monistic deity on the cosmological level). I interject here with his writing on Kali because it echoes so very closely the statements made by Maya, above. Bedi posits Kali as an archetype that is activated in times of crisis, who “amputates the darkness of our soul and makes room for the light... destroy[s] the darkness of personality and make[s] room for new consciousness to emerge”; mediating “our relationship with the transpersonal Self.”³⁰³ Bedi interprets Kali as belonging to the Shadow archetype, and traces the way her colours and symbolism correspond to Jung’s adoption of alchemical notions to describe the stages of psychic transformation:

“Kali’s three eyes represent the past, present, and future. Her white teeth symbolize the *albedo* (whiteness), or purity of the soul, her red tongue the *rubedo* (redness), or passion for life... she holds a severed head, symbolizing the **sacrifice** of our shadow... she is changeless, limitless, primordial power acting in the great drama, awakening the Shiva (unconscious masculine principle) beneath her feet” (emphasis mine).³⁰⁴

The notion of sacrifice here is used much in the same sense as the sacrifice that was offered during the puja, when each participant was invited to imbue the melon with “anything that needs to be transformed”, meaning aspects of self as well as of greater situations. This is cognate with the practice of animal sacrifice to Kali in Bengal (discussed in chapter one), an act Samanta terms the sacrifice of the “self animal”, i.e. those aspects of the self which impede one’s spiritual development and ultimate liberation. Similarly, Suzin Green (discussed in chapter three) understands her experiences with Kali and the hibiscus plant as deeply transformative, reflective of profound changes in her own psyche and personal (as well as spiritual) development. Talking with Sharanya informants, I had also seen various people make the connection between “working

³⁰² Gupta, “Kali Māyī”, 141

³⁰³ Ashok Bedi, “Kali – The Dark Goddess,” in *The Moonlit Path: Reflections on the Dark Feminine*, ed. Fred Gustafson (Berwick: Nicolas-Hays, 2003), 157

³⁰⁴ Bedi, “Kali – The Dark Goddess,” 160

through” their personal “shadows”, guilt, negativity, repressed or traumatic experiences, and, transformed by their relationship with Kali, emerge not only more psychologically wholesome, but also more spiritually advanced. It seems that using the language of psychoanalysis does not need to mean all religious or mystical experiences are “merely” internal; rather, such discussion leaves room for postulating psychic processes that are responses to and reflection of real, transformative spiritual experiences. Keeping this in mind, at least provisionally, might help clarify some of the motivations behind Western modes of approaching Kali.

Back to the group interview, having seen already many of the feminist engagements with Kali, I have posed the question of whether she is a goddess approached especially during times of crisis. Several respondents agreed with this, and Maya, quoted above, adds:

I think She comes in times when we're ready for Her to come, even if we don't feel like it... She's there when you're ready to be there, when she calls you; sometimes it just takes a while for you to feel strong enough to follow the calling, and feel the beauty that She is; and the path that you walk with Her... and so, I would say times of crisis, I would say times of needing to get kicked in the butt!

Others agreed that Kali can be “sneaky” in her approach into one’s life, a sentiment echoed by several other Western scholars and devotees of Kali such as Gupta. At the core of Kali devotion (as well as the broader neopagan and spiritual feminist movement), according to one informant, is direct experience, and not only the desire for direct experience but also lived realities that demand interpretation and understanding, which do not fit in the pre-existing moulds:

People want to have direct experience, they don't want something interpreted and handed down to them, so you know, people are not interested in having the Pope tell them the way it is, I mean, I don't think that will work anymore. I think that post-modernism had taken care of a lot of that, technology-wise... Three hundred years ago, everything was based on authority, if you wanted to know why the sun came up, well it's because — and there's an authority that can tell you, there wasn't any individual way of relating to... We've taken our own responsibility for our own knowledge and our own soul, so to speak, and traditional religion doesn't give you that direct technology, I like the fact that Chandra uses the word technology a lot, because there is a technology of how do you get these direct experiences, how do you get it so that it's implemented [*sic*] to your being and your way in the world, instead of somebody else telling you how to have those experiences, or what those experiences are and you never have them... So I think the craving is that people are looking for solutions. And I think this is because a lot of people have *had* an experience. I mean, I'm doing my dissertation on numinous experience... So, people have those experiences and they're looking for answers that make sense. (John)

An individual experience that is seized and understood by the individual is more valuable than an ‘ideal’ mystical or embodied experience (in so far as an experience may be explained or validated

by dogmatic teachings and pronouncements) — a thought echoed by several respondents. The question of authority and authenticity is also important here, and perhaps an element of disillusionment with one's early religious framework plays a role in making such statements, as in the case of Maya above. While “outside” clerical authority is viewed as intrusive and impeding one's direct engagement with the divine, authenticity is determined by direct experience as well as careful study of the philosophy, ritual, and practice. Ironically, while many scholars have criticized Western Kali practitioners for having constructed their tradition out of thin air, informants I have spoken with felt proud that, in their Kali practice, they *did* know the meanings of prayers and mantras, having studied them in detail. Some even contrasted it with having been brought up to simply “follow the rules” without deep understanding, or with the tacit and shallow engagement of those who practice out of habit rather than conscious choice:

It was a long path, going from somebody telling you, and not just telling you what to do but telling you how you're supposed to *feel* about it, you're supposed to love God, you're supposed to do this... And *this* is what *I* feel about it, this is *my* experience, nobody's telling me how I'm supposed to feel about Ma, how I'm supposed to feel about the world, how I'm supposed to feel about living a Tantric life... [...] It's part of what I make of it, and part of what Ma gives me, but I don't have to listen to anybody say “this is what you're supposed to do...” [...] Ma has many paths for me, which depends on where I start heading, She'll show me, you know, nobody has to tell me, ok, say this prayer ten times before you go to bed, and you don't know what the prayer is about! It's different if you're praying, you're doing a *japa*, you're doing beautiful mantras but you *know* what they're *about*! How many people are in churches, and they sing the hymns and they say the prayers, and they mean nothing; (Maya)

While perhaps in any tradition there are people who practice more consciously than others, it is interesting that so many spiritual feminists and Western Kali devotees regard their chosen paths as lucid and practical, and containing revelatory truths. Though their form of practice may not correspond directly to any Indian framework, whether orthodox or Tantric, it appears to emerge out of powerful and transformative experiences. Like many spiritual seekers, the practitioners I have spoken with had more questions than answers, and were each at one place or another along their journey. One may be a seeker within one's native tradition (a loaded term, no doubt, for what, or who, determines the authenticity of one's identity claims?), or one may seek beyond one's immediate cultural or historical set of narratives. Either way, such searching appears to be a sign of a vibrant and flourishing tradition. To use Orsi's expression, it is the *unexpected* that is most immediate, most engaged with the demands, values, and socio-cultural realities of the

present moment.³⁰⁵ The unexpected has no established symbolism or dogma, but it is a response to experience; next I turn to take a detailed look at the experiences of two women, whose paths to Kali differ substantially and yet intersect in unexpected ways.

2. Visions of Transformation: Sarah's Experience

My first informant is well-spoken and outgoing, and in a dense unstructured interview of about two hours we manage to cover topics from her own experiences with Maa to the inner politics of women's non-profit associations in the Bay Area. Before I move to presenting her narrative, it would be useful to briefly contextualize Sharanya in the broader community it is situated in. Northern California, perhaps like no other place in North America, provides a wide range of resources for neopagan and goddess spirituality groups, and therefore it was doubly interesting to speak with informants living and practicing in this environment. Extensive networks of support and resources for education that might only be available to many Western goddess spirituality practitioners over the Internet, can be experienced here first-hand. Annual pagan conferences such as Pantheacon are perhaps the most visible expression of this thriving community; it is also present in public celebrations of holidays, craft fairs, community centres, specialty books stores, and establishments of higher learning such as Sophia University (formerly the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology or ITP), which offers programs in clinical and therapeutic counselling, as well as Master's degrees in Women's Spirituality and Spiritual Guidance. Historically, since the early years of the second wave movement, universities have been fertile grounds for practitioners of goddess spirituality, even though most learning institutions do not have any special affinity with alternative spiritualities. It is not surprising then, that places such as Sophia University become gathering places, social hubs, and nexus of information and resources. At the same time, such public visibility may also create more tangible tensions between neopagans and goddess practitioners and the wider community, an issue raised by one of my informants (discussed below).

