

MYSTICISM UNBOUND

**An Interpretative Reading of Jeffrey J. Kripal's Contribution to the
Contemporary Study of Mysticism**

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Abstract for Thesis
Mysticism Unbound: A Critical Assessment of Jeffrey J. Kripal's
Contribution to the Contemporary study of Mysticism

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This thesis examines the relationship between human sexuality and “the mystical” in the work of Jeffrey J. Kripal. I claim that Kripal presents a nondualistic understanding of the relationship between human sexuality and “the mystical” that contests the conventional distinction between body and “soul.” In particular, Kripal’s two central concepts – “the erotic” and “the enlightenment of the body” – suggest that embodiment shapes our understanding of “the mystical.” By demonstrating the psychoanalytic, hermeneutical, and comparative significance of the relationship between human sexuality and “the mystical,” Kripal’s model calls attention to the crucial role that body, gender, and sexual orientation play in both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism. The point of my research is to show that Kripal’s approach signals a new way of studying “the mystical” in terms of “mystical humanism,” which draws on both Eastern and Western philosophies to construct a critical, non-reductive appreciation for the transformative and ultimately emancipatory potential of certain mystical states of consciousness.

For Farrah, my light and my fire.

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INTRODUCTION

Am I a god?
I feel such a light within.

From Goethe's *Faust*

In his influential work *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (1925), the American psychologist Frank Leuba claims that “not one of the prominent representatives of mysticism lived a normal married life” (Leuba 1925: 213). If Leuba’s locution “normal married life” is interpreted as a colloquial euphemism for sex, then it would appear as though Leuba is suggesting that not one of the “prominent” mystics lived a “normal” sex life. Given the generality of Leuba’s remarks, it is of course difficult to adequately gauge the validity of his proposition. However, it is also just as difficult to deny the fact that historically, issues relating to human sexuality have played a significant role in shaping our conventional understanding of the mystical. Is this supposed link between the sexual and the mystical a mere construction of Western psychology? Perhaps; but it is also possible that this link between the sexual and the mystical is both a construction of Western psychology *and* a genuine characteristic of mystical experience. Stated simply, perhaps Western psychology tends to link the sexual and the mystical precisely because, historically, mystics from various religious and cultural traditions have actually favored a discussion of the mystical in terms that are both implicitly and explicitly sexual.

The question of how to address the relation between sexuality and the mystical remains an enduring issue that continues to confront the contemporary study of mysticism. What type of role does sexuality play in the construction, interpretation, and representation of the mystical? Does a discussion of sexuality hinder or help our understanding of the mystical? At what point, if at all, do the pains and pleasures of sexual desire coincide with the agony and ecstasy of mystical desire? More precisely,

where do they intersect? Do the energies that create and sustain the sexual and the mystical converge in the body or in the “soul”? If the psychoanalytic theorist Norman Brown is correct and “all values are bodily values,” then why do so many religious traditions tend to frame the mystical in terms that deny the demands of the body and the material world in general (Brown 1959: 293)? Why is there such a palpable tension in the history of religions between the material and the immaterial, immanence and transcendence, and finally, the sexual and the spiritual? Must the demands of the body always be at odds with the desires of the “soul”?

The short answer is no. There are in fact certain religious traditions that offer a complimentary understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the mystical based in terms of their mutual interdependence. For example, the beliefs and practices associated with the Tantric traditions of East Asia tend to frame the sexualized body as a sacred conduit of the mystical. In contrast to the dominant narratives that traditionally inform the worldview and systems of value indicative of the Abrahamic religions, which, generally speaking, tend to vilify both the body and sexuality as obstacles that often obfuscate our understanding of the mystical, the Tantric traditions tend to venerate the sexualized body as a vehicle of spiritual liberation. In other words, for the traditional Tantric practitioner, the human body, or more specifically, the sexualized human body, signifies a mystical bridge between the “mundane” and the “sacred.”

This valorization of the sexualized body that has come to characterize the mystical traditions of Tantra is not limited to the history of Eastern mysticism. For example, in the West, there are certain alternative traditions, such as Paganism and

Gnosticism, which interpret the mystical in terms that often resemble the erotic writings typical of the Tantric traditions. Moreover, the writings of certain “free-lance” mystics, particularly, the American poet Walt Whitman and the French philosopher Georges Bataille, tend to frame the mystical in terms that are explicitly erotic. Such work calls attention to the mutual interdependence of the body and the “soul.” These brief examples underscore the point that historically, there are mystics and mystical traditions in both the East and the West that address the relationship between the sexual and the mystical as two sides of the same bodily coin. The question remains: What are the consequences for our conventional understanding of the relationship between consciousness and culture when our understanding of the mystical is fully embodied? What if the material world – the world of flesh, blood, and body – is in fact a genuine expression *of* the mystical? Or, even further, what if the material world *is* the mystical? Is it possible that Nature *is* “God,” that the earth *is* “heaven,” and Samsara *is* Nirvana? After all, what could possibly be more mystical than the natural wonders of the cosmos, where “a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars” (Whitman 2004: 49)?

The complex relationship between human sexuality and the mystical, and its various implications for our understanding of consciousness, culture, and cosmos, is central to the work of Jeffrey J. Kripal. Kripal’s innovative work has proved highly influential in broadening the psychoanalytic, hermeneutical, and comparative scope of the contemporary study of mysticism. In particular, Kripal’s focus on issues of eroticism, body, gender, and sexual orientation, directly challenge the conventional view of the mystical as something “beyond” the body. While Kripal is careful not to foreclose the

possibility that the mystical can potentially signify “something more” than mere bodily desire, he refuses to ignore the historical fact that the concerns of the human body and human sexuality have played a crucial role in shaping the way human beings traditionally relate to the mystical. This thesis can be read as a critical assessment of Kripal’s contribution to our understanding of human eroticism in relation to the historical and contemporary study of mysticism.

I suggest that Kripal’s corpus of work offers a multifaceted model for addressing how the mutual imbrications of the sexual¹ and the mystical expand the comparative understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” (Kripal 2007: 23). In particular, I claim that Kripal’s theory of “the erotic,” understood as “a *coincidentia* of the mystical and the sexual,” is key to elucidating how his conception of “enlightenment” relates to his conception of “the body” (Kripal 2002: 37). Stated simply, in Kripal’s model “the erotic” is what links “enlightenment” to “the body.” Furthermore, I argue that Kripal’s most significant contribution to the contemporary study of mysticism lies with the *emancipatory value* he attributes to “the enlightenment of the body.” The emancipatory value that Kripal attributes to “the enlightenment of the body” can be best understood in relation to the overarching aim of Kripal’s work, which, I suggest, is to establish a space

¹Kripal explains his understanding of sexuality and gender as follows: “I understand sexuality to be a biological driven instinct that, although perhaps genetically determined to some degree, is nevertheless open to the powerful forces of cultural and historical conditioning, which works dialectically with the biological givens (like a person’s ‘sex’ or anatomical genitalia) to produce a third, dialectical realm that is the human, essentially symbolic experience of sexuality. In David Halperin’s always eloquent terms, ‘sexuality does not refer to some positive physical property – such as the property of being anatomically sexed – that exists independently of culture...Unlike sex, which is a natural fact, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the appropriation of the human body and of its erogenous zones by an ideological discourse.’ Gender I understand as that culturally variable modal model of masculinity or femininity (or both, or neither), that is, the general meanings, values, and practices normally associated with being a man or a woman or a third gender in a particular culture or subculture” (Kripal 2001: 17).

in the academy of religion for a new “gnostic” epistemology based on the principles of “mystical humanism.” If read as an emancipatory discourse, I suggest that Kripal’s understanding of “mystical humanism” can help advance the political relevance of the academic study of mysticism because it brings much needed attention to how certain issues relating to body, gender, and sexual orientation influence the cross-cultural construction, interpretation, and representation of certain mystical states of consciousness.

Kripal defines the “the erotic” as “a dimension of human experience that is simultaneously related both to the physical and emotional experience of sexuality and to the deepest ontological levels of religious experience” (Kripal 1998: 23). In other words, the erotic signifies a nexus between the sexual and that “something more” which traditionally defines the mystical object of desire. According to Kripal, regardless of whether this dialectic of the sexual and the mystical is framed in negative or positive terms, or whether it is addressed implicitly or explicitly, the fact remains that erotic issues share a rich history in both Eastern and Western mystical discourse. Kripal thus employs the erotic as a hermeneutical lens from which to comparatively read the dialectic of the sexual and the mystical as it manifests within both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism.

In general terms, Kripal argues that the unique form of erotic desire disclosed in the texts of certain mystics offers an emancipatory discourse that challenges our

conventional understanding of reality. By deconstructing the violent “logocentrism”² that traditionally defines our normative understanding of the world, and exchanging in its place a polymorphously perverse eroticism, the writings and teachings of certain mystics express an inherent tendency to transgress conventional modes of consciousness. In effect, the erotic desire that defines the textual confessions of certain mystics offers an alternative way of knowing, feeling, and being-in-the-world. Thus, in Kripal’s model, the erotic desire of the mystic is potentially transformative, not only for the mystics themselves, but for any individual willing to participate in their radical vision and commit to a profound contestation of “normative” reality.

Why, at the risk of facing personal and public persecution, do so many mystics from so many different traditions make such an effort to communicate the emancipatory value of erotic desire? What exactly is so liberating about mystical love? Historically, in order to communicate the emancipatory value of his or her experience of the mystical, many mystics of various cultural traditions have utilized common erotic themes that tend to resonate, such as the relationship between lover and beloved, bride and bridegroom, and, although less frequently, the unparalleled intimacy between mother and child.

However, the language of erotic desire utilized by certain mystics not only includes the

²The term “logocentrism” was popularized by the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Logocentrism refers to “the deep-laid metaphysical prejudice whereby the values of truth and reason are equated with a privileged epistemic access to thoughts ‘in the mind’ of those presumed or authorized to know” (Bass 2004: xix). According to John C. Coker, “logocentric philosophy constitutes itself as exemplary of the *logos*, a Greek word whose meanings include reason, speech, rational discourse, and rational accounts (e.g. philosophical and scientific theories). In general, logocentric philosophies assume paradigms of what is rational, reasonable, etc., and correlatively they exclude or marginalize what does not fit their paradigm” (Coker 2003: 54). Derrida views this move to exclude “the other” as an inherently violent act (O’Donnell 2003: 125). Similarly, Herbert Marcuse refers to the *logos* “as the logic of domination” (Marcuse 1962: 101).

forms of intimacy just mentioned, it also exceeds them. The erotic desire of certain mystics is illicit, subversive, precisely because it communicates a form of mystical intimacy unbound by the constraints of convention, particularly the conventional strictures imposed on bodily pleasure by certain religious beliefs and practices. Ultimately, I argue Kripal's work aims to expose the erotic underpinnings of an "unbound mysticism," a mysticism defined by transgression, transformation, and, perhaps most significantly, "the enlightenment of the body."

The following thesis consists of two chapters that will unfold as follows: First, in chapter one I provide a general introduction to the work of Kripal by discussing the contents of his first two works, *Kali's Child: The Secret Erotic Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995; 2nd ed., 1998) and *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001). I argue that Kripal's general understanding of the mystical in these two works is representative of a "transformational" psychoanalytic study of the mystical. In his work, *The Oceanic Feeling: Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism* (1999), William B. Parsons identifies three psychoanalytic approaches to the study of mysticism.³ According to William Parsons, "the three schools can be termed the 'classical,' which seeks to frame mysticism as regressive and defensive, if not pathological; the 'adaptive,' which draws on both ego-psychology and object-relations theory and frames mysticism as regressive but in the service of culturally defined norms of health and social functioning; and the

³According to Parsons, these three "schools" of psychoanalytic theory can be traced to Sigmund Freud's informal dialogue with the nature mystic Romain Rolland (Parsons 1999: 11).

‘transformational,’ which is open to the possibility that the mystical element in religious traditions transcends the purely developmental” (Parsons 2003: 151).

To borrow from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, the “classical” school tends to reduce the significance of the mystical “to questions of fucking” (Lacan 1982: 147). The “adaptive” school, in contrast, acknowledges the developmental critiques offered by the “classical” school, but tends to generally focus on the therapeutic value of certain mystical states of consciousness. Similar to both the “classical” and the “adaptive” approaches, the “transformational” school recognizes the crucial role developmental factors play in the construction, interpretation, and representation of mystical consciousness. But unlike the “classical,” and, to a lesser extent, the “adaptive” school, the “transformational” school is ultimately defined by its capacity to “display cross-cultural sensitivity” and a “marked sympathy with the transcendent, religious claims of mystics” (Parsons 1999: 11).

Kripal’s “transformational” approach, as represented in his first work, *Kali’s Child*, frames the erotic as “a methodological category where religious experience and psychoanalysis can meet in the act of interpretation” (Kripal 1998: 23). I argue that Kripal’s primary aim in *Kali’s Child* is to demonstrate that erotic issues relating to the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna’s psychosexual development play a pivotal role in the construction, interpretation, and representation of his mysticism. By interweaving anthropology, history, and psychoanalysis, Kripal constructs a multi-layered, non-reductive interpretation of the mystical experiences of Ramakrishna that emphasizes both the transgressive and transformative merits of his mysticism.

By critically examining Ramakrishna's homoerotic visions, "secret teachings," and Tantric proclivities, Kripal argues that Ramakrishna's mystical experiences signify his psyche's attempt to reconcile an inner conflict between his repressed homoerotic desire and its bodily expression. From this perspective, Ramakrishna's alleged "madness" can be read as a culturally mediated symptom of his inability to fully articulate his homoerotic desires. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Kripal suggests that through a complex process of identification, internalization, and sublimation, Ramakrishna was able to draw on his homosexual desires as a catalyst for his mystical visions and ecstasies. Confronted with numerous losses in his childhood, Ramakrishna sought comfort by identifying with certain public symbols of his culture, particularly, the mythology and iconography surrounding the Tantric goddess Kali. Once internalized, Kripal maintains that the public and private meanings associated with these symbols enabled Ramakrishna to (secretly) engage and eventually sublimate his homoerotic desires, transforming them into an extension of his mysticism. Kripal thus suggests that sexual desire, once denied, returns through the mystical as the erotic (Kripal 2001: 172).