³⁰⁵ Orsi, "2 + 2 = Five," 118-119

I spoke with Sarah, an interfaith minister, therapist, and a self-defined eclectic spiritual feminist, over the phone from California. Like many of the people whose paths bring them to Kali, her story began with a crisis moment, which coincided with taking a college course Alexandre taught at the ITP. At the crux of this crisis were themes familiar to many women within feminist spirituality circles: lack of a female role model, and struggling with one's own experience as a woman vis à vis societal norms, expectations, and personal history. On the other hand, Sarah's story also bears the hallmarks of a 'Kali experience' in the form of traumatic yet transformative events, whether they are external or internal. While not an exclusive devotee of Maa, Kali stands at the core of Sarah's narrative of transformation, and it is these aspects of our conversation that I concentrate on here:³⁰⁶

It starts with Chandra's class... early 2004, winter quarter, I took her class "Voices of the Dark Goddess of the East and West", and I had been looking for a female role model for a long time. In my early twenties I actually looked up to Wonder Woman, and she's fictitious! (Laughter) ...I didn't quite have a live role model that I wanted. As a teenager I would read the work of Amy Tan and Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, Isabel Allende, all these really brilliant, talented women writers and activists. But see, I knew them through their writing, I didn't *know* them, you know? Not as a person that I had met or seen... [...] . So I took Chandra's class, and the first night you know, I, I had a breakdown...

She gave us Tarot cards, the same Motherpeace deck by Vicky Noble, who I've also met, that she used in Kali puja last week, and I had, interestingly, I drew the same card! It was the Son, s-o-n. A young boy, he's sitting on a rock, playing the flute, in the middle of a river or the ocean, or something, and there's seagulls above him, and you know, playing flute; and so I was really intrigued by the title of the class, and was excited to be learning about the goddess, however, part of me was very skeptical. And, I was being kind of guarded; I wasn't being kind of guarded, I *was* guarded... [...] And she told me, 'it means you're going to walk through your masculine door to get to your feminine side, you're going to be taking baby steps to reclaim your feminine'. And I started crying! I was bawling, I lost it. Just those few words, touched me so deeply, I was like oh my god, I was crying, I said 'I don't know what it means to be feminine!...'

While the experience of "femininity" means vastly different things to different women, many struggle with it regardless of its practical applications. For this respondent, coming from a home with an abusive father and a mother who would not outwardly fight back, femininity for a long time was associated with weakness, passivity, or victim-hood. Interestingly, here again we

³⁰⁶ As with the excerpts of the puja, these are from my own transcriptions of the audio recording of our interview, obtained and used with permission. While omitting some passages, I have endeavoured to keep the logical flow intact.

encounter the story of Inanna, already discussed in the previous chapter in the context of Kali and the Dark Goddess:

The class revolved around the story of Inanna, Inanna's descent into the underworld, which could mean one going into one's own psyche, in to the dark parts, unknown parts, and reclaiming. So it was very appropriate. And a lot of the class had to do with Kali, Kali Ma from the Hindu pantheon. And she was a frightening figure for me. I knew her intellectually, but I did not *know* her. Yet. And so, I learned about her, and read stories and theories and what not, and I had an experience one day, about having a vision of a phoenix. And I heard this phoenix speak to me, and it said, 'we will rise again.' And I'm like, who's 'we?' And I did my reading for Chandra's class that night, and it was about Kali Ma and returning the feminine with global consciousness... and I was 'o-k, I know who 'we' is.'

That summer, I made a shamanic journey, with a shaman from Peru, and it was *Ayahuasca*.³⁰⁷ And... I am not someone who's into drugs. I was raised pretty conservative, so. [...] I am hypersensitive, so I choose to be very mindful of what I put in my body because it will affect me strongly. When I did this shamanic journey, I did it consciously, and I was frightened, actually, at first. Because I didn't know what to expect. It's a hallucinogen, it's plant medicine, but there was a shaman there, one of my professors was there, and I had friends there, so it felt more comfortable. [...]

I vomited right away, and it literally felt like I vomited out my fear, my apprehension. We're in somebody's living room, and I brought a sleeping bag, and a cushion, and a pillow, and I'm sitting like a queen, my friend laughing at me, she's like 'are you comfortable yet?'...

I was facing a window. And I looked outside the window, and part of me is mindful, this is just a hallucination, this isn't real, but what I saw outside was Kali Ma. The first vision that I had. I saw her standing outside. And she, I could see her face, and she wasn't frightening, she had very classic features, except she was all green. And it was probably the silhouette of the trees and plants outside, but they took the form of Kali Ma. So she's got these very classical features, and she's got a canopy of leaves above her head, and there's these giant pythons, surrounding her. There's four giant pythons and their heads are very close to her head, they're part of the plant canopy above her, and they're frigging huge, their heads are like bigger than her head... It was very daunting to see that. She wasn't directly looking at me, her face was turned to the right, just a little bit, but her eyes were looking at me, so she's looking directly at me, she's not smiling, she's got this very... stern look on her face, and she says to me: 'I'm not here to hurt you. I'm here to help you. I'm here to help you break through old habits, and patterns and relationships, that no longer serve.' And I just sat there and I was like 'What? *You're* frightening!' And she tells me again, she keeps repeating that 'I'm here to help you, I'm not here to hurt you... I will hold your hand through all the difficult experiences.'

I felt really small. I felt like I was a little girl again, who was afraid and alone, and I replied to her... I don't think I was doing this out loud, necessarily, cause in this space we were supposed to try and keep our voices down so not to distract anyone else from their journey... [...] Whether I said it audibly or not, I was talking to her. And I said, I felt like I had a little-girl voice, like "really? Even if I don't talk to you, and I turn my back on you and walk away, you'll still be there

³⁰⁷ Ayahuasca is a psychoactive beverage used in divination and healing in various traditional South American societies, especially along the Amazon.

for me?" And she's like, "Yeah, I'm here with you, I'm holding your hand through everything, don't worry, I'm with you. You're not alone." And it was a really reassuring feeling, like I had this image of her actually holding my hand, you know? We're walking together.... in the vision, I am a little girl. Probably... 8 years old, 9 years old, something like that. You know, I've got a bow in my hair. But she's with me, holding my hand. She looked very fierce and very frightening, but she was not frightening to me at that point in this vision, she was a welcoming figure, a comforting figure, she was very tender; she was very nurturing. And she's holding my hand through everything.

This initial vision of Kali Ma is personal, immediate, and very much connected to overcoming one's fears, much like the descent of Inanna in contemporary goddess spirituality. In this case, she is the vehicle that opens the doors to visions and experiences of other divine forms, all of which are associated with aspects of personal growth and development. The image of the phoenix, as well as those of the serpents, are prominent symbols of rebirth, resurrection, and transformation. Kali Ma herself, though frightening, is a mother figure, a protectress, yet one who forces her 'children' to face the truth, including one's own truth. Much like in the Hindu context, stripped of illusion, the truth is a vehicle of liberation — though perhaps in this case, this is a more inward, psychological type of liberation; perhaps as a step towards ultimate spiritual liberation.

The evening of shamanic journeying proceeded with other visions, and embodied experiences of other deities, such as Aphrodite, Green Tara, and Bastet. Each of these had something to impart, in terms of divination and teachings, both as a divine presence and as a type of archetype found within the practitioner's own psyche. One of these concerns, at the time, was romantic love — which was answered in a vision of what Sarah described as the "Kinara Maiden", a figure from Indian-Pakistani mythology whose beloved, before he is allowed to marry her, must pass the ultimate test of recognizing her among thousands of identical-looking maidens.³⁰⁸ Though an eclectic melange of pantheons and deities, often seen in Western goddess spirituality (where all faces of the goddess are but One), Sarah's narrative often returns to Kali as to an anchor of her transformative experiences:

...The vision that I had was of this woman, this Kinara Maiden, with this elaborate shiny clothing on, beautiful form and face and long hair, and of course there's a thousand women that look exactly like her standing there, and so I see her, and her husband is walking down the line until he stops at one of them, and it's the real her, and she jumps at him and hugs him... At the

³⁰⁸ The story is unfamiliar to me, and so I have simply spelled here the name phonetically.

time I didn't know what this vision represented, until I shared it with somebody else, and they said, Oh! That means the right one will recognize you. And I was like, wow! That answers all my romantic questions, ever... So, again, even though Kali Ma is not associated necessarily with romantic love, or even love at all, she was very much part of that process for me, she had to be the one to comfort, to heal things, to clear up things, to allow for the other messages to come through, I would say. So, I have worked with her since then.

Especially in the context of contemporary goddess spirituality, one's direct experiences are definitive of one's practice, more than any text or interpretation:

Last year, I took vows as priestess, a pagan priestess, and part of my initiation was journeying to the Underworld. And being with the destroyer, the one who rules the unconscious realm, the area of death and rebirth. So, she was part of that for me. And I have a spiritual guide that I work with, and she's Jewish, and she's also a Wiccan Witch. So she was like 'I'm a Jewish [witch]!' and I was like, 'It's ok, I'm a Muslim [witch]!'... She's been with me for a while. In 2005, in May, I was at a Bembé, which is a Yoruban [ritual], within the Yoruba tradition out of Nigeria, it is an earth-based tradition. I had an ecstatic experience. [...] According to the Yoruban tradition, and other magical traditions, I was possessed. That scared the shit out of me, even while it was happening: I did not have control over my own body, I didn't know what was going on, and I was [coming] in and out of consciousness, and I was having my first full-body orgasm. So, as amazing as it was, it was also scary! [...]