Such a reductive reading of Ramakrishna's encounter with the mystical is a classic example of the "return of the repressed" in psychoanalytic theory (Freud 1939: 127). However, Kripal's analysis does not end with the "classical" psychoanalytic interpretation. According to Kripal, sexual repression, at least as it is myopically framed in certain schools of "classical" psychoanalysis, fails to fully account for the transformative element, that inarticulate "something more" that so often defines the empowered character of certain mystical states of consciousness. In other words,

according to Kripal, whereas psychoanalytic theory can assist in facilitating a psychosexual interpretation of the relationship between sexual desire and mystical desire in the life and teachings of Ramakrishna, ultimately the transformative quality of his mystical consciousness, its “secret” ontological meaning, resists the reductive materialism that so often defines “classical” psychoanalytic theory.

I aim to demonstrate that Kripal’s theory of the erotic, as represented by his analysis of Ramakrishna, can be easily located within the evolving psychoanalytic interpretation of mysticism. Furthermore, I argue that by seeking to “turn Freud on his head,” Kripal’s work *Kali’s Child* significantly expands both the scope of inquiry and the range of application for a psychoanalytic interpretation of mystical consciousness (Kripal 2001: 22). Whereas Freud tends to reduce mystical desire to sexual desire, Kripal reverses the dialectic so that sexual desire can be interpreted mystically. Thus Kripal’s erotic interpretation of Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences does not simply reduce the mystical to the sexual, but rather, in a much more “Tantric” fashion, he attempts to read the mystical *through* the sexual. I claim that the *terminus technicus* of this dialectic interplay between the mystical and sexual is the erotic, which, according to Kripal, is ultimately irreducible to either category.

When viewed through the lens of the erotic, certain aspects of the mystical are clearly concerned with issues relating to sexual desire. However, at the same time, Kripal’s theory of the erotic, as represented in *Kali’s Child*, shows that sexual desire can be profoundly mystical. Drawing on the mystical traditions of Tantra, Kripal’s

nondualistic⁴ approach contests the conventional distinction between “profane” sexual desire and “sacred” mystical desire. For Kripal, the erotic energies of Ramakrishna’s mysticism blur the boundary between the profane and the sacred, the material and the immaterial, transcendence and immanence. Essentially, Kripal suggests that the life and teachings of Ramakrishna present an imaginative example of how conventional epistemic binaries can be swept away by the unitive energies of erotic desire. And it is precisely the unitive character of this erotic excess issuing from the mystical that invariably overflows the explanatory register of any psychosexually based theory, including psychoanalysis. Hence, although psychoanalytic theory can assist in explaining certain psychosexual aspects of the mystical, according to Kripal it nonetheless fails to fully explain the ontological significance of that transformative “something more” which traditionally defines Ramakrishna’s understanding of the mystical.

In the second section of chapter one I examine Kripal’s next major work, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001), in order to show how Kripal’s concept of the erotic contributes to his understanding of “mystical hermeneutics.” In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal attempts to expose the erotic narratives that have secretly shaped the direction of the contemporary study of mysticism. If we are to take the confessions of the mystics seriously and consent to their standard claims of ineffability, how then can we hope to comprehend, even provisionally, the significance of their experience? The answer lies in accepting that we can never fully

⁴According to G. William Barnard, “a nondual theoretical perspective claims that all our normal philosophical categories simply do not apply to the nature of Ultimate Reality and that any positive statements about Ultimate Reality must be understood as metaphorical, at best” (Barnard 2002: 73).

comprehend a mystic's immediate response to his or her experience. We can never exhaust the plethora of meanings and idiosyncratic values attributed to each experience by a particular mystic.

However, it is possible to examine the varied ways in which a particular mystic's response to his or her experience is tacitly disclosed in cultural discourse. We may never fully know what a mystic actually experiences, but we can examine the discursive strategies a mystic deploys in order to signify the value of his or her experience. In other words, although we cannot directly access a mystic's experience of the mystical, we do have access to the narrative accounts of his or her experience. Thus, in *Roads of Excess* Kripal calls attention to the *hermeneutical* meaning of the mystical. From an historical and comparative perspective, the various narratives that traditionally define an encounter with the mystical tend to be marked by secrecy; that is, the language of the mystical is often coded. According to Kripal, the key to unlocking the secret code of the mystical lies with the erotic. In *Roads of Excess* Kripal utilizes the erotic as a hermeneutical lens from which to decipher and translate the code of the mystical into a more "human" idiom, and thereby elucidate its hidden psychosexual meanings.

Furthermore, I argue that *Roads of Excess* marks an important transition in Kripal's application of the erotic. In Kripal's first book, *Kali's Child*, the theoretical significance of the erotic is primarily localized to a psychosexual understanding of the mystical experiences of a specific mystic, namely, Ramakrishna. In *Roads of Excess*, however, Kripal expands his application of the erotic to include a general analysis of the study of mysticism as it manifests in the lives and teaching of various mystics/scholars, a

process he refers to as “comparative erotics.” I suggest that by aiming to broaden both the psychoanalytic *and* hermeneutical scope of his erotic thesis through comparative research, Kripal’s second work, *Roads of Excess*, can be ultimately read as a response to the criticism leveled at *Kali’s Child*. From this perspective, *Roads of Excess* signals an extension of *Kali’s Child* and thus the two works ought to be read in tandem.

Similar to *Kali’s Child*, Kripal’s erotic analysis of the study of mysticism in *Roads of Excess* is not intended simply to reduce the mystical “to questions of fucking” like Freud and the “classical” school. Rather, in a clearly Tantric move, Kripal seeks to elevate “fucking,” that is, sexuality, to the level of the mystical (Kripal 2001: 27). With such a radical move, Kripal is essentially asking, “what does the history of mysticism look like when we view it through our own sexualities and contemporary discourses about the same?” (Kripal 2001: 15). In other words, what can we discern from the mystical when it is read through the lens of the erotic? Not surprisingly, according to Kripal, what we will discover is that the erotic plays a pivotal role in both the psychological and social construction of the mystical.

However, what may be shocking to discover is the large extent to which the erotic has contributed to shaping the historical and contemporary study of mysticism. For example, one of the central claims Kripal puts forth in *Roads of Excess* is that an erotic reading of any monotheistic religious tradition reveals that the doctrinal and institutional powers that structure these tradition tends to privilege a patriarchal understanding of mysticism that is implicitly homoerotic. Kripal suggests that a similar homoerotic dynamic plays out in the work of some of the most influential theorists in the

contemporary study of mysticism, such as Louis Massignon and R. C. Zaehner, who draw on these same (homoerotic) mystical traditions to support their own views about the mystical.

In *Roads of Excess* Kripal also suggests that many of the models and methods that have come to characterize the contemporary study of mysticism are largely derived from the often hidden mystico-erotic desires and experiences of certain scholars who helped shape the field. In particular, Kripal suggests that the influential writings of Evelyn Underhill, Louis Massignon, Aghananda Bharati, R.C. Zaehner, and Elliot Wolfson exhibit a subtle form of private mysticism hidden *within* their public study of mysticism. Kripal states: “the study of mysticism has been largely inspired, sustained and rhetorically formed by the unitive, ecstatic, visionary, and mystico-hermeneutical experiences of the scholars themselves” (Kripal 2001: 3). What this means is that the hermeneutical process of studying mysticism, as represented by the influential works of the aforementioned scholars, has actually been shaped by the mystico-erotic experiences of the scholars themselves.

Kripal goes even one step further to claim that the study of mysticism can in fact act as a catalyst for producing mystical experience, a process he refers to as “mystical hermeneutics.” According to Kripal, reading and writing about the mystical can potentially activate a reader’s personal encounter with the mystical. In other words, studying the mystical can potentially lead to a participation *in* the mystical. However, because academia tends to privilege positivist methodologies that are based on “objective” theorizing, the private (read: subjective) mysticism of the scholars of

mysticism tends to be strategically encoded within their “objective” writings about the mystical. Thus, Kripal suggests that there is a hermeneutical feedback-loop operating within the traditional study of mysticism where scholars of mysticism, effectively transformed and inspired through their exposure to mystical texts, actively replicate their experience of the mystical through the idiom of their own secret writings, which, in turn, influences other mystics and scholars of mysticism, *ad infinitum*. Why does this private mysticism espoused by the scholars of mysticism often go unnoticed? Could it possibly have something to do with the erotic manner in which these scholars articulate their subjective understanding of the mystical? In *Roads of Excess* Kripal claims that the hidden mysticism that certain scholars have encoded within their texts is visible when viewed through the lens of the erotic.

The second chapter of my thesis examines how Kripal’s understanding of the erotic operates in his next two works, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections On The Study Of Religion* (2006) and *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007). I argue that these two works signal an expansion of Kripal’s “comparative erotics.” In more specific terms, both *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Esalen* examine the way certain erotic issues, such as body, gender, and sexual orientation, help to both construct *and* deconstruct our conventional understanding of the mystical. Following the observations of Wouter J. Hanegraaff, I believe that both these texts, *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Esalen*, ought to be read in tandem (Hanegraaff 2008: 260). *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Esalen* ought to be read in tandem because, first, they complement each other from a methodological standpoint and, second, the central theoretical arguments of each text are coextensively

linked as a whole. By drawing on an array of different materials, ranging from the sexuality of Jesus and the mythology of the comic book superhero, to psychedelics, evolution, and the paranormal, the combined findings of *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* lend support to Kripal's erotic thesis, which posits an embodied link between the sexual and the mystical.

Whereas *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* focus largely on establishing the psychoanalytic and hermeneutical significance of the erotic, *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* call attention to how both mystics and scholars of mysticism have tended to draw on certain erotic issues as a source of inspiration to help shape their understanding of "mystical humanism." According to Kripal, mystical humanism "brings together the worlds of Western critical theory and Asian mystical thought, on the one hand, and those of the Asian philosophical traditions and Western mystical thought, on the other hand" (Kripal 2006: 197). In other words, for Kripal, mystical humanism serves as a dialogical bridge connecting the insights of Eastern and Western mysticism with the critical theory and rationalism commonly associated with secular science, psychology, and philosophy.

In the *Serpent's Gift*, the core concept informing Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism is "gnosis." Capitalizing on the heretical history of the term as "hidden knowledge," Kripal claims that rather than reading the history of the mystical in mutually exclusionary terms that privilege either reason or mystical insight, a third "gnostic" approach is available, namely, mystical humanism, which can unify the critiques of rationalism with the intuitive insights of mysticism. Stated simply, Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism signifies a hermeneutical integration of the rational

and the mystical. I argue that this hermeneutical integration of the rational and the mystical that defines Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism is grounded in his concept of the erotic.

The Serpent's Gift is structured as four meditations that explore how a "gnostic" reading of the mystical can evince a comparative understanding of mystical humanism. These meditations revolve around a set of themes comprising eroticism, humanism, the comparative study of mysticism, and esotericism (Kripal 2005: 24). Kripal's meditations explore the following subjects: 1) the sexuality of Jesus as seen through the lens of Tantra (eroticism); 2) Ludwig Feuerbach's critique of religion (humanism); 3) the mystical potential of the comparative method (comparative mysticism); and 4) the mythology of the American comic book superhero (esotericism). At first glance the subject matter of these four meditations may appear unrelated. However, according to Kripal, when viewed through the lens of the erotic, a specific pattern begins to emerge that links them all together through a common trope, namely, a desire to communicate the merits of mystical humanism. In *The Serpent's Gift*, I argue, Kripal utilizes the erotic as a hermeneutical lens from which to interpret the hidden gnosis encoded in the aforementioned subjects, which essentially "reduces all religious language to the human being, but the human being conceived as 'cosmically'" (Kripal 2006: 88).

In *Esalen* Kripal traces the various ways in which the Esalen institute has contributed to the construction of the human potential movement, and subsequently, how these contributions have helped shape the contemporary understanding of the mystical. Located at Big Sur, California, the Esalen institute has been a veritable Mecca of the

American counterculture for over forty years. Founded by Michael Murphy and Richard Price in 1962, the initial aim of the Esalen institute was to facilitate a “fusion of Western and Asian esoteric traditions that turns to the potentials of the human body as the most potent site of spiritual transformation and intellectual insight” (Kripal 2007: 17). I argue that the high value Kripal places on the human potential movement, as represented by his work *Esalen*, is intimately tied to his concept of “the enlightenment of the body.”

In its early beginnings, the Esalen institute was primarily framed as an alternative learning institute dedicated to the study of psychical phenomena, psychedelic drugs, and psychological theory (Kripal 2007: 117). The founders of Esalen believed that a thorough investigation of these subjects could lead to a more “*integral*” understanding of the mystical as a unique expression of human potential (Kripal 2007: 13). While certain aspects of traditional religion are valuable to this enterprise, as a whole, the founders of Esalen sought to free “human potential” (the mystical) from the confines of religious dogma and establish a “religion of no religion” that could accommodate the discoveries of both science *and* mysticism.

By drawing on certain schools of Western psychology, particularly psychoanalysis and Gestalt theory, and combining it with the experiential and philosophical insights of certain Asian mystical traditions, particularly Tantra, the Esalen institute aimed to reconcile the conventional dualism between the body and the soul that traditionally haunts the “religious” understanding of the mystical. Most significantly, Kripal suggests that Esalen’s focus on the mutual interdependence of the body and the soul, the rational and the mystical, and the East and the West, established a

comprehensive and intellectually robust foundation for the comparative study of human potential.

Kripal identifies “the enlightenment of the body” as a defining theme of Esalen’s general understanding of the mystical. Similar to Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism, “Esalen’s enlightenment of the body encompasses something of both the European Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason, individual integrity, and liberty, and the corporate enlightenment of Asia, with all those remarkable psychophysical techniques of accessing and cultivating contemplative states of consciousness and energy” (Kripal 2007: 24). I suggest that the Esalen institute represents a uniquely American-based historical model of Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism. More specifically, I argue that “the enlightenment of the body” is the central concept informing both Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism and Esalen’s understanding of human potential. In other words, Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism and Esalen’s understanding of human potential are both theoretically and methodologically grounded in “the enlightenment of the body.”

In general terms, “the enlightenment of the body” refers to the mystical potential of the human body. Like Kripal’s concept of the erotic, “the enlightenment of the body” is nondualistic. “The enlightenment of the body” can be understood in nondualistic terms because it blurs the boundary between transcendence (enlightenment) and immanence (body) and thus contests the conventional distinction between mind (consciousness) and matter (energy). From this nondualistic perspective, “the enlightenment of the body” can be read as an extension of Kripal’s concept of the erotic (Kripal 2007: 22). Furthermore,

Kripal suggests that Esalen's general understanding of "the enlightenment of the body" can help to elucidate "the mystical depths of the erotic" (Kripal 2007: 77). Most significantly, Kripal highlights the work of certain Esalen theorists who claim that mystical states of consciousness can potentially lead to a new mode of erotic subjectivity that is both transformative and emancipatory.

Before proceeding to the first part of my thesis, I will make some preliminary remarks about the traditional definition and study of mysticism. In *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'* (1999), Richard King calls attention to some of the problems confronting the contemporary study of mysticism.

King states:

Virtually all contemporary studies of mysticism fail to appreciate the sense in which notions of 'the mystical' (including those that are adopted in the studies themselves) are cultural and linguistic constructions dependent upon a web of interlocking definitions, attitudes and discursive processes, which themselves are tied to particular forms of life and historically specific practices. Not only are contemporary notions of the 'mystical' subject to the cultural presuppositions of the day, they are also informed by and overlap with a long history of discursive processes, continuities and discontinuities and shifts in both meaning and denotation. Just as these various meanings and applications of 'the mystical' have changed over time, so too have the variety of attitudes towards them and evaluations of their importance differed according to circumstance. Defining the mystical then is never a 'purely academic' activity (in the sense in which one means 'of no real consequence'), nor can it ever be completely divorced from the historical remains of past definitions of the term (King 1999: 9).

King's point is that the conventional definition and meaning of the term "mysticism" cannot be divorced from history. The term "mysticism" is tied to the history of a particular tradition of Western culture. In *Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word* (1980) Louis Bouyer traces the etymology of the term "mysticism," claiming that it is derived from the Greek verb "muo," meaning "to close," or more specifically, to close

the eyes and lips (Bouyer 1980: 43). This injunction to close the eyes and lips is traditionally framed in reference to the oaths of secrecy associated with the sacred rites of the mystery religions of ancient Greece, particularly the Demeter (Elusian), Dionysian and Orphic mysteries. Bouyer suggests that given the context of its usage, it is probable that the meaning of the term “*muo*” referred to the secret “details of a ritual” (Bouyer 1980: 43). In other words, according to Bouyer, the earliest known reference to “mysticism” was related to the secret and “material” function of a particular ritual (Bouyer 1980: 43).

With the emergence of Christianity the meaning of “the mystical” became associated with the allegorical interpretation of biblical scripture (Bouyer 1980: 46). From this early Christian perspective it was believed that alongside the literal interpretation of biblical scripture lies a hidden “mystical” reading that was considered sacred because it could potentially lead to an intimate knowledge of God (Bouyer 1980: 50). Thus, for early Christian theologians, such as Origen and Clement, biblical exegesis offered “a veritable religious experience” (Bouyer 1980: 50). As the Christian understanding of “the mystical” expanded to include the experiential dimensions of the liturgy and the sacraments, the description and meaning of “the mystical” further evolved to refer generally to “the spiritual reality of worship” (Bouyer 1980: 47).

In the medieval period the experiential meaning of scripture was influenced by the writings of Dionysius the Areopagites (Pseudo-Dionysius), who introduced the term “mystical theology” to the West (King 1999: 15). According to F. C. Happold, mystical theology referred to “a particular type of insight and knowledge about God. The more

common, and much more precise, word found in medieval times was *contemplatio* (contemplation). It was used to designate a rare and advanced form of spiritual experience, not found among ordinary, religious folk” (Happold 1967: 36). As a substantive noun the term “mysticism” is relatively new, created in the seventeenth-century but not coming into popular parlance until as late as the nineteenth-century (Jantzen 1995: 27). Today, the common usage of the term “mysticism” is primarily a product of the material, historical and cultural conditions of Western modernity (Kripal 2001: 4).

Psychology has played a central role in defining the modern approach to the study of mysticism. Following the work of Michel de Certeau (1992), Kripal claims that “whereas premodern mysticism was historically embedded deeply in traditional forms of liturgical, scriptural, and doctrinal contexts, modernity has witnessed an increasing deracination of the mystical from the traditional forms of authority and faith and an ever-increasing psychologization of its meanings” (Kripal 2001: 10). Perhaps one of the most influential figures to study the psychology of mysticism is William James. According to King, a “dominant trajectory in the contemporary study of mysticism since James has been the study of ‘altered states of consciousness’ and the phenomenon connected with their attainment” (King 1999: 22). King claims that this move to study “the mystical” in terms of “altered states of consciousness” has resulted in “the privatization of mysticism” (King 1999: 21). Thus, by situating “the mystical” in the consciousness of the individual, psychological approaches tend to reinforce the modern dichotomy between the private and the public spheres (King 1999: 23).

This “privatization of mysticism” that defines the modern psychological understanding of “the mystical” has played a major role in shaping the direction of the contemporary study of mysticism. King writes:

The privatized and narrowly experiential conception of the mystical results in a peculiarly preoccupation in academic literature on the subject with indescribable and largely inaccessible experiences of an extraordinary nature. Mysticism has at once become decontextualized (and thus amenable to simplistic comparative analysis), elitist (since only certain people can experience it), antisocial (since it is inaccessible to the public realm – to the rest of society), otherworldly (since it is about cultivating private experiences and not engaging in the world) and domesticated (since it is concerned primarily with the cultivation of inner states of tranquility and the alleviation of anxiety). This formulation of the mystical makes it difficult to reconcile with the goal of political social transformation. The mystic, it would seem, can only be revolutionary in spite of, and not because of, her mystical qualities! (King 1999: 24).

In other words, if mystical experience is essentially a private affair then it ultimately has no real bearing on the public efforts necessary for practical political engagement. From this perspective, it is all well and good that a mystic has a personal experience of transcendence that may very well transform his or her perspective on the world. However, an individual’s mystical experience does not necessarily have any relevance for anyone else who has not had such an extraordinary experience. Sigmund Freud speaks to this same point in *Future of an Illusion* (1927) when he writes:

Am I to be obligated to believe *every* absurdity? And if not, why this one in particular? There is no appeal to a court above that of reason. If the truth of religious doctrine is dependent on an inner experience which bears witness to that truth, what is one to do about the many people who do not have this rare experience? One may require every man to use the gift of reason which he possesses, but one cannot erect, on the basis of a motive that exists only for a very few, an obligation that shall apply to everyone. If one man has gained an unshakable conviction of the true reality of religious doctrines from a state of ecstasy which has deeply moved him, of what significance is that to others? (Freud 1927: 28).

Freud's point is that any revelatory insight gleaned from mystical experience is significant only to the mystic and is therefore socially irrelevant. However, what Freud fails to consider is that one does not necessarily have to paint like Michelangelo to be inspired by his paintings, nor must one write a symphony like Beethoven to be moved by his music. In other words, an immediate apprehension of the mystical is not required in order to enjoy its fruits. Moreover, there is strong evidence in the history of mystical discourse in both the East and the West to support the claim that there are certain mystics who do draw on their mystical experiences as a vital source of social and political engagement (Foreman 1999: 129). Hence, King highlights the fact that "mystics are not necessarily quietistic, antisocial hermits, nor have they always been unconcerned with issues of social justice, poverty, sexual inequality, and so on" (King 1999: 34).⁵

According to Grace Jantzen, "the ideas surrounding the mystical and of who counts as a mystic have undergone major changes" (Jantzen 1995: 323). The meaning of "the mystical" has changed because it is a social construction. In other words, "the mystical" is a product of both history and culture and thus any meanings that we attribute to the term are subject to change. More specifically, "the mystical" is rooted in a particular history of Western Christian culture. It is important for scholars who study mysticism to recognize how this Western Christian worldview has shaped both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism. This observation is particularly relevant to the work of scholars who engage in the comparative study of mysticism. Scholars

⁵Essentially, King argues that both views – "the mystic" as hermit and "the mystic" as revolutionary – are stereotypes. Accordingly, King suggests "that the truth lies somewhere between (or beyond?) the two sides of the dichotomy" (King 1999: 41).

interested in the comparative study of mysticism must be mindful of the many ways in which this link between Western Christian history and the meaning of “the mystical” affect how he or she interprets “the mystical” practices and traditions of non-Western/non-Christian cultures. Most significantly, as the writings of Jantzen and King demonstrate, it is vital for all scholars who study mysticism to recognize that the meaning of “the mystical” must always be historically and culturally contextualized.

In light of the above discussion it becomes very difficult to define “the mystical” in any type of universalizing manner. However, at the same time, a general definition is necessary in order to achieve any sense of clarity. According to Margaret Smith, mysticism refers to “an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain a direct experience of God” (Smith 1980: 20). Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as “the way of union with Reality” (Underhill 1943: 3). The notion of “union” with some higher principle or state of consciousness is a common feature to many definitions of mysticism. For example, W. T. Stace claims that the core characteristic of mystical experience is “an undifferentiated unity” (Stace 1960: 232). And R. C. Zaehner defines mysticism in terms of “*the union of the human soul with god*” (Zaehner 1969: 74). Moreover, William Wainwright refers to mystical experiences as “unitary states which are noetic but lack specific empirical content” (Wainwright 1981: 1).

Alongside this sense of “union,” certain definitions tend to frame mysticism and “mystical experience” in terms that emphasize the non-rational and non-sensory quality of “the mystical.” For example, Ninian Smart defines mysticism “as primarily consisting

in an interior or introvertive quest, culminating in certain interior experience which are not described in terms of sense-experience or of mental images, etc” (Smart 1980: 78). David M. Wulff refers to mysticism as “a spiritual reality not ordinarily present to the senses or comprehended by the intellect (Wulff 1997: 658). And Jerome I. Gellman refers to mystical experience as “a (purportedly;) *super* sense-perceptual or *sub* sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection” (Gellman 2005: 138).

Paul Marshall summarizes the general consensus of the conventional understanding of “the mystical” as characterized “by one or more of the following: profound sense of *unity*, profound sense of *knowledge*, profound sense of *contact with reality*” (Marshall 2005: 2). From this perspective, “mystical experience” can perhaps be defined as a unitive contact with Ultimate Reality that produces a secret knowledge. The problem with many of the definitions outlined above is that they tend to exhibit a certain “essentialist” quality that harbors an explicit or implicit (Western/Christian) theistic bias. Keeping these problems in mind, it is important to formulate a working definition of “the mystical” that can serve as an epistemological anchor for my analysis. I will draw on Kripal’s definition of “the mystical” as “a hidden dimension of human consciousness in which the dichotomies of normal awareness are transcended in an intense experience of unity or communion with a hidden reality or presence” (Kripal 1998: 20).

In conjunction with highlighting the various problems of trying to define “the mystical,” it is also important to call attention to the various ways in which certain

mystics and scholars have attempted to make a distinction between different types of mysticism. For example, Dionysius the Areopagite outlined two ways of attaining and expressing a mystical experience of God: the *via positiva* and the *via negativa*.

Commonly referred to as the *kathopatic* perspective, the *via positiva* is typically defined by a tendency to emphasize the positive content of God's intimate disclosure within the world (Golitzen 2003: 9). In contrast, the *via negativa*, or *apophatic* perspective, typically emphasizes the ineffable transcendence of God; that is, from an *apophatic* perspective, the meaning of the mystical ultimately remains beyond disclosure (Golitzen 2003: 9).⁶

Many influential scholars have established certain typologies of mysticism. For example, in *The Philosophy of Mysticism* (1960) Walter Stace outline several typologies that have played a defining role in shaping the general study of mysticism. First, Stace claims that a distinction can be drawn between "emotional" mysticism, as represented in

⁶Dionysius generally privileges the *apophatic* perspective, as evident by the following passage: "In the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of mystical contemplation, leave behind the sense and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and nonbeing, that you may rise up unknowingly toward the union, as far as is attainable, with him who transcends all being and all knowledge. For by unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and of all things, you may be born on high, through pure and entire self-abnegation, into the super-essential radiance of the divine darkness" (Dionysius as quoted by McGinn 2006: 284). It is also important to note that the writings of Dionysius were highly influential in demarcating the traditional "Mystic Way," of Christian mystical practice, which is generally characterized as a tripartite process of spiritual awareness consisting of a soul's purgation, illumination, and eventual union with God (Happold 1967: 56).

⁷ It is important to note how this common distinction between "emotional" mysticism ("mysticism of the heart") and "speculative" mysticism ("mysticism of the mind") is drawn along gender specific lines (Jantzen 1995: 123). According to Amy Hollywood, "modern scholars... tend to divide mysticism into two general types: the feminine – affective, emotional, visionary, and often erotic; and the masculine – speculative, intellectual, and often explicitly antivisionary. The distinction, we should note, does not quite fit the evidence" (Hollywood 2002: 8).

the teachings of such mystics as St. Teresa and St. Catherine, and intellectual or “speculative” mysticism, as represented in the teachings of such mystics as Meister Eckhart and the Buddha (Stace 1960: 53).⁷ Second, Stace argues that another distinction can be made between “spontaneous” mystical states that are unsought and unguided, and “acquired” mystical states that are deliberately facilitated by particular religious practices, techniques and disciplines (Stace 1960: 53). Third, following Rudolph Otto,⁸ Stace outlines two types of mystical experience, the introvertive and extrovertive. Stace claims that “the essential difference between them is that the extrovertive experience looks outwards through the senses, while the introvertive looks inward into the mind” (Stace 1960: 61).

Typologies can be very useful in terms of helping scholars to categorize information. However, it is important to recognize that mystics may not always make the same distinctions as scholars (Marshall 2008: 142). In other words, many mystics tend to describe their experiences in terms that appear to be both extrovertive and introvertive. Even Stace admits that “mystics in general do not distinguish between the introvertive One and the extrovertive One” (Stace 1960: 67). It is also important to recognize that, historically, certain typologies tend to harbor an implicit or explicit Christian/theistic bias. For example, Zaehner’s influential distinction between “nature mysticism,” “soul mysticism,” and “the mysticism of love” privileges theism and specifically Christianity (Zaehner 1957: 172). Moreover, Stace clearly privileges introvertive mystical experience

⁸ In *Mysticism East and West* (1932), “Otto distinguishes two categories of mystical experience, the inward and outward way” (Marshall 2005: 52).

over extrovertive mystical experience. Stace writes, “the extrovertive experience, although we recognize it as a distinct type, is actually on a lower level than the introvertive type, that is to say, it is an incomplete kind of experience which finds its completion and fulfillment in the introvertive type of experience” (Stace 1960: 132).