I spent the next few months, actually four months, integrating what had happened to me. And I would cry every second or third night, because I had these new feelings in my body, and I had these new things going on, my personality was shifting, very drastically. In a sense, the old me was dying, as the new me emerged. This new me was more confident, more feminine, a big flirt. According to the Yoruban tradition, I am a child of the love goddess, so of Oshun. And I'm also the child of Ka'wo, the warrior king. [...]

The way I used to be, which was more guarded, or more identifying with masculinity, not because that is who I necessarily really was but just because that felt safer, all that was falling away. In that sense Kali Ma was with me too, I was with her, I would be alone in bed, at night, crying, and She — you know, I would call her, be with me, because I didn't want to feel alone.

It is in these moments of very traumatic and transformative experiences that drawing on a pre-existing network of support has been particularly important, since, as Sarah recounts, it was her professors who were able to contextualize for her these various experiences (I use the word 'professors' here after Sarah's own usage, since it appears some of her spiritual teachers were also her academic instructors at ITP). Importantly, the experiences of transformation are deeply embodied, and the practicalities of everyday life are closely intertwined with her coming into a new spiritual practice. Coming into this from a monotheistic background may have felt especially stressful, since nothing in her Sunni Muslim upbringing prepared her for visions, ecstatic experiences, and other deeply embodied engagements with a variety of gods and goddesses. (It is

interesting that Sarah's Muslim background, though acknowledged as an important part of her identity, heritage, and spiritual world, does not prevent her from embracing an eclectic goddess spirituality, magic, and *murti* veneration.)

Significantly, in this case too Kali represents a sort of transformative anchor, her Hindu origin congruent with Sarah's family's ethnic roots. Regarding Sharanya, Sarah's involvement with the group is more casual, though at one time she attempted the priestess training program there. Working with Kali is not always easy, but it is also more than an 'intellectual' choice; it is a spiritual calling.

I've decided to go try to work with Chandra in Daughters of Kali, which I did just for a few months. I was told by higher powers not to be there. And I was confused at to why that was the case. But I followed my intuition, I told Chandra I was really sorry, and she said it won't affect our relationship, and you know, you have to follow what the spirit says to you... So, I am not meant to be a priestess of Kali, specifically, but I work with her. [...] She's not easy to be with. I mean, none of them are, they all have lessons to teach us, but I find her more daunting. For obvious reasons, cause she looks it, and she's the destroyer. She helps us face scary things. She helps us face parts of our self we are afraid to look at. That's never easy... but, you know, I choose to try to rise to the occasion as best I can, especially if I am being called.

Despite her challenging aspects, Kali remains a caring and comforting presence. Reconciling within herself this paradox, she also helps practitioners such as Sarah to overcome and be reconciled with painful experiences, such as break ups and loss, or 'dark' aspects of one's personality. Here too, she is incorporated into a greater neopagan ritual scheme:

I let Kali hold me. Like, she accepts me as I am. You can be your entire self with her; there's nothing you need to hide. Because you can't hide from her! You don't have to feel embarrassed or ashamed, or guilty, in front of her; you can be all of who you are, all the muck, and the scary stuff - she can hold it. She knows. I will create a container sometimes, to work through what I'm feeling, and I would journal and be really angry, curse, and scribble... I'll be burning a candle with 'cut and clear' oil, and I'd call the destroyers in, the destructive deity... because I want to express what I'm feeling in a healthy way, in a productive way. I don't want to go take it out on somebody, I don't want to hurt myself by carrying negative energy like that and acting out. So, yeah. It's been helpful to have her with me. Especially at this time of year when it's about death and rebirth, in October-November, it's the time when the veil between worlds is thin, and we honour our ancestors. She's part of that too, for me.

A leader of ritual in public contexts as well, Sarah describes a Samhein-related ritual focused on ancestors and "letting go", she is scheduled to lead, and Kali appears to have the power to 'hold one accountable' in a moral and spiritual sense:

Even though she's not necessarily associated with ancestor work, in a sense she's like that for me because my heritage is from the part of the world where Kali is worshiped. And she rules death

and rebirth, she rules letting go, she rules facing ourselves, she rules owning all of who we are. And it's good to have her there with me, to help me create a sacred space, to help me take care of myself, to help me face myself, to help me be able to serve others. She's real... Her sword cuts through illusion. I cannot bullshit with myself, with her there.

Importantly, from this narrative once again reaffirms the deeply personal nature of the relationship between practitioner and deity, lived out in daily actions and situations. Recalling the night of the Kali puja we were both present at, Sarah returned to the theme of Kali as a teacher of 'uncomfortable lessons', whether those may be in a pragmatic, individual, sense, or on broader mythological and cosmological levels. Even something as prosaic as running late, arriving at the wrong place, and feeling lost can be part of a greater learning experience:

I didn't get the address, I assumed it was going to be at the Cultural Integration Fellowship... by Golden Gate Park. So, I drove out there, and I'm standing there, in the cold, for half an hour, and a couple of other people arrive who also thought it was going to be there, and it wasn't. And I was like, OK, what am I supposed to do now? And thankfully one of the people was able to get in contact with Chandra, found out it was at her house. He led the way, and I followed them in my own car. It was just weird, and I was like, yeah, OK, I never thought it was going to be that easy to just get here! [...] She [Kali] is reminding me to be able to control my state of mind, and that even in very challenging situations, frustrating situations, when we face the unknown, when we face our fear, we can be able to do it, just breathe through it...

In an ironic way, perhaps, the frightening destroyer deities, such as Kali, create a safe space where all the parts of one's selfhood may be accepted — an idea echoed by the need of a 'dark goddess' in feminist spirituality, discussed above. As Sarah puts it:

The deities that actually felt safer to be with, were the destructor ones, which is almost ironic. I was more comfortable with them, because I could be a bitch and... [?] I could be angry and I could rage, and I can say a slur of nasty words, and I can think horrible thoughts, and they'd be like, 'it's OK, it's OK, you're safe with us. Say what you want, you can think what you want, and you know better than that thought, you know you would never act out; you can choose to act out on these things, but you choose not to.'

...to look at the face of the divine, directly, is frightening. To face ourselves, face our wounding, face our pain is scary. To challenge ourselves to grow is scary. And that's why I think those deities are made to look scary... They're not something [wrong], they not harmful, but they get a lot of negative projection because people don't want to face them, they don't want to work through the bad stuff.

The notion that Kali's (and other fierce deities') appearance reflects, to some extent, the way the realities she represents are perceived by devotees is especially interesting. On the one hand, it is tinged with a more Western, almost Jungian, tendency to internalize the images of the divine; on

the other, it is reminiscent of Kali's Bengali *bhakti* tradition as reflected in Ramprasad Sen's and Ramakrishna's poetry, with their often ambiguous, yet personal and passionate appeals to Ma.

Much in tune with Sharanya's broader ecofeminist ethos, the private, embodied and experiential realities translate for Sarah into practical ways of being in the world and relating to others. We discuss the various tensions in the local community of spiritual feminists and goddess practitioners, while she characterizes as a 'second wave' versus 'third wave' stance. Though I cannot treat this discussion here in detail, a good example Sarah used to illustrate the various issues being worked out currently in the community is the question of including transgender women in all-women's spiritual groups — still a relevant topic for many Bay Area neopagans.³⁰⁹ One of the avenues for further research among Western Kali devotees (and goddess practitioners more broadly) would include exploring constructions of gender and gender dynamics in this context. It would be particularly interesting to see if such discourse is influenced by the gender fluidity seen at times among deities of the Hindu pantheon, and the complementarity of male and female energies in a single deity — most famously, in the image of Ardhanārīśvara as half Shiva, half Parvati, but also in the incarnation of Kali as Krishna and Shiva as Radha, as described in the *Devi Purana*.

3. A Tantric Ethos of Interconnectedness: Haravallabha's Experience

The second informant whose experiences I draw upon in this chapter, has been a student of Sharanya and a follower of Maa for four years, and a student of religious traditions for many more years previously. In our discussion we touched upon her experiences with Sharanya and with Kali specifically, as well as upon topics such as living and practicing in Northern California, the problems of misinformation and misconceptions, the need for careful study and the ultimate importance of one's personal experience. Once again, here I present excerpts of this

³⁰⁹ A good source for community news, the *Pagan Newswire Collective: Bay Area*, has numerous articles tagged "transgender" on their website, the most recent of which ("Transgendered Inclusion at PSG; Humanizing the Experience on Both Sides", June 28, 2012) deals with steps taken by two prominent Bay Area pagan and Goddess activists to try and agree regarding the presence of transgender women at Dianic rites (an exclusively female-membership spiritual feminist path). Accessed August 25, <http://bayarea.pagannewswirecollective.com/tag/transgender/>

conversation, many of which raise already familiar themes of crisis and transformation, facing one's fears, and cultivating an embodied practice which informs one's being in the world. Ultimately, a tantric way of life means, in the case of this informant, a deep awareness of the interconnectedness of all living things, and the mastery of tools that allow one to navigate these various levels of experience. It is these aspects of the Sharanya's path that resonate most strongly with feminist Witchcraft, offering not only a cosmology and a philosophy, but also a lived, experiential ritual practice.