Interestingly, both Zaehner and Stace privilege a hierarchical understanding of “the mystical” in which “nature mysticism” (extrovertive experience) is situated at the bottom and theistic mysticism is situated at the top. Why is “nature mysticism” often considered less valuable than “religious” mysticism? It is possible that “nature mystics” signify a potential threat to the authority of institutionalized religion because they rarely adhere to any form of traditional dogma or practice? This question will be addressed in more detail as the thesis advances. What is important to take away from the present discussion is that the particular methods and typologies that scholars utilize to study mysticism are always embedded in a particular (Western/Christian) worldview that often influences how he or she both values and understands “the mystical.”

Another important issue surrounding the study of mysticism is the debate between perennialism and contextualism (constructivism). Briefly, proponents of the “perennial philosophy”⁹ generally acknowledge that mystics tend to interpret the significance of their experiences in different ways. However, according to the “perennial philosophy,” once we look below the surface of the interpretations and “after we peel away all the

⁹The terms “perennial philosophy” was popularized by Aldous Huxley’s classic text, *The Perennial Philosophy* (1944). There are many prominent theorists in the history of mystical studies who have advocated a viewpoint that is more or less similar to the “perennial philosophy.” For example, William James, R. M Bucke, Romain Rolland, Walter Stace, Ninian Smart, and R.C Zaehner are all theorists who have championed an understanding of “the mystical” that tends to resemble the basic claims of the “perennial philosophy.”

localisms, all the accidents of particular languages or particular philosophies, all the ethnocentric phrasings,” we will find a “common-core” to all mystical experiences (Maslow 1964: 20). In other words, proponents of the “perennial philosophy” generally claim that all mystical experiences essentially reveal the same thing. However, the revelation is expressed differently from culture to culture because each cultural tradition interprets the revelation in terms of their own specific worldview (Stace 1960: 342). Mircea Eliade aptly summarizes the views of the “perennial philosophy” when he writes the following: “the enormous gap that separates a shaman’s ecstasy from Plato’s contemplation, all the differences deepened by history and culture, changes nothing in this gaining consciousness of ultimate reality” (Eliade 1963: 394).

The popularity of the “perennial philosophy” was largely challenged in the 1970s by the views of the “contextualists,” particularly the work of Steven Katz.¹⁰ In *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (1978), Katz contests the claim that there is a “common-core” to all mystical experience (Katz 1978: 22). According to Katz, mystical experience “is over-determined by its socio-religious milieu: as a result of his process of intellectual acculturation in its broadest sense, the mystic brings to his experience a world of concepts, images, symbols, and values which shape as well as colour the experience he eventually and actually has” (Katz 1978: 46). In other words, a mystic’s experience of the mystical is conditioned by his or her religious and cultural surroundings. There is no “common-core” to mystical experience because every mystical experience is shaped by a unique variety of beliefs and concepts. Stated simply, there is no “pure experience.” All

¹⁰ In several influential texts (1978; 1983; 1992), Katz is joined by many prominent theorists who support a contextualist understanding of the mystical.

experiences, even mystical ones, are a product of language, history, and culture. Rather than seeking to reduce mystical experience to a single universalizing principle, Katz and the contextualists call for a pluralistic approach to the study of mysticism that can accommodate both religious and cultural diversity (Katz 1978: 25).

The problem with Katz's "radical" contextualist approach is that it fails to consider the possibility that certain mystical experiences are not a product of "indoctrination and enculturation" (Marshall 2008: 176).¹¹ The experiences of "nature mystics" (extrovertive mysticism) are a particular problem for contextualists because they are often "situated *outside traditions of doctrine and practice*, occurring under a variety of non-religious circumstances" (Marshall 2008: 190). In other words, there is no room in the contextualists model for novelty. According to Marshall, "*novelty* is a problem for radical contextualism because the experiences are sometimes unprecedented in the subject's outlook. In many cases, subjects had no background knowledge of mysticism, and so their experiences had no mystical precedents on which to base themselves" (Marshall 2008: 191). Furthermore, in contrast to the contextualist position, certain theorists claim that mystical experiences "result from a deconstruction of ordinary experience" (Marshall 2008: 176).¹² For example, in *Mysticism Mind and Consciousness* (1999) Robert

¹¹ According to Marshall, "radical contextualists contended that mystical experiences are specific to the religious traditions in which they occur ('pluralistic thesis'), and they argued for this specificity by maintaining that mystical experiences are shaped by their contexts ('contextual thesis')." (Marshall 2008: 81).

¹² Certain theorists have also criticized the contextualist position on the grounds that it applies criteria for understanding mystical experience that is only applicable to normal, "everyday" experience. Mystical experience is not like regular human experience and thus it demands a different method of approach. For example, Anthony Perovitch argues that, "mystical experiences...are not human experiences which seem to employ typically human faculties in typically human ways. Consequently, no presuppositions about the mediated shaped, conceptualized character of 'human experience'....are relevant to the sorts of "nonhuman

Foreman claims that “mystical experiences don’t result from a process of building or constructing mystical experiences, but rather from an un-constructing of language and belief. It seems to result from something like a releasing of experience from language” (Foreman 1999: 99).

Interestingly, Foreman attempts to revitalize the “common-core” thesis by appealing to the notion of a “perennial psychology.” According to Foreman, “the claim of the perennial psychology is not that there exists a commonality of philosophical claims but rather that in the human psyche there are certain deep and consistent psychological structures” (Foreman 1998:28). In other words, mystical experiences do not share the same underlining philosophy but they do tend to share a similar capacity to access deep levels of consciousness. Foreman argues that certain “mystical experiences tap into a fundamental human psychophysiological structure. Not created by culture, this structure – consciousness itself, its ability to tie itself together through time, and the intimate but non-conceptual acquaintance we have with it – come with the machinery of being human” (Foreman 1999: 27). From this perspective, all human beings have an “innate capacity” to experience mystical states of consciousness and this “innate capacity” is what unites all mystical experiences.

experience” being reported by such mystics. ‘Kantian’ epistemological assumptions may extend as far as the ‘human experience’...but the experience being reported by many mystics demands a suspension of our assumptions not only of a uniformity in the experience had by humans, but also of a uniform epistemological apparatus for handling that experience” (Perovitch as quoted by Parsons 1999: 121). Moreover, Marshall claims that, “even if ordinary perceptual experience were heavily conditioned by context, it does not follow that the same must be true of all experiences. It is risky to extend an epistemological model developed from a consideration of routine, perceptual experience to experiences that are entirely different from the ordinary” (Marshall 2008: 188).

Is there a way of reconciling the debate between perennialism and contextualism? According to William Parsons, “the emphasis on context should not ignore the need for an ongoing conversation that stresses the search for commonality. It is best, then, to utilize both approaches in dialectical interplay. Thus the meaning of mysticism can be continually monitored and qualified, allowing to accrue specificity and structural constancy through attention to context and comparative dialogue” (Parsons 1999: 6). Elliot Wolfson argues for a similar approach when he calls for a “modified contextualism,” which refers to an “intermediate position that seeks out common structures underlying the manifold appearances” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 282). Kripal shares Wolfson’s position, adding that, “given that we all share a common neurophysiology and live in radically different cultures and times, how could it be any different?” (Kripal 2001: 373).

Essentially, I argue that Kripal advances a nondualistic model for studying the mystical that successfully addresses the many failings that encumber the “general” study of mysticism.¹³ Most notably, by constructing a theoretical and methodological approach

¹³ There are primarily five criticisms that can be levelled at the general study of mysticism. First, much of the material offered by the work of William James, material that today is still relied upon for making evaluative claims about mystical experience are, for the most part, seriously outdated (Hollenback 1996: 17). Second, the general study of mysticism tends to suffer from ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and Christocentric bias (Hollenback 1996: 17.). Although in recent years the latter criticism has been mitigated to a certain extent by the increasing participation of non-Christian scholars, it can still be reasonably argued that even today the general study of mysticism is both ethnocentric and more specifically Eurocentric. According to Josh Byron Hollenback, this is evident in the field’s collective neglect of preliterate tribal mysticism (Hollenback 1996: 17). Third, the general study of mysticism has traditionally failed to adequately address the fundamental role that historical and cultural context plays in the construction, interpretation, and representation of mystical experience (Hollenback 1996: 17). Fourth, with perhaps the exception of James, the general study of mysticism has failed to provide a sophisticated understanding of how “supernormal or ‘miraculous’ phenomena” relate to mystical experience (Hollenback 1996: 17). The fifth and final critique that can be levelled at the general study of mysticism is that

based on the principles of “embodiment,”¹⁴ Kripal demonstrates that the psychoanalytical, hermeneutical, and comparative study of mysticism is intimately tied to issues relating to sexuality, gender, culture, and politics. Thus, in comparison to the traditional “religious” study of mysticism, Kripal’s model offers a much more rigorous and reflexive interdisciplinary perspective, one in which the horizons of “the mystical” always remain malleable and open to critical debate.

historically and presently, it tends to be based on assumptions that are inherently patriarchal and thus damaging to political issues related to gender equality and social justice in general (Jantzen 1995).

¹⁴ I draw my understanding of “embodiment” from the work of J. A. Belzen. According to Belzen, embodiment “refers to the recognition of humans being socialized into both a linguistic and a bodily community of practices such that what is said and the embodied quality of how it is said are simultaneously engendered and inextricably intertwined” (Belzen 2003: 285). Moreover, “whereas the body might be conceived as an individual entity embodiment cannot, because embodiment is about culture, about ‘world’ – not even about material worlds, but even about possible worlds” (Belzen 2003: 287).

Chapter One: Mystical Desire

A person's sexuality reaches up to
the highest peaks of their spirituality

Friedrich Nietzsche

The Platonic doctrine of Eros has played a pivotal role in shaping the way Western culture traditionally addresses the relationship between human sexuality and the mystical. In Plato's classic work *The Symposium*, eros (sexual desire) is celebrated as the driving force of both philosophical knowledge and mystical insight (Tarnas 1991: 14). In general terms, Plato claims that the mystical essence of eros can only be fully realized by engaging in a "contemplative ascent" through various stages of desire (Nussbaum 2005: 227). This contemplative ascent begins with a desire for bodily beauty, followed by a desire for intellectual beauty, and culminates with a desire for the beauty of the mystical "Good," which subsumes and transcends all conventional forms of beauty (Most 2005: 36). This Platonic ladder of love, characterized as a progressive movement of erotic desire that extends from the sexual (immanence) to the sublime (transcendence), inspired some of the most influential writers of early Western mysticism, including the great pagan mystic Plotinus,¹⁵ and "the fountainhead of Christian mysticism," Dionysius the Areopagites (James 1958: 347).

¹⁵ Dean Inge describes Plotinus as "the great thinker who must be, for all time, the classical representative of mystical philosophy. No other mystical thinker even approaches Plotinus in power and insight and profound spiritual penetration" (Inge as quoted by Magee 2001: 30). Plotinus' understanding of the mystical is derived directly from the work of Plato. Following Plato, Plotinus argues that existence is predicated on an eternal process of hierarchal emanation from which the excess power of the One unfolds into various permutations of soul and matter (Tarnas 1991: 213). Plotinus claims that a mystic's ultimate aim is to transcend the material world and return to the One, a process he characterizes as "a flight of the alone to the alone" (Plotinus as quoted by Smith 1967: 288). This mystical return to the One is marked by a union of the subject and object, soul and God: "Perhaps, however, neither must it be said that he sees, but that he is the thing seen; if it is necessary to call these two things, i.e., the perceiver and the thing perceived. But both are one; though it is bold to assert this. Then, indeed, the soul neither sees, nor distinguishes by seeing, nor imagines that there are two things; but becomes as it were another thing, and not itself. Nor does that which pertains to itself contribute any thing itself. But becoming wholly absorbed in deity, she is one, conjoining as it were center with center" (Plotinus as quoted by Smith 1967: 286).

Following Plato, the writings of both Plotinus and Dionysius describe the relationship between eros and the mystical in terms of a hierarchy. The sexual desires of the human body are typically situated at the bottom of the hierarchy and are generally viewed as an obstacle that threatens to permanently veil the true and transcendent source of that which is considered “the Good,” “the One,” or “God.” Traditionally, according to this Neoplatonic perspective, procreation and the preservation of the species are acknowledged to be the material aim of sexual desire. However, the ultimate value of eros lies in its capacity to produce something much more divine than bodily pleasure, namely, mystical ecstasy. This tendency to renounce the body, sexuality, and by extension, immanence in general, is a typical characteristic of Western mystical discourse, and ultimately serves to expose the “dark side of Platonism” (Halperin 2005: 56).

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was greatly influenced by the work of Plato. In particular, Freud’s understanding of the libido is derived from Plato’s conception of eros (Lear 2005: 196). In *Group Psychology*, Freud admits that, “in its origin, function, and relations to sexual love, the ‘Eros’ of the philosopher Plato coincides exactly with the love-force, the libido of psycho-analysis” (Freud 1921: 91). As a signifier of the libido, eros is traditionally associated with the “life-preserving instincts” of the psyche (Porter 2005: 129). Hence, from a psychoanalytic perspective, eros is generally understood as the enigmatic source of energy that binds us to existence and motivates our primal desire for pleasure, love, and union (Marcuse 1962: 38). Following Plato, Freud’s conception of

eros attempts to “enlarge” the meaning of human sexuality¹⁶ to refer not only to the sensuous desires of the body, but also to the hidden role sexual desire plays in the construction of civilization as a whole. For Freud and psychoanalytic theory in general, “culture is the effect of the sublimation of sexual energy” (Sharpe and Faulkner 2008: 133). According to Freud’s psychoanalytic model, the psyche has evolved various mental techniques, most notably, repression and sublimation, which allow it to tame, harness, and redirect excess sexual energy for the purposes of constructing culture. Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the whole of human civilization – art, religion, science, etc.– can be ultimately understood as a product of sublimation, in particular, the sublimation of repressed sexual desires¹⁷ (Freud 1905).

Whereas both Plato and Freud offer a comparable view of eros in terms of its capacity to facilitate sexual relations and its constitutive role in the construction of civilization as a whole, their views radically differ when it comes to the question of how eros is to be understood in relation to the mystical. Given Freud’s contempt for traditional religion,¹⁸ it is no surprise that his interpretation of the mystical conflicts with

¹⁶ According to Herbert Marcuse, “it may not be accidental that Freud does not rigidly distinguish between Eros and sexuality, and his usage of the term Eros (especially in *The Ego and the Id*, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, and in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*) implies an enlargement of the meaning of sexuality itself. Even without Freud’s explicit reference to Plato the change in emphasis is clear: Eros signifies a quantitative and qualitative aggrandizement of sexuality” (Marcuse 1962: 187).