The question of what Tantra "really means" arises early in the conversation, a term which, according to Haravallabha, is commonly misconstrued — and especially so in Northern California. In this she echoes critiques sounded by such scholars as Rachel McDermott and June McDaniel regarding the Western fad of 'Tantric sex workshops', finding the popular misconception of Tantra as a hyper-sexualized, 'titillating' practice, rather limiting. As discussed in first two chapters, while some rituals involving sexual acts are indeed prescribed in some Tantric texts, their practical application is rare, and moreover, usually constitutes a very small percentage of a complex of other practices, such as meditation, visualization, and so on. As June McDaniel points out, most of the female tantrikas she had interviewed were "insistently celibate," regarding sexual practices as something that might benefit men more than women in this contexts - geared as they are towards training one to control one's desires (rather than to 'improve one's sex life', as many Western Tantra groups position it).

So what then is the meaning of living a tantric life, and the path of Sharanya as "(R)evolutionary Shakta Tantra," as advertised on their website? While suspicious of 'Tantric sex workshops', Haravallabha acknowledges the possibility of sexual ritual practice, stressing the need for education and discernment, and the primary function of Tantrism as a technology of spirituality. Most importantly, she finds it problematic that the general perception of Tantra is so sex-saturated:

On the Shakti front, it's kind of the flip side of the dark stuff, this is the stuff that is exciting, and scintillating and glamorous and titillating to an American audience, and, for better or for worse, that's what sells, and that's what grabs the American imagination, and so there is a lot of literature out there, and workshops, and retreats, and stuff like that... also, about how to *do* tantric sexual practice. But it's not linked to scripture, and it's not linked to tradition, and it's not linked to much of anything... I have good things to say about sacred sexuality and the idea that the sexual act can be an act of worship and an act of [personal?] transformation and to [?]

divine, that's all good, but, that's not all that Tantra is! There is a long lineage, a long period of teaching, a way of life, a philosophy and outlook on the world, a way of constructing thought, a way of being in the world, and ability, even... what you do in the world is informed by this, it's not just "hot"! It's not just sexy divine communion...

Instead, Tantra here is understood as a spiritual practice of immanence, much like goddess spirituality is envisioned by such theologians as Starhawk. Haravallabha continued:

Tantra and pagan practice feel very close to me in the sense that they are both about aligning one's energy, physiologically, spiritually, with the energy of the created world. So, when you do a spell, if you're in the pagan tradition... [...] Internally, we are investing the words spoken and the actions performed with a certain intention, and we're also investing [the space in the room] with a certain quality of energy... In my experience of Tantric practice, that means that in a tangible reality, that we're all connected. So that the energy of the table and the glass and the ritual object, and the flower and the tree and the natural world, all of those things are very much a part of me and I am very much a part of them. So for me there is *an ecstatic union of consciousness*, that is associated with tantric practice, and maybe that's not exactly how most tantrikas would say this, but that's how [it is] for me, as an individual. (emphasis mine)

The expression “ecstatic union of consciousness” is particularly interesting, because it is an experience that is very much associated with the manifest world, and not outside it, as in some other contexts. Kali, for this practitioner, represents the sum total of the world, the various aspects of the divine in it, and the eternal oneness that is beyond all of that. Though Haravallabha did not use the same expression, her understanding of Kali is strikingly reminiscent of Saxena’s notion of Kali as “pregnant nothingness”, the luminescent darkness that is the origin, sum, and end of all things:

She is a great beyond... the eternal, the most, the ultimate, and beyond. So after you have catalogued all the usual hosts of gods and goddesses in any tradition, my sense of Kali is that She exists beyond that catalogue and that She also encompasses it, so there is nothing that is not imbed with Her presence. The entire universe and sort of beyond the entire universe are all Her domain... And in this sense, I associate Kali Ma with the Maternal Principle, and the Creative Principle, and the Destructive Principle, and pretty much all that there is, but also, a bit more specifically with the Void, which... the kind of Void that is active with possibility, an emptiness which is alive...

At the same time, Kali’s awe-full cosmological position does not preclude a personal and lived relationship of devotee and goddess. On the contrary, the intellectual knowledge of the goddess and the tantric tradition have come following an initial transformative experience, which the informant sought to contextualize and understand. Similarly to many other cases already discussed, this experience had come in a moment of crisis, and was transformative not only in its initial context, but also vis a vis the informant’s larger worldview and way of life:

In a time of great crisis and great opportunity in my life I had a very strong, kind of an inhabited vision of Kali... when I say an "inhabited vision" I mean it was like, something was going through me that was unfamiliar and deeply familiar, and was quite alien to my [ordinary] circumstances, and yet quite definitive of who I was [...]

You'll find often that people talk about this, this... with Ma, when apparent contradictions come into play [...] the creating and the destroying happening at the same time. So there was this experience where I felt that *the Goddess was acting through me*, and that I in a sense was *the vehicle for her energy to heal me and transform the situation that I was in*. That happened actually more than once, but the first time it happened, was when I first started thinking, this is an *experience* that is extremely significant and I want to understand what it means. And so I started doing a lot of research online, in books, in the library at the university, to try to understand *what this was*, and *who* this was, and what [...] and if other people are having similar experiences. And as a scholar, I think that my experience was at once completely embodied and very much informed by my intellectual life. (emphasis mine)

While Haravallabha's research did yield an early web page for Sharanya (circa 2003), she did not become involved with the group until several years later when she moved to the area and was introduced to one of the public Sharanya pujas by a friend. Here, too, there is a curious element of serendipity, which is so often recounted by Western (and Indian), devotees of Ma. Fascinated by the blending of the East and West, as well as by the figure of the founder (whose level of scholarship, passion, and commitment she found especially admirable), after a year of attending the public pujas, Haravallabha entered the year-long apprenticeship program. As she puts it, her very participation in the group was a result of her quest for Ma — the reality behind her own embodied experiences. This was synonymous with a quest for transformation, the catalyst for which was Kali:

... as a quest to transform my life. This strange thing that happened in that crisis moment was strange and wonderful, and moving, but then it forms your next steps. That's normal, that's something that you will hear in anyone's description of their spiritual path... I was in a bad situation, this visitation happened to me, and I took heed! Get my [changes] to accommodate more wellness and fulfilment and service, and joy, in my day to day life.

The initial vision, which unfortunately she does not elaborate upon, had unlocked for her potentialities that hitherto lay dormant, including the capacity to be a 'ritualist and a healer', and to serve as transformative conduit for others. Subsequent visions, or experiences of Kali, have remained similarly vivid and immediate, and connected to both spiritual and lived realities:

One of those visitations was in the public puja setting, after I had decided to commit myself to at least a year of study. The way that Ma appeared to me very vividly in that one evening's ritual was a little bit, well, not just a little bit, but very scary, at first, until I realized that what I thought was scary was actually breaking down old structures so that new energy can flow through... and

that was, the image that came to me in the meditation on her presence, was of her form dancing inside my body, with knives a-flashing, and, specifically in my womb, in my uterus space, right in my belly, there She was, with Her weapons flying, and doing a fierce, kind of gleeful dance inside my frame.

For me, that vision is very closely connected with my biology, and with my physiological reality as a female, and as someone who thinks about being a mother... in really concrete ordinary terms, in order for me to prepare the way for a child, in my life, a great many things need to change... Structures need to come down in order for new energy to come through [...] with that creative and destructive aspect, there's the destruction first, in that scary wielding of blades, but what really happens then is not damage, but cleansing.

This account echoes, in surprisingly similar terms, the conversation with Sarah, detailed above. Kali's fierceness is directed against that which had outlived itself, that which is illusory or no longer serves, as well as to combat fears which cripple one's progress both in the spiritual and the mundane sense. In fact, this informant also finds the fierce aspect of Kali in a way "deceptive", in the sense that her bloodthirsty, wild countenance is not a literal expression of malevolence or punishment, but a requirement of the devotee to put aside those part of herself which are afraid — what in the Western context one would call the ego. As Haravallabha recounts:

The fierce aspect is really something that drew me, and it's curious actually that the fierce aspect, over time, has helped me to release fear. That's kind of an aspect of Her being a Protectress that I can call on if I need to 'ride into battle' or something, but also... This fierce aspect, the tongue dripping with blood, and the wild eyes, and the wild hair, and the weapons, and the severed head, and the severed limbs, all of that is sort of deceptive. [...] Devoting yourself to an image, to a goddess that appears as a fierce bloodthirsty warrior requires that you set aside *your* fears. And that you also believe that it is all for the best. So She usually is depicted with one hand representing the idea of "don't be afraid, this will be resolved," and that going to battle *because* order has to be restored, so you get the narrative of the Durga, riding into battle and then returning to her bath after the battle, restoring order and harmony.

Interestingly, it was the image of Durga that first drew this devotee to Ma, because, to her, understanding Durga meant knowing and understanding Kali. Though similarly equipped with many weapons and riding on a wild beast (a lion or a tiger), Durga's countenance is gentler, her smiling face is sweet and peaceful. Yet it is Durga that gives rise to Kali in the *Devi Mahatmya*, and it is she who assures the demon Mahisa that she is not "cheating" by calling on an army of goddesses to fight by her side, since all the goddesses are One.

Next, we talk a little bit about Sharanya and her participation in its intensive study program, *Daughters of Kali*. Within the organization Alexandre remains the main source of knowledge and training, though each member taking part of the priestess training can expect to

take over some parts of ritual or specific preparatory roles, as seen in the puja I attended, or to teach a lesson or a particular aspect of practice to newer students. A commitment to the year of apprenticeship also entails a commitment to the organization (according to the website, it is “a year and a day”, as is found in many Wiccan or Witchcraft training programs). Like any spiritual tradition, it takes commitment and an initiation process, and, broadly, the work done in the group includes spiritual guidance and support, as well as mastering various teachings and aspects of the practice, such as mantras, breathing techniques, leading ritual, and so on. The experience, according to Haravallabha, is akin to a concentrated study group sharing and processing information together, as well as supporting each other in the endeavour. However, this does not mean that one may not carry on their personal practice; Haravallabha emphasizes that for her, direct and embodied experience is still the primary organizing principle of her spiritual path, even if oftentimes it is difficult to articulate and share with others. Sharanya, besides providing a community of like-minded seekers, had also been a framework in which to aggregate and understand her own experiences and relationship with Kali:

The Western mindset and maybe especially in an intellectual setting, is that... rationalist, post-enlightenment thing... Where the "sacred" is just a concept; and for most people, the world of spiritual archetype is not integrated with the world of everyday practical modern life. For a tantric, it is integrated.

I can walk around the city and still understand there is a great dynamic, living system of natural energy around me, because, the roots of the trees are under the sidewalk, and the spirit presence of the trees are also on the sidewalk... I think in African, in Indian, in the mystical traditions of the world you get that integration between the divine presence, or the spirit world and the mundane world. In Western culture, not so much. So yeah, that means that those [intimations] and those glimpses of the other side, that's sort of the lazy term 'the other side', but those glimpses of spiritual reality become very difficult to articulate to people, because you can be pretty sure that most people won't be able to hear it in a way that makes sense to them...

The presence of Kali and the practice of devotion has meant that I have had a ritual and communal context in which to make sense of all of the layers of reality that I have been experiencing but unable to articulate, up to that point. I am who I am, whether I study and practice this ritual or not, but having these teachings and these people and this group in place has meant that I now have a context for that, that makes sense. (emphasis mine)

Making sense of one's embodied religious experiences, and living a tantric — that is immanent and integrated — life, are the key themes of Haravallabha's account. Importantly, the transformative presence of Kali is seen as something as once familiar and alien, so Kali appears

to be *recognized* (rather than merely observed) upon the informant's encounter with her. Though Kali was previously known to Haravallabha as a deity in the Hindu pantheon (from various academic studies), much like in the case of Sarah, such purely intellectual knowledge is not enough; she must be experienced as a sacred reality, a real and transformative presence in one's life.

VISIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFORMATION: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER INQUIRIES

While the ethnographic data presented above serves as a first entry into the tradition, many more questions remain unresolved and call for further study. Some of the areas left unexplored here include: the structures of spiritual study and initiation within the tradition; the community involvement of members and of the organization; the interactions and relationship between Sha'can practitioners and other Kali/ Devi Mandirs in California as well as with local Hindu communities; the place of Sha'can in the greater neopagan/ goddess spirituality community (especially since in Northern California it is a thriving one); a demographic mapping of the larger community of worshippers; and of course the continuous evolution and development of the tradition. On a greater scale, the dialogue between Western spiritual feminism, Hindu Shaktism, and Indian feminist critique provides a fertile ground for examining the movement and transformation of religious symbols in the (post)modern world. The 'ownership' and 'authenticity' of specific cultural and spiritual narratives becomes implicated in complex identity politics, another issue that I do not attempt to broach here, but which deserves a close examination. It is identity politics that often frame the critiques of the Western Kali appropriations, the more extreme examples of which may often seem offensive, disrespectful and "wrong" to native South Asians and to first- or second-generation North Americans of South Asian descent. Such discourses are especially relevant in multicultural and multinational modern Western societies, and I believe they are enriched by in-depth explorations of the lived religiosities that are being claimed, re-claimed, contested, and negotiated. It is for this reason that I chose to focus in this paper on the intersection of theological, cultural, and experiential aspects of the Western Kali.

According to Alexandre's own vision, Sharanya Kali worship is presented in a way that is *relevant* to the Western context and to the lives of Western devotees and practitioners. Therefore, the key characteristics that differentiate Western approaches to the goddess from Eastern ones are potentially revealing of broader trends in the Western religious landscape, as well as of new directions for development within Western goddess spirituality. While McDermott rightly notes

the process of ‘indianization’ among many Western appropriations of Kali, meaning a renewed emphasis put on nuanced and critical engagements with the South Asian Kali traditions, the Western Kali is still an uniquely syncretic and independent figure. As a paradoxical deity of reconciling dualities and transformation, it is not surprising that she emerges, first of all, in dialogue. Such accounts of Western Kali devotion as I have presented here temper, to an extent, those critiques of feminist appropriations of Kali that posit them as purely ideological constructions, revealing instead a lived tradition with a strong embodied and experiential ethos. I have chosen to focus on it here precisely because it actively straddles the divide between East and West and consciously harmonizes the two. After all, as Rachel McDermott pointed out when first writing of Kali’s migration West, “Symbols have their own lives. So do Goddesses. One should not expect Kali in the West necessarily to look like Kali in the East. Just as she has had a complicated and dynamic history of interpretation in India, so will she in the West.”³¹⁰

Sharanya is one sector in this dynamic landscape of Kali’s Western interpretations. While it is rooted in the experiences and vision of its founder, Chandra Alexandre, it is a path that draws a vibrant community of practitioners and devotees, and which serves as a public forum for encountering and worshipping the Goddess as the fierce Kali Ma (and I used the term “Goddess” here both in the Western and in the Eastern sense of the word). Even in the preliminary and cursory findings presented here, several key themes can be identified: (1) *a core encounter with Kali in a moment of crisis*; (2) *the centrality of embodied and direct experience of the divine as revelatory knowing*; (3) *Kali as an agent of transformation*; (4) *her frightening fierceness and her ultimately nurturing and comforting presence*; (5) *a cultivation of an intimate relationship between goddess and devotee/practitioner*; and (6) *an assumption of an ethical, moral, and practical stance in the world as a result of these experiences*. This constellation of ideas seems to me rooted in specifically Western social and religious realities, and therefore emblematic of the significance of Kali in Western goddess spirituality.

To take for example the first theme: whether or not approaching the goddess within a Tantric framework, many respondents, both in the cases above and in sources surveyed in chapter three, recount a core experience with Kali, usually in a moment of crisis. Such special

³¹⁰ McDermott, “The Western Kali”, 305

experiences are *unexpected* in the Western milieu (though they are neither unexpected nor uncommon in the Indian context of goddess worship), and their occurrence, as well as a subsequent need for interpretation and understanding, merits further investigation. The approaches to these experiences and the processes of meaning-making around them range widely in the West, from psychoanalysis to the more traditional terminology of visions and visitations, to an organic blend of the two. Either way, they are generally regarded as sources of *immediate knowing*. The added nuance of being triggered by or associated with traumatic events is particularly interesting, especially in people who have not been followers of Kali prior to this core experience. It is not my goal here to speculate on the relationship of Kali's mythos with crisis and trauma in the Western context, but I believe it is another fertile avenue for exploration.

Furthermore, Carol Christ and other spiritual feminists write that the Goddess rises up in the visions, dreams, and imaginations of women — and, indeed, to a certain extent, Kali appears to rise up in the visions and experiences of her Western devotees. I have, however, endeavoured to demonstrate that this is not a unified image of Kali, either. Such embodied, personal, and revelatory engagement with the goddess further complicates the discourses of authority and authenticity, and even of the notions of 'borrowing' of symbols cross-culturally. The case of Haravallabha is especially interesting in this regard, since her core experience had occurred before she had an explanatory framework within which to situate it, and in fact, to use her words, it *triggered* her "quest for Kali Ma." Certain religious images and narratives appear to be so salient that they transcend cultural and geographical boundaries; or perhaps they fulfil a need that is unaddressed by pre-existing cultural and religious narratives. The centrality of embodied and direct experience as a source of knowing is certainly a characteristic of feminist spirituality, and it is also pronounced in Western imaginings of Kali. Bodily processes, such as the cycle of menstruation for women, have been similarly associated with Kali, perhaps because Kali is also Kamakhya, the Goddess of Desire, whose *shakti pitha* in Assam is famous for its yearly festival of the goddess's menses — an event marked by a natural phenomenon of the stream running through her sacred cave becoming coloured red by monsoon floodwater (discussed in chapter two). It would be interesting to further explore these associations and map out their meanings for both Western and Indian Kali devotees.