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse notes that, “the methodical sacrifice of libido, its rigidly enforced deflection to socially useful activities and expressions, *is* culture” (Marcuse 1962: 3).

¹⁸ Freud believed that religion was “the enemy of science (Gay 2006: 533). Freud is often quite critical, if not outright hostile towards many of the claims made by organized religion. For instance, according to Freud, many of the claims that traditionally characterize organized religion, such as a belief in an omnipotent God, immortality, and salvation, are “patently infantile” (Freud 1930: 74). Freud suggests that these infantile beliefs stem from humanity’s collective wish to be sheltered from the dangers of the natural world (Sharpe and Faulkner 2008: 162). In other words, according to Freud, religion basically signifies a neurotic flight from reality (Freud 1930: 30). Freud’s primary critique of religion is found in his works *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). In

Plato's. For Freud, the mystical is ultimately reducible to sexual desire.¹⁹ In contrast, for Plato, the mystical ultimately transcends sexual desire. A further conflict is raised by the

general terms, Freud derives his critique from philosophical materialism and argues that traditional religion can be understood as a form of universal obsessional neurosis that hinders both individual *and* cultural development. At the level of the individual, Freud attributes religious practices and ideation to the infant's early relationship to his or her father. From this perspective, the concept of "God" and its symbolic derivatives can be construed as a projection of an individual's internalized guilt and dependence on the Oedipal father. Hence, Freud claims that, "a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father" (Freud 1910: 123). In terms of culture, Freud frames religion as a collective wish-fulfillment. For Freud, the underlining aim of religious practices and ideation is an unconscious wish to ameliorate the harsh vicissitudes of living by conjuring up the protective image of a collective father figure. Freud states: "religion originated from the helplessness of children and by tracing its contents to the survival into maturity of the wishes and need of childhood" (Freud 1933: 165). Furthermore, Freud claims that "religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from its readiness to fit in with our instinctual wishful impulses" (Freud 1933: 174). Richard Tarnas provides a succinct and balanced summary of Freud's interpretation of religion. According to Tarnas, "with Freud, the modern psychological evaluation of religion achieved a new level of systematic and penetrating theoretical analysis. The discovery of the unconscious and of the human psyche's tendency to project traumatic memory constellations onto later experience opened up a crucial new dimension to the critical understanding of religious beliefs. In the light of psychoanalysis, the Judeo-Christian God could be seen as reified psychological projection based on the child's naïve view of its libidinally restrictive and seemingly omnipotent parent. Reconceived in this way, many aspects of religious behaviour and belief appeared to be comprehensible as symptoms of a deeply rooted culturally obsessive-compulsive neurosis. The projection of a morally authoritative patriarchal deity could be seen as having been a social necessity in earlier stages of human development, satisfying the cultural psyche's need for a powerful "external" force to undergird society's ethical requirements. But having internalized those requirements, the psychologically mature individual could recognize the projection for what it was, and dispense with it" (Tarnas 1991: 317). Significantly, Freud's critique inaugurated a prevalent trend in the psychoanalytic study of religion, namely, psychological reductionism. Hence, critics have accused Freud of "seriously neglected both the diversity of religion's forms and the complexity of its character" (Wulff 1997: 317).

¹⁹ Although Freud never extensively addressed mysticism in any great detail, the comprehensive nature of his corpus combined with the complexity of his thought invites conflicting interpretations. On the one hand, Freud appears to dismiss mystical experience or, the "oceanic feeling," as an infantile state of mental regression akin to the primary narcissism associated with the pre-Oedipal phase of ego development (Parsons 1999: 40). Accordingly, Freud states that the oceanic feeling "can be traced to early-ego feelings associated with the mother-infant dyad" (Freud 1930: 68). In other words, Freud initially understood mystical experience as a narcissistic fantasy of merging with the pre-Oedipal mother of the unconscious. From this perspective, mystical experience signifies a state of psychic regression. Furthermore, drawing on his critique of traditional religion, Freud claims that "the 'oneness with the universe' which constitutes its ideational content sounds like a first attempt at a religious consolation, as through it were another way of disclaiming the danger which the ego recognizes as threatening it from the external world" (Freud 1930: 67). However, on the other hand, Freud does appear to soften his critique of mystical experience to such a degree as to suggest that both psychoanalysis and some mystical practices adhere to a similar introspective approach. For instance, in the *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (1933) Freud claims, "certain mystical practices may succeed in upsetting the normal relations between the different regions of the mind so that, for instance, perception may be able to grasp happenings in the depths of the ego and id which were otherwise inaccessible to it" (Freud 1933: 79). Hence, Naomi Goldenberg suggests that, "Freud believed that some mystical procedures had merit because, like psychoanalysis, they led to exploration of deep

question of how Plato and Freud value the body. From a Platonic perspective, the body is generally conceived as an obstacle that must be transcended in order to attain mystical illumination. In contrast to Plato's rejection of the body, Freud's psychoanalytic theory is "all about awareness of the body and the bodily base of all symbolism" (Brown 1959: 231).

Despite their different views concerning the role of the mystical and the value of the body, both Plato and Freud subscribe to a hierarchical interpretation of eros. Whereas Plato elevates sexuality to the mystical, and Freud, in contrast, reduces the mystical to the sexual, they each still favor a hierarchical interpretation of eros that can be read as inherently exclusionary: either the sexual is essentially mystical (Plato) or the mystical is essentially sexual (Freud). This hegemonic either/or stance that characterizes both the Platonic and Freudian understanding of eros impacts the way each theorist addresses the body: either the body is renounced for the sake of the mystical (Plato) or the mystical is renounced for the sake of the body (Freud). Is it possible that there is another way to

levels of the mind" (Goldenberg 1979: 43). Moreover, in other contexts Freud admits that a mystical experience could expand a mystic's perception so radically that he or she could possibly attain a rare and intimate glimpse of the opaque processes of his or her unconscious. For example, the last note published in the *Standard Edition* of Sigmund Freud's collective works reads as follows: "mysticism is the obscure self-perception of the realm outside the ego, of the id" (Freud 1940: 300). Goldenberg reads this passage to mean that similar to psychoanalysis, certain mystical states of consciousness are capable of broadening "the range of the ego to perceive more of the id" (Goldenberg 1982: 19). Drawing on such passages, Goldenberg suggests that "perhaps Freud was inclined to hold mysticism in higher esteem than the phenomenon he called religion. Although this not a commonly held view of Freud's attitude toward mysticism, it is justified if the corpus of Freud's work is viewed in its entirety" (Goldenberg 1982: 16). Freud may have placed a higher value on mysticism than religion, however, it is clear that Freud does tend to *reduce* the meaning of the mystical to some kind of "early phase of ego-feeling" (Freud 1933: 67). Overall, it can be reasonably argued that Freud held ambivalent views regarding the psychoanalytic value of mysticism. It is precisely this spectre of ambiguity attached to the status of mysticism within psychoanalytic circles that has enabled scholars from a wide array of different disciplines to produce conflicting interpretations of mystical experience and yet still find support for their position in the work of Freud.

conceptualize the relationship between eros and the mystical without resorting to a binary formula that either negates the mystical (Freud) or negates the body (Plato)? In other words, perhaps our understanding of eros can once again be further “enlarged” to accommodate *both* the body *and* the mystical. I argue that Kripal’s work presents a compelling example of such an “enlarged” understanding of eros.

In general terms, Kripal explores the various ways certain mystics and mystical traditions address the role embodiment plays in the historical and contemporary understanding of the relationship between human sexuality and the mystical. According to Kripal, the sexual and the mystical are intimately linked, and the human body signifies the ultimate site of their convergence. The history of mystical discourse in both the East and the West widely attests to this connection between the sexual and the mystical. However, a contentious area of debate that continues to haunt the contemporary study of mysticism is the question of where “the sexual” ends and “the mystical” begins. Moreover, what role does our understanding of body play in making such a determination?

While historically sexual desire and the body are often vilified as barriers to the mystical, especially by certain monotheistic traditions, there are mystical traditions, for instance, East Asian Tantra, which tend to frame the sexualized human body as a bridge to the mystical. From a cross-cultural perspective, how is it possible to account for the different ways this link between the sexual and the mystical is understood? Why is it that some mystics and mystical traditions eschew the body and human sexuality, while others do not? What exactly is so menacing about the body and human sexuality? Or, from

another angle, perhaps a more revealing question is the following: what is so *mystical* about the body and human sexuality?

By examining how certain mystics and mystical traditions maintain an often-ambivalent understanding of the relationship between the sexual the mystical, Kripal's work highlights the hidden role embodiment plays in both our historical and contemporary conception of the mystical. The driving question of Kripal's work is not the traditional "Western" question of how sexual desires can be restrained and harnessed for mystical purposes. Rather, in an explicitly "Tantric" fashion, Kripal's work asks how sexual desires can be released and liberated for mystical purposes, and, moreover, how these same mystico-erotic energies can be utilized to enrich our comparative understanding of body. By focusing on the psychoanalytical, hermeneutical, and comparative implications of this link between the sexual and the mystical, Kripal's work adds a new "erotic" dimension to the contemporary study of mysticism, which categorically asserts the embodied significance of certain mystical states of consciousness.

I argue that Kripal's approach to the study of mysticism is unique because it offers a nondualistic model of understanding the relationship between sexuality and the mystical that refuses to succumb to the idealizations of Platonism or the reductionism of Freudianism. Like Freud, Kripal recognizes the fundamental role that the sexualized body plays in the construction, interpretation, and representation of certain mystical states of consciousness. However, unlike Freud, Kripal is hesitant to reduce the whole meaning of these mystical states of consciousness to sexuality alone. Much like Plato, Kripal

seeks to elevate the sexual to the mystical. Yet, in clear contrast to Plato's disavowal of the body, Kripal recognizes the body as a privileged site of contact between human beings and that "something more" which traditionally defines the mystical object of desire. By proposing a "Blakean"²⁰ middle-ground between Platonism and Freudianism, Kripal's nondualistic approach establishes a model for understanding the mystical that can accommodate both the immanence of the sexualized body and the "something more" that ostensibly transcends the sexualized body. Stated simply, for Kripal, the body *is* mystical and the mystical is always already embodied.

Jeffrey Kripal received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1993. He has published numerous essays and is the co-editor of five texts and the author of five published monographs.²¹ His most widely known works include the following: *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995; 2nd ed., 1998); *Vishnu on Freud's Desk: A Reader in Psychoanalysis and Hinduism*, T. G. Vaidyanathan and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds. (1998); *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the*

²⁰ Kripal describes his category of "the erotic" as follows: "I thus use the category not as a reductive category to explain away mystico-erotic experience as simple sexual displacement à la Freud, but as a respectful, ultimately hopeful way of insisting on both the sexual rootedness of mystico-erotic events (with all the physical messiness and literal fluidity that rootedness implies) *and* the possible ontic source(s) of those same remarkable experiences. Here again my method is more Blakean than Freudian, although it certainly participates in both modes of thought. Sexuality for Freud, Diane Hume-George has reminded us, 'is the foundation of culture and consciousness.' To understand this properly however, one must, in Freud's own terms, 'conceive of the sexual function in its true range,' that is, one must understand sexuality to extend well beyond the genital to the multiple erotogenic zones of the human body and to the various forms of sublimation we find in human thought and artistic expression. My own use of the erotic extends this 'true range' even further down (or up) into the ontological. This is both a Tantric and a Blakean move and, subsequently, a kind of inversion of Freud's notion of sublimation or 'making sublime,' which derives the sublime from the instinctual instead of the instinctual from the sublime" (Kripal 2001: 22).

²¹ Kripal has two monographs in process: *Comparing Religions: A Textbook Initiation* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, projected publication date of 2012) and *The Secret Life of Superpowers: Mythical Themes and Paranormal Currents in American Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ms. completed). It is also significant to note that two of his published monographs – *Authors of the Impossible* and *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* – have each been optioned for a feature documentary.

Ethical Status of Mysticism, G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal, eds. (2002); *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001); *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (2006); and *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007). Generally speaking, Kripal's interests include the study of East Asian religions, eroticism, ethics, and mysticism, Western esotericism, human potential, and the paranormal. He currently holds the J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought and the Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University, Texas.

The following chapter examines Kripal's first two major works: *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995; 2nd ed., 1998) and *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001). I argue that these two texts ought to be read in tandem because the central theoretical and methodological aims of each are co-extensive. Both texts elucidate Kripal's erotic understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the mystical. On the surface, *Kali's Child* can be read as a comprehensive psychobiography of the Indian mystic Ramakrishna. However, at a deeper level *Kali's Child* also signifies Kripal's first attempt at articulating an erotic interpretation of the mystical. By drawing on the insights of both Western psychoanalytic theory and East Asian Tantra, Kripal's analysis offers a compelling portrait of Ramakrishna as a deeply troubled mystic who secretly toiled with his repressed homosexual desires. Yet, at the same time Kripal

claims that Ramakrishna's unconscious sexual conflict acts as a catalyst for some of his most remarkable experiences of the mystical.²²

Kripal's approach to Ramakrishna is unique in that unlike previous psychoanalytic studies of Ramakrishna, which often tend to reduce the full meaning of his mystical ecstasies and visions to some kind of sexual repression, Kripal's study demonstrates that there are certain aspects of Ramakrishna's mysticism that exceed any simple psychosexual explanation. Kripal believes that sexual issues play a central role in the construction, interpretations and representation of Ramakrishna's mysticism. However, from an ontological perspective Ramakrishna's mysticism appears to reflect something much more profound than just sexual repression. In other words, Kripal claims that the ontological meaning of Ramakrishna's mysticism transcends the limited scope of human psychology.

Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom, Kripal's second book, can be read as a response to the controversy generated by *Kali's Child*. Critics of *Kali's Child* have tended to question the validity of Kripal's claim that there is a link between Ramakrishna's repressed homosexuality and his mysticism on the grounds that Kripal misinterprets the life and teachings of Ramakrishna. Drawing on material from various mystics and mystical traditions, Kripal claims that there is an historical pattern running throughout the comparative study of mysticism that calls attention to the link between erotic desire and mystical ecstasy. In particular, Kripal suggests that male erotic mystical

²² Kripal states: "Ramakrishna homoeroticism eventually became a mystical technique with which he could induce mystical states almost at will" (Kripal 1998: 83).

traditions are commonly structured along homoerotic lines which, when recognized as such, serve as further proof of the homoerotic thesis he introduced in *Kali's Child*.

Alongside its apologetic agenda, I argue that *Roads of Excess* also signifies an expansion of Kripal's central thesis that erotic issues play a significant role in structuring both the historical and contemporary understanding of the mystical. Specifically, Kripal suggests that the academic study of mysticism has been in large part shaped by the contributions of certain scholars, such as Evelyn Underhill, Louis Massignon, R.C. Zaehner, Aghananda Bharati, and Elliot Wolfson, whose public views about the mystical tend to reflect and reinforce their personal mystico-erotic experiences.²³

According to Kripal, "their work was driven by implicit mystical concerns, that at certain points in their researches their hermeneutical encounters took on powerful and sometimes genuinely transformative dimensions, and that – most important – these 'unitive' moments were later performed in the semantic, metaphorical, and theoretical events of their writings" (Kripal 2001: 6). In other words, Kripal argues that the modern study of mysticism, as represented by the works of the scholars mentioned above, is a product of the various, often conflicting, mystical experiences of the scholars themselves.

Moreover, this "scholarly mysticism" calls attention to how reading and writing about mystical texts can effectively elicit a mystical experience, a process Kripal describes as "*mystical hermeneutics*" (Kripal 2001: 8). Most significantly, for the purposes of the

²³ In addition to these scholars, Paul Marshall identifies many other scholars whose works have been influenced by a personal encounter with the mystical. For example, Marshall refers to W. R. Inge, William James, Rufus Jones, R. M. Bucke, Edward Carpenter, Aldoux Huxley, F. C. Happold, Robert Foreman, Robert May, Michael Stoeber, William Barnard, James Austin, Robert Ellwood, and Arthur Deikman" (Marshall 2008: 17).

present study, Kripal claims that this mystical hermeneutics is itself immersed in the erotic, that is, when the secret of the mystical is disclosed, it is often articulated in terms that are related directly to the erotic.

THE ART OF MADNESS

Jeffrey Kripal's dissertation, *Kal's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (1995; 2nd ed., 1998) caused a maelstrom of controversy when it was first published, and to this day continues to stir debate. At issue is the question of how Ramakrishna's sexual desires impacted his mysticism. Kripal's thesis is that Ramakrishna's repressed homosexual desires played a formative role in the construction, interpretation, and representation of his mysticism (Kripal 1998: 4). Although the relation between Ramakrishna's homosexual desires and his mysticism has been discussed in previous psychoanalytic studies, for example, by Moussaieff J. Masson (1976) and Narasingha P. Sil (1991), Kripal's analysis is different because, like Sudhir Kakar in *The Analyst and the Mystic* (1991), he does not aim to reduce the whole meaning of Ramakrishna's mysticism to his sexuality in a "classical" psychoanalytic fashion. Rather, in a much more "transformational" vein, Kripal employs a dialectical approach that draws on both Western psychoanalytic theory and Eastern Tantric practices.²⁴

²⁴ Kripal states: "In interpreting the mystico-erotic experiences of Ramakrishna, I will employ two hermeneutical strategies, two meaningful wholes in which to understand the seemingly disjointed pieces and parts of Ramakrishna's experiences. One of these wholes, the Hindu Tantra, is indigenous to Bengali culture. The other, psychoanalysis, is a product of my own cultural heritage. Whereas the Hindu Tantra proposes a dialectical relationship between the mystical and the sexual, psychoanalysis, at least in its more traditional forms, unabashedly reduces the mystical to the sexual, understood in its most materialistic sense. Both, it should be noted, are interpretations. With such a dual perspective, I intend to demonstrate the extent to which psychoanalysis can make sense out of some of the otherwise bizarre behaviours of Ramakrishna, but also how Tantra, with its dialectical model and its refusal to reduce the mystical to the simply sexual, can help us in interpreting mystical eroticism. In short, cautiously and critically looking both ways, acknowledging both but accepting neither in toto, I want to offer a nonreductive, psychoanalytically informed reading of Ramakrishna's mystical eroticism" (Kripal 1998: 6)

Beginning with the influential dialogue between Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud, and continuing with the contemporary work of theorists like Masson, Sil, Kakar and Kripal, it is evident that the life and teachings of Ramakrishna have sustained a remarkable appeal within the psychoanalytic study of mysticism. However, the issue of whether or not Ramakrishna's vision of the mystical can be explained in terms of pathology, adaptability, or transformation continues to be a contentious subject of debate. Following in the "transformational" tradition, Kripal's interpretation of the life and teachings of Ramakrishna is defined by a marked sympathy for the mystical. For example, reflecting on his work in *Kali's Child*, Kripal admits, "if it were not for the decidedly mystical moments of my life, I would have easily turned Ramakrishna into a pathological case study, which of course is precisely what many of his contemporaries very reasonably did and what some scholars still do, and with more than a little evidence" (Kripal 2001: 256). However, rather than pathologizing Ramakrishna's mystico-erotic experiences, Kripal draws on the iconography, biography, and doctrine surrounding the saint's life to show that while scenes of torment and despair may have marked his ecstasies and visions, Ramakrishna's overall experience of the mystical proved to be quite liberating for both himself and his followers.

Traditionally, the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (1836-1889) is often portrayed as a venerable saint who was inspired by his experiences of the mystical to proclaim the essential unity of all religions: "with sincerity and earnestness one can realize god through all religions" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002: 123). This traditional view of Ramakrishna as an ecumenical neo-Vedantist is in large part derived from the

teachings of his closest disciple Vivekananda and, later, the Ramakrishna Mission, which published and translated the most popular biography of Ramakrishna, the *Kathamrta*. Kripal refers to this traditional orthodox view of Ramakrishna as the “incarnational” perspective, which tends to portray Ramakrishna “as a new incarnation of God” (Kripal 1998: 315).²⁵ By drawing on an “array of nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Bengali texts, many of which, having been threatened, denied, and systematically censored,”²⁶ Kripal attempts to demonstrate that alongside the traditional “incarnational” portrait of Ramakrishna lies a deeper, secret understanding of the saint that is thoroughly Tantric in nature (Kripal 1998: 3).

After Ramakrishna’s death, two different factions of his devotees fought to control the legacy of his mystical vision: the householder tradition and the renouncer tradition. Kripal claims that, “for the householder tradition, Ramakrishna is primarily a mystic, a saint, a religious reality to be approached through prayer and meditation. The renouncer tradition does not deny such an understanding, but neither does it emphasize it, stressing instead its understanding of Ramakrishna as a social reformer, a protofeminist, the inspiration of Vivekananda’s social programs. The householders, in other words,

²⁵ Kripal claims that, “*Ramakrishna the incarnation was socially created through human interaction and the processes of interpretation and debate*” (Kripal 1998: 219). In other words, “as Ramakrishna’s ecstasies and visions were witnessed and interpreted by a community of disciples, Ramakrishna’s Tantric secret undergoes a transformation: a series of mystico-erotic experiences become the grounds for Ramakrishna’s incarnational status. Ramakrishna, through a complex social process of interpretation and appropriation, is declared to be an incarnation of God... What was reported as a private mystico-erotic experience was thus transformed into a publicly acknowledged theological state. Ramakrishna the secret Tantrika became Ramakrishna the hidden incarnation” (Kripal 1998: 316).

²⁶ According to Kripal, “one of the primary objects of this censoring, and the source of much nervousness within the tradition, happens also to be both the central text of the tradition and the centrepiece of this study, Mahendranath Gupta’s *Srisriramakrsnakathamrta*, known to Bengalis simply as the *Kathamrta* and to English readers as *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*” (Kripal 1998: 3).

renounce the world in their reading while the renouncers enter and embrace it” (Kripal 1998: 10). According to Kripal, the renouncer tradition eventually gained the upper-hand and began to systematically bowdlerize and censor Ramakrishna’s “secret-talk”²⁷ (Kripal 1998: 13). Through a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis and deft translation of the primary texts, Kripal attempts to recover Ramakrishna’s “secret talk” and expose the hidden truth of his mysticism, namely, *“that Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences were constituted by mystico-erotic energies that he neither fully accepted nor understood”* (Kripal 1998: 4). Kripal admits that, “in asserting this basic relationship between the mystical and the sexual, then, I am in effect proposing that Ramakrishna was a Tantrika” and that “Tantra was Ramakrishna’s secret”²⁸ (Kripal 1998: 5).

In seeking to expose the Tantric roots of Ramakrishna’s mysticism, Kripal is confronted with yet another secret, namely, that Ramakrishna’s Tantric view of the mystical is intimately tied to his homosexual desires. Thus, according to Kripal, two interrelated factors are key to understanding Ramakrishna’s mysticism: First, his hidden dedication to Tantra, and second, his repressed homosexual desires. Combined these two secrets acted as the catalyst for his inspirational view of the mystical (Kripal 1998:5). By utilizing psychoanalytic theory in conjunction with his reading of Tantra, Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna’s homosexual desires essentially “created the symbolic contours and shape of his mysticism” (Kripal 1998: 319). In the following discussion I aim to

²⁷ Ramakrishna’s “secret-talk” (*guhya katha*) refers to “eighteen passages [of the *Kathamtra*] dealing with visions and confessions Ramakrishna thought too troubling or important to reveal to any but his most intimate disciples, whom he called his ‘inner circle’” (Kripal 1998: 4)

²⁸ Kripal asserts that “Ramakrishna’s “secret” “has been triply concealed: (1) from the saint himself in visionary symbolism and unconscious ecstatic acts and (2) from M’s [Mahendranath Gupta] readers in a complex cyclical structure and (3) a bowdlerized translation” (Kripal 1998: 6).

elucidate these “symbolic contours” that characterize Ramakrishna’s mysticism by examining the four primary themes informing Kripal’s thesis: 1) Ramakrishna’s identification with women; 2) The homoerotic symbolism that defines Ramakrishna’s relationship to his disciples; 3) Ramakrishna’s homoerotic visions of the mystical; and 4) Ramakrishna’s ambivalence towards Tantra as signified by his relationship with the goddess Kali.

According to Kripal, “Ramakrishna had described himself as having a woman’s nature and went so far as to dress like one” (Kripal 1998: 26). For instance, as a child Ramakrishna “would dress up like the women of the village and mimic their mannerisms, their walk, their conversational habits, their vanities” (Kripal 1998: 59). Ramakrishna’s identification with women even seeped into his childhood fantasies: he often dreamed of being “born in a Brahman family as a child-widow and lover of Krsna” (Kripal 1998: 65). Moreover, as an adult during his “handmaid state” Ramakrishna recounts how he would “dress in women’s clothes and wear jewelry and a scarf. With a scarf over my body I would perform the worship” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 104). Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna’s identification with women can be read as a symptom of his repressed homosexual desire (Kripal 1998: 234).

This connection between Ramakrishna’s identification with women and his homoerotic desire is highlighted by his relationship to Mathur, the proprietor of Kali’s temple, where Ramakrishna spent the majority of his life as the temple priest. Kripal notes that Mathur “would dress Ramakrishna with his own hands and buy expensive shawls, women’s clothes, and jewelry for him. Sometimes such gifts would induce

ecstasy and vision in the young priest” (Kripal 1998: 105). Kripal suspects that Mathur and Ramakrishna might have shared a sexual relationship.²⁹ For instance, upon their first meeting, Mathur was “immediately attracted to Gadadhar [Ramakrishna]: ‘the good-looks of the master, his tender nature, his piety, and his youth caught the eye of Mathur. ‘At first sight,’ Sarananda tells us, seemingly completely unaware of the homosexual dimensions of his own description, a ‘sudden loving attraction’ arose in the mind and heart of the temple boss” (Kripal 1998: 61). Moreover, Kripal describes a later scene in which “Ramakrishna enters Mathur’s bedroom at an inopportune time, angering Mathur and his wife and leading them to exclaim: ‘Father! Now that you’ve watched us, why are you leaving? Do you have something else in mind?’ (Kripal 1998: 107). Shortly after this incident, “‘a certain kind of mood’ comes upon Mathur, he asks Ramakrishna to lie down next to him. Ramakrishna makes no objections to his boss’s request” (Kripal 1998: 107).

The traditional “orthodox” explanation of Ramakrishna’s cross-dressing claims that it “was a spiritual technique that enabled the Master to realize the conditional status of gender. It helped Ramakrishna to learn an important Vedantic lesson: gender, and everything else about the body and the mind, is conditioned, plastic, and so ultimately impermanent, false” (Kripal 1998: 108). Kripal questions such a reading on the grounds that “Ramakrishna nowhere even hints at such an understanding” (Kripal 1998: 108).

²⁹ In more specific terms, Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna might have been sexually abused by Mathur. In connection with “Mathur’s demonic ‘abduction’ of the saint,” Kripal points out that, “it is more than a little curious that Ramakrishna often slept in Mathur’s bedroom and lived in his mansion for sixteen years” (Kripal 1998: 300). Moreover, drawing on the “curious connection that seems to exist between Ramakrishna’s states of madness and the temple precincts,” Kripal speculates, “that it was not so much the temple as the *temple boss* that gave these states their energy and purpose” (Kripal 1998: 300).

Rather than affirming Ramakrishna's Vedantic predilections, Kripal suggests that his "feminine states would enable the saint to transform his homoerotic desire into the mystical states that defined and legitimated his charisma" (Kripal 1998: 109). Thus, for Kripal, Ramakrishna's identification with women can be read as both a technique of mystical ecstasy aimed at conquering his worldly "lust," and as a symptom of his repressed homosexual desire (Kripal 1998: 233).³⁰

The assertion that Ramakrishna's identification with women is tied to his homoerotic desire is reinforced by the "maternal" behavior he displays towards his disciples (Rolland 1984:190). Traditional sources describe Ramakrishna behavior towards his disciples as the very "image of motherly love" (Kripal 1998: 141).