Kali as an agent of transformation is perhaps the central theme of her Western incarnations, and in particular the transformation of ‘base’ aspects of the self such as fear, cowardice, and self-deception. This resonates strongly with Dalmiya Vrinda’s account of the Kali who transforms the sacrificial victim as well as the “self-animal” of the sacrificer — also a transformation of ‘base’ aspects of the self, in this case, the ‘animal’ aspects that are blind to the truth of the world and need to be literally digested by the goddess in order to obtain true knowledge and move closer to liberation. However, it is in this aspect, especially, that I found the Western imaginings of Kali differed the most from her Eastern counterpart: though both engender personal and cosmic transformation, the *focus* and *practical outcome* of this transformative process seems to be rooted in very different cultural narratives regarding selfhood, empowerment, and liberation. In the Hindu sense, the true self is often unknowable, it is the *ātman* which transcends one’s personality, history, memory and all other things that in the West comprise the Ego. In the Western case, however, such conceptions of the “true self” as spirit are deeply rooted in a dualist worldview, and therefore are often rejected by spiritual feminists, neopagans, and goddess practitioners as remnants of patriarchal structures. Roxanne Kamayani Gupta had touched upon these differences in worldviews in her account of Māyī (chapter three), when she noted that the same Kali Ma had moved her and the older woman to adopt two opposite, and possibly irreconcilable, positions; while Gupta felt compelled to fight for the other woman’s safety and well-being, Māyī herself had acted only for Ma, having dissolved her *self* in her beloved Kali. While Māyī’s attitude may not seem empowering to many Western women (and one can speculate if Māyī’s behaviour was not also conditioned by an overarching patriarchal structure, as such authors as Lina Gupta might), the Westerner’s reaction may seem equally misguided and blinded by undue attachment to the illusory world to an Indian Kali *bhakta*.

Such speculations would certainly fall under the rubric of whether or not the Hindu Goddess is a feminist, and indeed Indian feminist authors such as Lina Gupta have argued for the need to rescue Her from the patriarchal structures which utilize the symbol of the goddess to oppress, rather than empower, women. It is even possible that, while Western feminists look to the age-old traditions of goddess worship in India and are inspired by its rich treasury of

symbols, texts, and ritual, Indian feminists and goddess devotees might also benefit from a look Westward, to the meanings that the Divine Feminine had taken on in the lives of Western women, and how it might be used to reclaim spiritual as well as social and political spaces. This is another space for fertile and illuminating cross-cultural dialogue, especially when explored in conjunction with identity politics and various socio-historical factors that have shaped both Indian and Western societies and patriarchal structures.

Certainly, Western Shakta *tantrikas* and Kali practitioners have used the imagery and mythos of goddess to reclaim both the “dark” aspects of femininity and of the human psyche more generally — even as more nuanced readings of Kali and of Indian goddess worship are introduced into the conversation. Reclaiming, as a political and spiritual endeavour, is in and of itself an integral part of feminist theory and spirituality. In the case of the Dark Goddess and Kali, reclaiming hidden, negative, or otherwise silent aspects of the self is done either for the purpose of holding up and acknowledging lived experiences that are repressed, shunned, tabooed, or otherwise ignored in normative societal narratives, or for the purposes of healing, and of “clearing out” negative spaces so as to make room for new growth. The latter sentiment was clearly articulated in Sarah’s account of her relationship with the goddess, who, in her devotional landscape, represents both Truth (often the sort of *frightening* truth one may not want to admit or acknowledge), and a comforting, supporting presence, a Mother. Haravallabha and Maya had similar experiences associated with Kali, and both mentioned that their initial encounter with Ma was frightening, but ultimately led to renewal and transformation. It would also be useful to recall here the Tarot cards explored in chapter three, positing Kali as the symbol of facing and working through fear, positing Kali as both fear and freedom from fear (unsurprisingly, the opposite face of fear is Love, which Kali embodied as Divine Mother or as Kamakhya, Goddess of Desire); the traumatic encounter and the agent of transformation and liberation. And even the early feminist Kali appropriated as the “angry bitch from hell”, in this context, poses as a sort of cathartic figure, pointing toward a deeper reality.

What conclusions can be made, therefore, regarding the marriage of East and West in this multivalent, multicoloured tapestry of the Western Kali? Will she become a symbol of universal,

transnational feminist religion? The particular blend of ancient and modern, ritual and philosophical, embodied and experiential, apparent and esoteric that forms the nexus that is the Western Kali appears to be so successful because it demands one's attention and active engagement, and defies simple or straightforward definitions. How can one pin down a goddess continually dancing the dance of creation and destruction? Indian-American theologians and Shakta devotees such as Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, are uniquely positioned to survey both the rich goddess tradition of India and the burgeoning goddess tradition of North America. Saxena admits that she does not read Kali (as the ultimate form of the Great Goddess) as either specifically patriarchal or matriarchal, and whether or not she is empowering, in the feminist sense, depends on one's circumstances, education, discernment, and even personal experiences with the goddess — emphasizing, once again, the need for direct engagement and the impossibility of simple labels.³¹¹ At the same time, as demonstrated by the various cases presented above and in chapter three, it is the Shakta Tantric approach to Kali that is most salient with Western spiritual feminists precisely because it articulates most strongly those aspects of Indian goddess religiosity that potentially make it empowering and enriching for women, and which honour and sacralize the feminine. Briefly, I would like to turn one's attention to some key overlaps and spaces of synaesthesia between the two traditions, while highlighting unique aspects of the Western interpretations of Kali.

Sha'can is perhaps just the most vivid example of Western Kali worship positing itself as a path of spiritual ecofeminism. While I have emphasized the 'feminism' part in this paper, in particular in chapter three, the 'eco' part is also significant since it entails an orientation towards the natural world, in religious and in socio-political contexts, that is generally not a part of Kali worship in the East. While both Shaktism and Western goddess spirituality articulate an equation of the Divine Feminine with the manifest world, and therefore the sacralization of all nature as the body of the goddess (the *prakriti-shakti-maya* complex, for example, which forms the gynocentric matrix of Hindu thought), it seems that in the Western context these theological considerations entail a more direct socio-political activism aimed at pursuing feminist and eco-conscious policies and governance. At the most quotidian level, examples of such sentiments

³¹¹ Saxena, *In the beginning IS desire*, p. 45-49

may be the episode of the “twice birthed” flowers I had witnessed at the puja, or even the story of Kali and the hibiscus plant from chapter three. At the puja in particular, the special accent Alexandre made on the flowers brought by one of the participants, celebrating the spirit of re-use and care for the environment, appears indicative of a more general moral stance. In Haravallabha’s narrative one sees a continuation of these principles, and their development into an encompassing philosophy, or “set of tools”, for living one’s life. Tantrism is interpreted here in a manner very similar to Starhawk’s articulation of ecofeminist Witchcraft, and especially regarding notions of will and power, and the power of such “uneasy” words as *Witch* and *Goddess* that serve to fight the consciousness of estrangement, which separates socio-political issues and spiritual issues into a myriad of discrete entities, when in reality they are all related. She writes:

...The power we sense in a seed, in the growth of a child, the power we feel writing, weaving, working, creating, making choices, has nothing to do with the threats of annihilation.³¹² It has more to do with the root meaning of the word power, from the (late popular) Latin, *podere*, (“to be able”). It is the power that comes from within. There are many names for power-from-within, none of them entirely satisfying. ... I have called it *immanence*, a term that is truthful but somewhat cold and intellectual. And I have called it *Goddess*, because the ancient images, symbols, and myths of the Goddess as birth-giver, weaver, earth and growing plant, wind and ocean, flame, web, moon and milk, all speak to me of the power of connectedness, sustenance, healing, creating.

...To reshape the very principle of power upon which our culture is based, we must shake up all the old divisions. ... For though we are told that such issues are separate: that rape is an issue separate from nuclear war, that a woman’s struggle for equal pay is not related to a black teenager’s struggle to find a job or to the struggle to prevent the export of a nuclear reactor to a site on a web of earthquake faults near active volcanos in the Philippines, all these realities are shaped by the consciousness that shapes our power relationships. Those relationships in turn shape our economic and social systems; our technology; our science; our religions; our views of women and men; our views of races and cultures that differ from our own; our sexuality; our Gods and our wars. They are presently shaping the destruction of the world.