Interestingly, Ramakrishna showed a marked preference for "mothering" young single

³⁰ Kripal writes: "Ramakrishna, then, became a woman not just to conquer his desire but also to increase it. Whereas his love for women died, his love for men and male deities was nourished, set afire. I would argue, moreover, that within this dual movement of asceticism and eroticism, the erotic was more primary, more basic. Becoming a woman – that dweller of the harem and naughty wife of the world – enflamed Ramakrishna's desires more than it extinguished them. Given his teachings on women, it is likely, indeed probable, that he was not particularly attracted to women in the first place. Assuming the nature of women allowed him, then, to kill what desire he had for women and to nourish his more natural desire for men" (Kripal 1998: 234). In his influential work, *The Analyst and the Mystic* (1991), Sudhir Kakar argues that Ramakrishna's identification with women must be properly contextualized as a product of cultural conditioning. According to Kakar, certain Hindu mystical traditions explicitly emphasize the need to cultivate one's femininity in order to access the path towards enlightenment (Kakar 1991:30). In the case of Ramakrishna, this tendency to sanctify the feminine stems from the classical Vaishnava myth of Vishnu being the only real male, while all humans are essentially female (Kakar 1991:32). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kakar claims that Ramakrishna's feminine behavior suggests that he is a "secondary transsexual," which denotes a male who does not openly manifest a longing to be female but nonetheless sustains an inner identification with the feminine (Kakar 1991:33). Kakar concludes that Ramakrishna's identification with the women can be interpreted as both a symptom of cultural conditioning *and* as an inner affirmation of his psyche's "primary femininity" (Kakar 1991:33). Furthermore, in her paper, *Is there anything transcendent about transcendence* (1995), Kelly Raab suggests that Ramakrishna's identification with women can be read as "a third category yet to be defined – the man/women/goddess at play" (Raab 1995: 339).

boys.³¹ Untainted by “woman-and-gold,”³² Ramakrishna believed these young single boys were ideal receptacles or “pure pots,” for his mystical teachings (Kripal 1998: 82). It was not uncommon for Ramakrishna to place a disciples head upon his lap and feed him like a doting mother. In one particular instance, “the motherly Paramahansa puts the boy [Rakhal] in his lap and tries to nurse him with his strangely full breasts”³³ (Kripal 1998: 141).

Kripal claims that Ramakrishna’s relationship to his disciples was marked by “anxious desire” (Kripal 1998: 65). Commenting on Ramakrishna’s “anxious desire” for

³¹ Kripal believes that, “Ramakrishna remained, until the very end, a lover not of sexually aggressive women or even of older men but of young, beautiful boys, those ‘pure pots,’ as he called them, that could hold the ‘milk’ of his divine love” (Kripal 1998: 3). There are certain passages of the *Kathamrta* that clearly reinforce Kripal’s assertion that Ramakrishna was attracted to young boys. For example: “A certain person slanders me greatly. He only says that I love boys” (KA 4.190). And again, “Hajra [the saint’s cousin] says, ‘You see rich boys, beautiful boys, and you love [them]’” (KA 4.230).

³² The renunciation of “woman and gold” (*Kamini-Kanacana*) is one of Ramakrishna’s central teachings. “Woman and gold” were the two great evils that encapsulate Ramakrishna’s disdain for the material world. Both “woman and gold” signify human (read: male) attachment and thus Ramakrishna considered them to be obstacles towards enlightenment. According to Ramakrishna, “the bound souls are tied to the world by the fetters of lust and greed. They are bound hand and foot. They think that ‘woman’ and ‘gold’ will make them happy and give them security, they do not realize that it will lead them to annihilation” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002:29). In contrast to the traditional “canonical” translation of *Kamini-Kanacana* as “woman-and-gold” Kripal argues that the phrase can be more accurately translated as “lover-and-gold” (Kripal 1995: 281). According to Kripal, “‘woman-and-gold,’ then, is a false translation, yet another strategy in the concealing of Ramakrishna’s secret” (Kripal 1995: 280). Kripal goes on, “lover-and-gold, to be truly accurate, should be LOVER-and-gold. Everything bad for Ramakrishna pales before the problem that is the Lover. Marrying a woman leads to the necessity of ‘gold,’ which in turn necessitates taking a job. All this spells the end of the man’s freedom, for now he is a slave to woman, money, and land, to his boss, and to his stomach...As long as man is attached to this world of lover-and-gold, ‘nothing will happen.’ Yoga, mystical absorption, devotional states, and meditation will be impossible” (Kripal 1995: 282). Apologists for Ramakrishna maintain that his reference to “woman and gold” did not imply women in general, but rather, this was just his “shorthand description for the entire conventional world” (Gupta 2002:12). Nikhilananda believes that “Sri Ramakrishna did not mean that women are to ‘blame’ for lust, nor did he teach his male devotees to hate women. On the contrary, he revered women as sacred representatives of the Goddess and taught that a man should treat every woman with the same reverence with which Hindus traditionally regard their own mothers” (Gupta 2002: 12). However, this view is seriously challenged by Ramakrishna’s “outrageously misogynistic” statements about women (Kripal 1998: 278).

³³ Kripal claims that even Ramakrishna’s biographer, Gupta (M), was perplexed by the erotic manner in which Ramakrishna would “engage his boy disciples in maternal relationships...a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the lap and nursing at the breasts of a forty-eight-year old man was simply more than M, or most anyone else, could understand” (Kripal 1998: 301).

his young male disciples, the biographer Gupta (M) relates how “he cries to bathe them, to lay them down, and to see them. He runs all over Calcutta to see them. He flatters and sweet talks people into bringing them from Calcutta to him in their carriages...Is this worldly affection? Or is it the pure love of God?”³⁴ (Gupta as quoted by Kripal 1998: 81). Perplexed by his “anxious desire” for young boys, Ramakrishna was forced to ask, “Why am I so attracted to them?” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 68).

Kripal notes that certain practices and visions that Ramakrishna shared with his disciples were often framed homoerotically. For example, “sometimes the boys would dance naked” and Ramakrishna would examine “the bare chests of men and boys in order to determine their spiritual fitness” (Kripal 1998: 232). Moreover, “Ramakrishna paired his disciples up into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ disciples in order to awaken their devotion and love” (Kripal 1998: 232). Perhaps one of the most explicit instances of Ramakrishna’s homoerotic behavior towards his young male disciples involves him falling into a deep ecstatic state and placing his foot upon their genitals³⁵ (Kripal 1998: 238). Although these homoerotic actions can be explained in part as “techniques of arousal,” which serve “as a means to generate his and the disciples’ energies,” they can also be read as harboring Ramakrishna’s deep-seated desire to engage in a homoerotic relationship with his young male disciples (Kripal 1998: 238).

³⁴ Kripal calls attention to the fact that certain segments of the public did question the purity of Ramakrishna’s intentions in surrounding himself with young boys. Take for example the following comments of an anonymous boatman: “What a sham he is! He eats so well, lounging on cushions, and under the guise of religion ruins so many school boys!” (Kripal 1998: 79).

³⁵ According to Kripal, “Ramakrishna never denied that he stuck his foot in strange places. But neither was he willing to take any blame” (Kripal 1998: 238). Kripal suggests that, “Ramakrishna’s foot is best understood as an embodied symbol of the mystico-erotic base of his Tantric experiences, what I have called Ramakrishna’s secret” (Kripal 1998: 240).

Some of Ramakrishna's most significant visions of the mystical were invoked by the presence of young boys. In one particular vision Ramakrishna recalls seeing "the paramahansa boy of fifteen that I saw under the banyan tree, again I saw another just like him! Everywhere there was a fog of bliss! – From within it a boy of fourteen arose and showed his face! He had the form of Purna! We were both naked!" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 162). In another secret passage referring to Purna, Ramakrishna remarks how "he wants to kiss and embrace Purna as if he were a woman and Purna a man" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 75). Moreover, in another scene Ramakrishna recounts how "a naked person used to stay around – I would play with his little penis with my hand. Then I would laugh a lot. This naked form used to come out of me. It was in the form of a paramahansa – like a boy" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 160). Again, Ramakrishna confesses to another disciple the details of a particular ecstatic state in which he "couldn't help but worship the little penises of boys with sandal-paste and flowers" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 160).

An even more explicit example of Ramakrishna allegedly acting on his homosexual desire involves his disciple Narenda, later to be known in the West as Vivekananda. According to Kripal, "Narenda and Ramakrishna are taking a nap at the home of a disciple. Narenda has his back to Ramakrishna. At some point, the saint gets up, crawls towards Naraenda and 'touches' him softly. Narenda wakes up and shouts in English. 'Lo, the man is entering onto me!' Ramakrishna laughs and replies, 'you son-of-

a-bitch! Do you think I don't follow your jabbering in English? You're saying that I'm entering you!"³⁶ (Kripal 1998: 302).

Despite the fact that the examples outlined above occurred at different times in Ramakrishna's life and in varying contexts, when they are taken together an intriguing pattern begins to emerge that links Ramakrishna's homoerotic desires with his vision of the mystical. More specifically, the symbolism of these homoerotic incidents point to a "secret of which he himself was not aware, namely, that his mystical experiences and visions were constituted by erotic energies that he neither fully accepted nor understood" (Kripal 1998: 238). However, Ramakrishna did try to contend with the erotic significance of his mysticism. This is evident by his ambivalent attraction to Tantra, which, according to Kripal, "is the hermetical key to integrating the religious teachings and experiences of Ramakrishna" (Kripal 1998: 86).³⁷

Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna's overall view of the mystical can ultimately be read as refuting the tenants of the Vedanta tradition, and affirming, albeit ambivalently, a Tantric worldview (Kripal 1998: 185). Generally speaking, Tantra refers to an esoteric mystical tradition originating in East Asia that utilizes the power of the five M's to induce

³⁶ Space constraints prohibit a detailed discussion of Kripal's analysis of Ramakrishna's "Secret Door," which refers to Ramakrishna's ambivalent relationship to the mystical significance of the anus and the latrine. It is suffice to note that for Kripal, the anus and "the latrine image is a metaphor that speaks to us of the ambiguities that marked Ramakrishna's homoerotic mysticism: of his fears of being entered by others, of his disgust with the dirtiness of sex, of his own profound ambivalence toward Tantra and its use of the bodily substances on the mystical path, and finally, of his own hidden desire to enter the secret door of others" (Kripal 1998: 302). Moreover, Kripal points out that, "Ramakrishna associates the act of defecation and the moment of religious experience" (Kripal 1998: 290).

³⁷ Kripal believes that "it is to Ramakrishna's credit that he did not categorically reject Tantra. Perhaps he sensed, or even knew, that its truths had been embodied in his own life, that somehow his ecstatic states were connected to his early erotic, and sometime abusive, encounters, and that he himself desired to enter the secret door" (Kripal 1998: 302).

mystical ecstasy.³⁸ The uniqueness of Tantra lies in its ability to embrace a system of antinomian symbolism where conventional cultural distinctions, such as, purity and pollution, body and soul, and immanence and transcendence, are thoroughly contested. Kripal claims that, “Tantra, as understood by Ramakrishna, is a tradition whose followers are called Saktas or ‘worshippers of the Power.’ That is to say, the particular Tantric tradition with which Ramakrishna is the most familiar is a Sakta form of Tantra, whose myth, ritual, and doctrine focus on the worship and propitiation of Sakti in the form of the goddess Kali” (Kripal 1998: 32).³⁹

Kali, the divine Mother, is central to Ramakrishna’s understanding of the mystical and he was often tormented by his desire to achieve her vision:

Crying, ‘Ma! Show yourself to me!’ he would fall down suddenly as if he were mad. His face and eyes were bloody red, his eyes were rolled up back into his head. His chest was ceaselessly wetted by such a stream of tears that ground below him on which he sat looked like it had been rained on... If someone would raise some food to his mouth, he would eat it. He would defecate and urinate unconsciously; and yet he was only able to say ‘Ma,’ and saying it, he would weep... His state at this time was like that of a boy nursing at its mother’s breasts. When one looked at Ramakrishna, one immediately

³⁸ Kripal states: “Tantra accomplishes its reversal of Brahmanical culture by ritually employing impure substances and illicit acts to transgress and transcend the Hindu category of purity and to activate the subtle energies of the psycho-physical organism that will carry the aspirant to his or her desired end. These substances and acts are known as the ‘Five M’s’: *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (grain) and *maithuna* (sexual intercourse)” (Kripal 1998: 30).

³⁹ According to Sanjukta Gupta, “the concept of the Goddess, mainly identified with Kali, is full of contradictions and ambiguities. On the one hand, she is seen all over India as the epitome of demonic ferocity and cannibalism, as is clearly depicted in her iconography: corpse-earrings; the long necklace of freshly severed heads and the belt made of amputated forearms; her nakedness or tiger’s skin loincloth; her dress and ornaments dripping blood; and her grotesque habit of tearing apart the live bodies of her victims, lapping up their gushing blood with her lolling tongue and getting drunk on it. In other words, she is death and destruction. On the other hand, she is also the life-giving and life-protecting cosmic mother whose breast milk sustains the world and regenerates her creatures, weakened by the process of life and death and wearied by suffering” (Gupta 2003: 60). Ramakrishna believed that “the primordial power is ever at play. She is creating, preserving, and destroying in play, as it were. This power is called Kali. Kali is verily Brahman, and Brahman is verily Kali. It is one and the same Reality. When we think of It as inactive, that is to say, not engaged in the acts of creation, preservation, and destruction, then we call It Brahman. But when It engages in these activities, then we call It Kali or Shakti. The reality is one and the same; the difference is in the name and form” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002: 77)

thought of an infant who cannot see its mother and so cries ‘Ma! Ma!’ and will not be consoled (Datta as quoted by Kripal 1998: 62)

Kripal recounts how “on one of these awful days, tormented by desire but frustrated by his unsuccessful attempts and at the point of despair, Ramakrishna’s eyes fell on the sacrificial sword hanging on the temple wall. He reached for it and was about to decapitate himself before Kali when the goddess intervened”⁴⁰ (Kripal 1998: 62):

Just then I suddenly attained a strange vision of Ma and fell down unconscious! After that, I knew nothing of what happened in the external world anywhere for the rest of the day and the next. But within me flowed a new intensely concentrated stream of bliss as I realized a direct vision of Ma (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 62).

Ramakrishna’s attempted decapitation by Kali’s sword signifies a pivotal moment in the saint’s struggle to cope with his homosexual desire. Drawing on both psychoanalytic and Tantric categories Kripal suggests the following interpretation:

Ramakrishna’s attempted decapitation, which led to the saint’s first full-blown mystical experience was triggered by homoerotic longings Ramakrishna was at the time rejecting as illegitimate: the pattern created by Ramakrishna’s vocabulary of desire – and especially the three terms ‘anxious desire,’ ‘a strange sensation,’ and ‘wring like a wet towel’ – suggest as much, as *all three terms are explicitly connected with Ramakrishna’s threatened self-decapitation and all three terms are consistently used to describe Ramakrishna’s attraction for his boy disciples*. By employing a culturally meaningful act – offering one’s head to Kali – Ramakrishna attempted to end his erotic torment (*vyakulata*) and the shame attached to it by symbolically castrating himself, the head being in the mystical physiology of yoga and Tantra the ultimate goal of one’s semen and so an appropriate symbol for the phallus (Kripal 1998: 76).⁴¹

⁴⁰ According to Kripal, “Ramakrishna’s encounter with Kali’s sword occurred sometime around 1856, shortly after the temple’s consecration in 1855. For the next four years, Ramakrishna would see lights and experience burning sensations in his body as he walked a thin line between religious enlightenment and madness” (Kripal 1998: 101). Ramakrishna acknowledges his own “madness.” For instance, when commenting on his practice of imitating the god monkey Hanuman, he admits, “I was mad” (Kripal 1998: 103). Moreover, in reference to Ramakrishna’s practices “according to the Tantras,” Kripal comments that, “for Ramakrishna, who we must remember was a high-caste Brahmin, eating with jackal and dogs and washing his mouth out with muddy water were acts that bordered on social and psychic destruction” (Kripal 1998: 93).