...Because we doubt our own content, we doubt the evidence of our senses and the lessons of our own experience. We see our drives and desires as inherently chaotic and destructive, in need of repression and control, just as we see nature as a wild chaotic

³¹² Here Starhawk refers to what she call “power over,” a destructive, linear, dualistic framework of power achieved by domination, which seems to be the prevalent paradigm for power in the modern world.

force, in need of order imposed by human beings. ... Yet another form of consciousness is possible.... This is the consciousness I call *immanence* — the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, interacting, and infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance.

The Goddess can be seen as the symbol, the normative image of immanence. She represents the divine embodied in nature, in human beings, in the flesh. The Goddess is not one image but many — a constellation of forms and associations — earth, air, fire, water, moon and star, sun, flower and seed, willow and apple, black, red, white, Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She includes the male in her aspects: He becomes child and Consort, stag and bull, grain and reaper, light and dark. Yet the femaleness of the Goddess is primary not to denigrate the male, but because it represents bringing life into the world, valuing the world.³¹³

It is not surprising then that some spiritual feminists, or any other individuals seeking a spirituality of power-from-within rather than one of power-over (such as vividly illustrated by the testimony of Maya, from the group discussion above), would read Shakta Tantra in light of the ethics of immanence. Sha'can as a devotional, ritual, and practical path combines the salient symbolism and rich philosophical tradition of the fierce Kali with Western feminist and environmentalist ethos; this demonstrates that the appeal of Kali in the Western context is not necessarily limited to her “shocking” attributes, but more so by what is *behind* them.

One can see a glimpse of Kali even in Starhawk's words above, in the “black, red, white” — the colours which, in the Eastern context, represent Kali's paradoxical unification of the three *gunas*, or qualities, of the manifest world, and in the Western context have been interpreted by Bedi as reflective of the three stages of the alchemical process of transformation. In Jungian terms, though such transformations are internal and are lived out in the psyche, they are reflective of greater truths, or archetypes. The themes of crisis and healing, while played out on the individual plane, are meaningful because they reflect mythic and human realities beyond an individual's life. And the very fact that for some people the encounter with Kali, at least initially, is shocking or frightening, points to an intimate and visceral experience, which, depending on how it is handled, can serve as a “pointer” for further growth. Starhawk, for example, consciously welcomes the discomfort often associated with terms such as “witch” and “goddess” as a vehicle from which change may be effected. Language, in particular, shapes consciousness,

³¹³ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997, 3-9

and as such has the potential to transform the consciousness of estrangement into one of immanence.

Naming and voicing is a key to understanding, reclaiming, and transforming, including whatever is associated with the ‘dark’; one must wonder if in the Hindu context Kali Ma’s terrifying aspects serve not a similar purpose, of approaching, naming, and becoming reconciled with fear, death, and dissolution — actions which will lead, ultimately, to liberation. Her sword, after all, cuts through illusion and the severed head in her hand represents the relinquished ego; Saxena writes that it is the trace of creative, divine desire, found in human desire which “has the power to annihilate the little self, opening up the possibility of radical freedom.”³¹⁴ This “little self” can be compared to Starhawk’s “estranged self”; in Saxena’s reading of Kali as an embodiment and breathing of the entire universe she articulates ideas very similar to Starhawk’s notions of power-from-within, especially when she speaks of the resolution of dualities and the recognition of Desire as desire to Become:

Such recognition leads one along the road to a complete and pure subject position from where one can reach out to the other in love — not from lack, but from plentitude.... Desire for the other, in this sense, is an act of giving rather than hoarding one’s fragile sense of self. Such a giving can only come from strength rather than weakness. ... In one flash of re-cognition emerging out of a dissolved self, one can momentarily speak out: I am That ... We recognize that there was no beginning, only the relentless coming and going of the eternal stream of creation, sustenance, and withdrawal.³¹⁵

Though the comparison between Shakta Tantra and Starhawk’s ethics of immanence is powerful and relevant, I do not wish to overstate it. It is worth noting that Starhawk’s *Goddess* is not a being outside of the physical world; She is not *necessarily* a transcendent reality.³¹⁶ In articulating the ethics and practices of immanence, Starhawk is proposing above all an *attitude* which is almost atheistic: “choosing to take this living world, the people and creatures on it, as

³¹⁴ Saxena, *In the Beginning IS Desire*, 78

³¹⁵ *Ibid*, 78-80

³¹⁶ I use cautious language here, because Starhawk never quite addresses the question of ontology head-on. She warns against the possible stagnation of symbols, and the dangers of forgetting the principles behind them, but she equally does not shy from using the words such as “sacred” and “spiritual”, and writes extensively about shamanic journeys and altered states of consciousness. I feel this is a purposeful ambiguity on her part, not wishing to box the Goddess into one definition or the other, and instead allowing her to stand as a symbol and as a reality simultaneously, as an oscillating complex of possibilities.

the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, to see the world, the earth, and our lives as sacred.”³¹⁷ Power-from-within is not something to *have*, but rather something to *do*; reality and society are conceived of in terms of constant flux, dynamic, challenging, requiring constant engagement with and movement (anticipating Connelly’s articulation of neuropolitics by several decades). Magic is the name Starhawk gives to that will power that animates the world, the “psychology/technology of immanence” and “the art of changing consciousness at will.”³¹⁸ It is interesting that it is both something of a natural force, and the force animating human beings, human behaviour; Starhawk notes that it is not very useful in tactics of power-over (hence the association in mainstream culture of magic with charlatanry, deceit, or illusion), but it is useful in calling up and channelling power-from within. Magical acts can be prosaic, such as organizing a protest or writing an article, and they can be esoteric, including all the ancient and modern technologies of deepening awareness, spiritual development, ritual, and so on. To practice magic, in this context, is to “move energy”; it also must be in constant flow in order to be nurturing and healthy. Such an articulation is remarkably cognate to *shakti* and the Hindu notion of auspiciousness, *maṅgal*, the “uninterrupted flow” of things. It is unsurprising that Kali, among her many Bengali epithets is “Mother Who Embodied Auspiciousness”, Maṅgalmayīmā.

Aptly named, Sha’can is located at the nexus of feminist goddess spirituality and Shakta Tantra, representing much of what the Western Kali is, or can be, about: a devotional path of self-effort, positing a monistic Great Goddess in an immanent and deeply interconnected universe, and constantly negotiating between the macrocosm and the microcosm within the very person of the devotee/ practitioner herself. At the same time, it is also a path of social awareness, prescriptive of one’s orientation in the community and in the world. One vivid example of this is the ritual “removing the curses from the feminine”, performed as part of the puja above, wherein healing at an individual level is perceived as directly connected to healing at the societal level, and even at the level of the entire planet, as she is conceived of in feminine terms as Mother Earth. This ritual use of a traditional prayer from the *Caṇḍī* (another name for the *Devi Mahatmya*) in the context of Tantric Kali puja easily embodies the ethics of magic in feminist

³¹⁷ Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark*, 11

³¹⁸ *Ibid*, 13

Witchcraft, which postulates a correspondence between the particular and the general, as well as the notion of personal will, power, and responsibility. While the tradition of Sharanya is rather unique for its complex negotiation of Shakta Tantrism (so much so that I would call it a Western-style Shaktism rather than a Shakta-flavoured goddess spirituality), its vision of Kali is nonetheless congruent with many of the Western Kali appropriations reviewed in chapter three. Kali as the primary Shakti goddess is another key characteristic in her appeal to spiritual feminists. As already mentioned, *shakti* as the energy animating the manifest cosmos and inherent in every living being and Shakti as the manifestation of this collective power in the form of the Goddess/ various goddesses is remarkably organic to the revivalist movement of goddess religiosity. As the aspects of the Goddess of feminist spirituality include both light and dark, gentle and fierce manifestations, so Kali is uniquely positioned as a paradoxical deity that defies and reconciles dualities.

In a sense, Kali is the perfect symbol, because regardless of the framework of interpretation, she always appears to be greater than the sum of her parts. Above, I have touched upon only some of the more immediate points of contact between Starhawk's goddess theology and Saxena's Shakta reading of Kali, and no doubt many more can be explored in depth, perhaps in further studies. Nonetheless, even my cursory treatment here reflects the blending of Eastern and Western goddess spiritualities also found in Sha'can and in the experiences of its practitioners. Haravallabha's description of Kali as the Ultimate and that which encompasses and transcends both the created world and the "catalogue" of all gods and goddesses, is especially revealing of this. While she remained very faithful to a sort of humanist vision, her devotion to Kali is ecstatic and revelatory. It seems to me that such an ability to pose at once as a symbol, an archetype, and the *reality* behind that symbol, is the crux of Kali's lasting fascination and appeal to Western spiritual feminists. Starhawk writes that she chooses the symbol over the abstraction because it evokes sensual and emotional responses, not only intellectual ones; I would add that for many spiritual feminists and Western Kali devotees the symbol also corresponds to a *lived, experiential* reality. It does not only evoke certain sensual, emotional, intellectual, and devotional responses, but *embodies* them. While it is not my goal here to explore the theological

implications of this, I believe my survey of Western Kali imaginings and my conversations with Sharanya members have pointed to the *reality* of the goddess in individuals' lives.

It is natural that I started this paper in the East, with the Kali of West Bengal and Kerala and the hills of Rajasthan, since without it the exploration of her Western incarnations would have been impossible. I find it interesting that Kali continues to transform the spaces she occupies, intellectual and otherwise, opening new avenues for knowledge — as one might expect from the first and primary Mahavidya. Both in the East and in the West she continually marches into new terrain, and whether she is reclaimed by feminist thinkers or contested by traditionalists, she is forever slipping away from easy classification. The fluidity and organic structures of the Internet have certainly facilitated the processes of information sharing, though perhaps they also complicate ever more the task of adopting a critical approach. Experience, in this flux, remains a reliable organizing principle simply because it is representative of discrete, individual, lived realities; it was my hope in this paper that in examining a few cases of lived, embodied experiences of the Western Kali I will be able to find a more fecund way into her multi-voiced tradition.

Throughout this paper, as I deepened my search for the Western Kali and probed further into the experiences of practitioners and devotees, the Angry Kali of early feminists and the Orientalized Kali of popular culture slowly gave way to an increasingly more complex figure. This evolution perhaps reflects the development of the goddess movement as a whole, and especially in such expressions of it as Sha'can, it reflects the critiques of third wave feminism being applied and incorporated into theology, ritual, and practice. New ideas regarding gender and gender essentialism, class division, the role of the natural world, identity politics, and so on, can be seen worked out, in part, through changing symbols and narratives — and the 'maturing' Western Kali seems to be an indication that such work is indeed taking place. As with the early goddess movement, however, it is taking place in de-centralized, discrete ways; in the intimate experiences of devotees, in small covens, in discussion forums, in blogs, in bookstores, in visions, in works of art. Though one's initial experience with her may be frightening or shocking, Kali paves the way for possibilities of a deeper engagement. Her fierce aspect unites all the

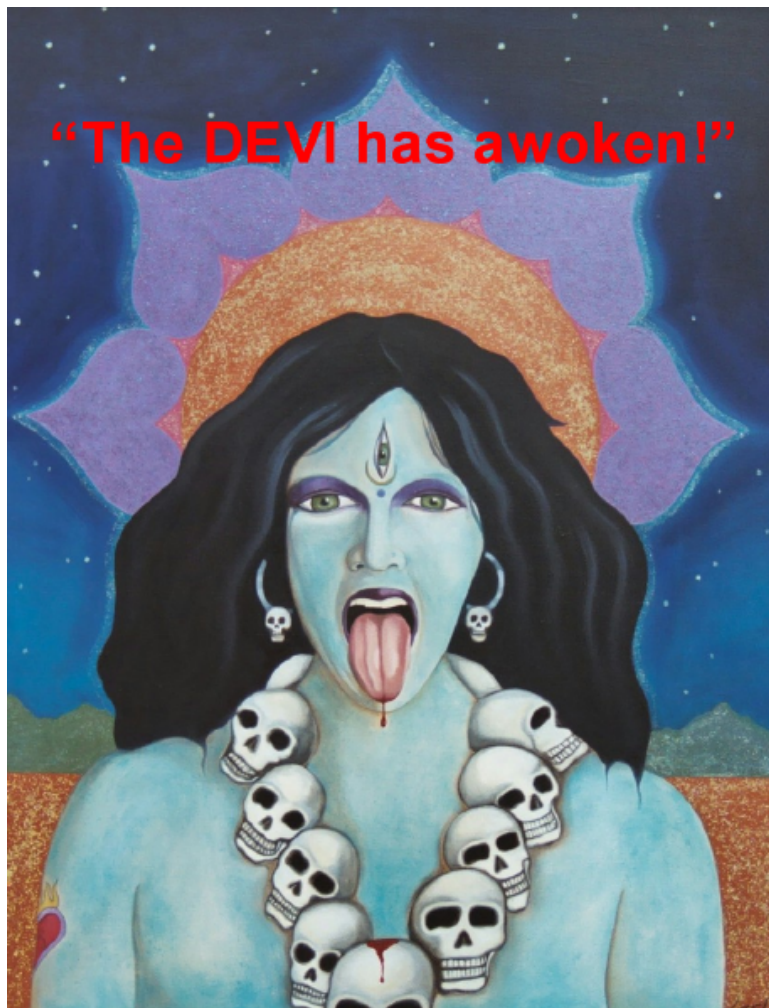
varied interpretations of her — the militant and the maternal, the sensationalized and the sensual, the terrifying and the transformative.

Looking far beyond the scope of this paper, and even beyond its many limitations, the phenomenon of the Western Kali also begs comment regarding current notions of the ‘embeddedness’ of religion and religious symbols; or perhaps it is just a sign of the times, of dis-embedded, transnational and multi-local lives and identities. What are the roles and meanings of history, geography, language, or ethnicity in the context of a wandering Goddess, or, for that matter, a wandering community of devotees? How to situate, comparatively, the lived experiences of her Eastern and Western devotees? Though these questions remain open, they allow for lines of communication to be established between various partners of conversation; and these conversations are becoming more and more relevant in the contemporary world, with its global flux of information which so often masks the diversity of local and particular contexts. Ultimately, here too Kali is an agent of change, a paradoxical goddess who is at once One and Many, incarnate in living bodies and in the earth itself. Investigating her Western forms ultimately poses questions that are beyond the specific practices of her Western devotees. Travelling over electronic highways and in visions, reflected in new images of herself, Kali is dancing, whirling, conquering new limits and transcending them.

APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL DIGITAL ICONOGRAPHY OF KALI

In addition to the images presented in chapter three, here are a few more of the images I have been collecting as various instances of Kali's Western iconography that I have not had the space to discuss in great detail above but which still present interesting imaginings of the goddess. It seems that one of the unique Western ways to engage with Kali and "translate" her into familiar terms is through art, and these examples support this notion. The variety of images included here is, once again, only a sampling of diverse styles and contexts. The images below are found online, and I have cited the webpage of origin and a brief note on context, to the extent possible.

1. "The Devi Has Awoken!" by Lorraine Leslie, a self-portrait as the goddess. *Sacred Art* blog, December 5, 2010, <http://lorraineleslie.blogspot.ca/2010/12/devi-has-awoken.html>



2. "Kali," digital art by Andrew Soper (it exists also in what the artist calls a PG-13 version, with covered breasts). Andrew Soper's artist website, May 19, 2011, <http://andrewsoper.com/archives/310#more-310>



3. “Kali Exorcism”, accompanied by poem (excerpt below), by Helen Moore, *International Times* blog, <http://internationaltimes.it/kali-exorcism/>



“Kali Exorcism

After Allen Ginsberg, and written for the Gaian Remembrance Vigil on 11.11.11

O Kali, shadow-slayer, destroyer of illusion,
I offer up the military-industrial complex,
and all the complexes within me that destroy peace.

Descend, blue-skinned mother, raging, bloodthirsty
fresh from the battlefield of demons, your eight arms
bearing skulls and weapons,

and take this putrid fruit of our violence, slice it open,
expose its flesh and seeds to the light
where they may never grow....”

4. "Goddess Kali" by Victoria Bearden, Oil on Canvas, 18"X 24", painted in 2009. Online at *Primal Urge Magazine*, http://www.primal-urge-magazine.com/JUNE%20-%20JULY/victoria_bearden.htm.



“A more Western version of the Hindu Goddess, both motherly, and wildly fierce, she is the Goddess who liberates Souls.” (Victoria Bearden)

5. "Kali" (unattributed art), posted by amberlee at *A Little of This...* blog, August 11, 2011, <http://teenage-renegade.blogspot.ca/search?q=Kali>



"Kali is the definition of fierce, she is the ultimate female." (amberlee)

APPENDIX B: SELECT INTERNET SOURCES

While the sands of the Internet are ever shifting, and websites appear, disappear, and/ or are modified on a daily basis, it seems useful to try and present a select list of sources I have used in exploring the imaginings of the Western Kali as she appears “dancing on the electronic highways”, to borrow McDermott’s apt expression. This is by no means a comprehensive list, and my aim here is to merely give a *small taste* of the breadth and variety of Kali’s appearances on the web in English (presumably, these are available to all North American seekers of Kali). In presenting these here I hope to emphasize the fluidity of the evolving terrain within which the Western Kali may be situated. Some of these sources were active in the beginning of my research and are no longer available; others have appeared only recently; others yet have been altered significantly. Yet any lived tradition is in a constant state of flux, and observing it can be useful in gauging its currents, moods, and shifting identities.

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Hands of Kali bellydance troupe. Accessed April 26, 2010, <http://www.handsofkali.com/>

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Shiva Shakti Mandalam: the inner wisdom of the hindu tantrik tradition website <http://www.shivashakti.com/>

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