⁴¹ From a strictly psychoanalytic perspective, Kripal argues that “we might thus identify at least three dimensions of Ramakrishna’s experience of Kali’s sword: (1) my theory that the sword was aimed at the

In the Tantric worldview, the goddess Kali is traditionally assigned a dual role as both “a gentle, consoling Mother *and* a wild, uncontrollable Lover” (Kripal 1998: 87). In response to Kali’s dual nature as lover/mother, Kripal claims that Ramakrishna constructed “two separate identities, that of the Hero and that of the Child” (Kripal 1998: 130). Ramakrishna relished his role as Kali’s Child; however, assuming the role of the Hero was much more problematic for the saint. This is because a Tantrik Hero is associated with the householder tradition, which, according to Ramakrishna, refers to a “husband who takes the goddess in the form of a woman in order to cut the bonds of illusion” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 130). In other words, a Tantric Hero refers to a male who identifies with Kali as a Lover. However, Ramakrishna was never able to become such a Hero in his waking life precisely because he refused to have sex with a woman.⁴²

Kripal claims that, “many people living with Ramakrishna believed that the saint’s madness stemmed from his sexual continence”(Kripal 1998: 121). To mitigate his supposed “madness,”⁴³ certain family members, teachers, and devotees set-up numerous trials of temptation in which Ramakrishna was confronted by women in a sexual context.

symbolic phallus in order to end the tormenting shame that the saint felt for his homosexual desires; (2) the traditional psychoanalytic reading of self-castration in Hindu mythology as productive of a ‘negative Oedipus complex’ that in turn result in marked homosexual tendencies; and (3) Kakar’s maternal seduction theory, in which the sword is invoked as a defence against the sexually aggressive mother” (Kripal 1998: 344).

⁴² According to Kripal, Ramakrishna “could not be forced to complete the Tantric ritual of *maithuna* or ‘sexual intercourse’ with a woman, for example, not because he had somehow transcended sex (the traditional claim) but because the ritual’s heterosexual assumptions seriously violated the structure of his own homosexual desires” (Kripal 1998: 2).

⁴³ According to Kripal, “Ramakrishna’s strategy of avoiding sex by considering every woman to be his mother and, by doing so, equating intercourse with ‘raping the mother’ (*matrharana*) evoked outrage and scandal from the community: ‘He’s completely crazy,’ the people said” (Kripal 1998: 78).

Kripal describes at least four instances in which Ramakrishna fails to engage sexually with a woman. In the first, Ramakrishna's cousin, Hriday, sneaks "a young sexy woman to Ramakrishna's bedroom. Upon seeing her, Ramakrishna became very upset and scolded Hriday for his ploy" (Kripal 1998: 122). In the next incident, Hriday takes Ramakrishna to a brothel where he was surrounded by a group of young naked prostitutes. According to Kripal, "the scene, it seems, was more than Ramakrishna could take. Crying 'O Ma so full of bliss! O Ma so full of bliss!' he fell into samadhi" (Kripal 1998: 122).

In the third trial, Mathur's wife "sent two women to one of the bedrooms of Mathur's house, where Ramakrishna was resting... The two women entered the bedroom and grabbed Ramakrishna... Ramakrishna jumped up in dismay and then fell down unconscious" (Kripal 1998: 122). Finally, in the last trial of temptation Ramakrishna is taken to a local gathering of Tantric practitioners and a group of women surround him. One woman "stuck his big toe in her mouth" and a "second young woman acted out a very obscene gesture" (Kripal 1998: 123). Kripal believes that "whatever the two women intended by their symbolic (and not so symbolic) gestures, Ramakrishna did not like it" (Kripal 1998: 123).

Another telling example of Ramakrishna's fear of "sexual women" concerns his relationship with his child-bride Sarendra. Traditionally, Ramakrishna's marriage is characterized as another spiritual trial in which his "worship of the sixteen-year-old girl" serves as a testimony to his "sexual control and his Vedantic realization that gender is illusory!" (Kripal 1998: 133). However, rather than accepting Sarendra as his lover,

Ramakrishna approached their marriage as another spiritual test of temptation.

Ramakrishna states: “I performed the worship of the sixteen-year-old girl in the child state. I saw that her breasts were Mother’s breasts, that her vagina was Mother’s vagina” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 135). Ramakrishna refused to distinguish the Lover from the Mother, choosing instead to conflate the two. Kripal believes that “with his worship of the sixteen-year-old girl, then, Ramakrishna sought to transform his young wife, whom he feared, into his divine Mother, whom he worshiped” (Kripal 1998: 136). What did Ramakrishna fear about a sixteen-year-old girl? He feared her sexuality.⁴⁴ More specifically, he feared what her sexually signified: “the realities of the adult world”...and “the identities of that very world, namely, the Hero and the husband” (Kripal 1998: 136).

⁴⁴ Ramakrishna’s fear of women’s sexuality and its relationship to his alleged misogyny is a complex issue. According to Kripal, “Ramakrishna’s teachings on women *are* profoundly misogynist, but in a very specific way. To understand the specific contours of this misogyny, it is crucial that the interpreter distinguish with Ramakrishna the powers of delusion and gnosis...In scenes in which the saint is convinced that a particular woman poses no threat to his spiritual powers, that she is a pure Mother, a possessor of the power of gnosis, he is quite comfortable in her presence. Numerous passages thus relate how groups of women felt ‘no shame’ in his presence. The sexual charge, as it were, had been effectively removed by Ramakrishna’s assumption of the child state and by the women’s (perceived, at least) assumption of the mother state. The relationship was rendered pure, sexless, devout. In scenes, however, in which a woman is perceived by Ramakrishna to possess the power of delusion, the saint inevitably reacts with scorn, hatred, fear, and, at times, unconsciousness. The Lover is resolutely rejected. Thus there are no ‘women’ in the texts. Rather, there are Mothers and Lovers, possessors of the power of gnosis and possessors of the power of delusion. If we keep such distinctions in mind, Ramakrishna’s reactions are not only consistent, they are predictable. Ramakrishna’s misogyny, then, needs to be qualified. He did not hate or fear all women. Certainly, he feared women as sexual beings, as Lovers. But he also worshipped women as pure sexless beings, as Mothers, even if this ‘worship’ was as much a defensive tactic born out of fear as it was a religious act arising from genuine devotion...As Sumit Sarkar astutely pointed out, there was an issue of power in Ramakrishna’s misogyny. But the primary elements seemed to revolve more around the issues of ritual purity and the rejection of an active heterosexuality. Ramakrishna may have been afraid of women dominating men, but he was absolutely terrified of the polluting substances of the female body and the contact with them that sexual intercourse inevitably brings. To sum up, then, I would say that Ramakrishna’s debated misogyny was neither a simple ‘hatred’ (*miso-*) nor a hatred of ‘woman’ (*gyny*). Rather it was a “disgust” (*ghrna*) of woman as ‘lover’ (*kamini*)” (Kripal 1998: 287).

Was Ramakrishna a “failed Tantrika”? (Kripal 1998: 129). It is true that he refused to identify himself as a Hero and take the Goddess as his Lover. Instead, Ramakrishna opted to identify himself as a Child of Kali. Ramakrishna states: “This is the child state – the last word in mystical practice – you are my Mother, I am your son. This is the last word” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Kripal 1998: 135). It is Kripal’s belief that “for Ramakrishna, the goddess is a consoling Mother who protects her child from the adult dangers of sexuality and not, as for the Hero, a Lover who grants the striving aspirant the bliss of union” (Kripal 1998: 121). Ramakrishna’s tortured relationship with Kali reflects his underlining ambivalence towards Tantra in general. On the one hand, Ramakrishna exhibits a serious discomfort with certain teachings and practices of Tantra, as evinced by his refusal to engage with the goddess as a sexual partner. However, on the other hand, it is also clear that Tantra had a profound influence in structuring the way he ultimately viewed the mystical. For instance, Kripal writes, “Ramakrishna’s teachings on the nature of the world appear as a *means to help his listeners, and now readers, to transcend the ways of Vedanta and come to the ultimate knowledge and experience of the goddess and her Tantric world*” (Kripal 1998: 174).

Kripal admits that on the surface Ramakrishna is a failed Tantrika. However, at the same time Kripal maintains that, “in his inner life, in his secret visions, he conquered like a true Tantric Hero that which he so feared and hated in his waking life. True, it was an unconscious victory, one accomplished quite despite Ramakrishna himself, but it was a victory nonetheless” (Kripal 1998: 129). In other words, despite the fact that Ramakrishna failed to fulfill the ritual obligations of Tantric practice, he nonetheless

remained a Tantrika at heart. Take for instance one of Ramakrishna's most celebrated sayings: "I don't want to be sugar. I want to eat it" (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002: 149). What this means is that, in contrast to the traditional Vedantic worldview, Ramakrishna wants to enjoy the fruits of the mystical here and now, in this world. Like a true Tantrika, he refuses to separate the sacred from profane and the transcendent from the immanent. For Ramakrishna, the entire world, from the most gruesome to the most sublime, can be ultimately read as an expression of Kali, the definitive Tantric goddess. With Kali as his guide, Ramakrishna viewed the mystical through the eyes of Tantra and what he discovered, in true Tantric fashion, is a "mansion of fun."⁴⁵

But important questions still remain, namely, how did Ramakrishna's homosexual desires help to facilitate his Tantric view of the mystical? Or, in more general terms, how is Ramakrishna's sexual desires related to his Tantric understanding of the mystical? Kripal attempts to answer these questions by drawing upon his concept of "the erotic." According to Kripal, "the erotic" refers to "*a dimension of human experience that is simultaneously related both to the physical and emotional experience of sexuality and to the deepest ontological levels of religious experience*" (Kripal 1998: 23). In other words, "the erotic" signifies an interdependent and irreducible "*coincidentia* of the sexual and the mystical" (Kripal 2002: 37). In the discussion of Plato and Freud that opened the chapter, I argued that both Plato and Freud tend to frame the relationship between eros

⁴⁵ Kripal claims that, "Ramakrishna lived in and preached a Tantric world. Voices commanded him to 'remain in *bhavamukka*,' to remain poised within that dialectical union of the Absolute and the phenomenal world that defines Tantra. He struggled to unite the goddess and the god, the word of Sakti and the world of Brahman. And he saw. He saw this world literally shaking with the bliss of Siva and Sakti engaged in sexual intercourse. Appropriately, he sang of the goddess on top of the god and preached a mansion of fun that left the renouncing ways of Vedanta far behind" (Kripal 1998: 196).

and the mystical in terms of a hierarchy. This type of hierarchical framework is problematic because it harbors an implicit dualism that either reduces the sexual to the mystical (Plato) or the mystical to the sexual (Freud). In contrast, I argue that Kripal's concept of the erotic permits him to theorize a more horizontal understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the mystical that can accommodate the findings of both Plato and Freud. For Kripal, the sexual and the mystical are mutually inclusive categories, and their relationship is best understood as a nondualistic dialectic. In Kripal's model, then, the erotic signifies the nexus of this dialectic interplay between the sexual and the mystical.

Kripal claims that, "many of Ramakrishna's mystical experiences were induced within erotic contexts, imagined or real" (Kripal 1998: 317). In more specific terms, Ramakrishna's mystical experiences are often times induced within a *homoerotic* context and fueled by his repressed homoerotic desires. Kripal suggests that "these homoerotic energies...not only shaped the symbolism of Ramakrishna's mysticism; they *were* his mysticism" (Kripal 1998: 322). In other words, Ramakrishna expressed and realized his homosexual desires *through* the erotic symbolism of his Tantric mysticism. It was Tantra, specifically, "its most basic dictum – that human sexuality and mystical experience are intimately related, if not identical, on some deep energetic level," that provided Ramakrishna with a culturally-sanctioned method of engaging with the mystico-erotic meaning of his homosexual desires (Kripal 1998: 327).

Recall that rather than "engaging the goddess sexually" as a Hero, Ramakrishna's homosexual desires forced him to assume the role of a Child and engage the goddess as a

Mother (Kripal 1998: 318). From a Tantric perspective, it is Ramakrishna's inability to become the Hero, that is, his failure to "engage the goddess sexually" that caused him such "serious conflict and emotional pain" (Kripal 1998: 318). Although Tantra may provide Ramakrishna with a symbolic framework from which to ground his mysticism, it was "his homosexual desire that ultimately determined the specific manner in which he appropriated the symbols of his religious universe" (Kripal 1998: 318). Thus, from a psychoanalytic perspective, it is possible to interpret the "serious conflict and emotional pain" that Ramakrishna endured throughout his life as a result of his failure to recognize his homosexuality. In other words, Ramakrishna's "anxious desire," his suicide attempt, and his alleged "madness" can all be attributed to his inability to come to grips with his repressed homosexual desires.

It is significant to note how Kripal's nondualistic approach calls attention to the fact that regardless if the cause of Ramakrishna's sexual conflict is viewed as a religious issue stemming from his inability to "engage the goddess sexually," or as a psychological issue stemming from his failure to accept his homosexual desire, both interpretations – the Tantric and the psychoanalytic – can be accommodated by his theory of the erotic. In other words, from an erotic perspective, the source of Ramakrishna's sexual conflict can be read as *both* a religious *and* a psychological issue. But whether we choose to interpret Ramakrishna's sexual conflict in terms of religion or in terms of psychology, or even both, the fact remains that Ramakrishna seemed blissfully unaware of its origins.

Drawing on Freud's theory of the "unconscious,"⁴⁶ Kripal claims that Ramakrishna "is incapable of deciphering the homoerotic images that consistently appear in his visions and language; he cannot stop himself from ecstatically worshipping the penises of boys; and he suffers from various digestive and anal conditions that were symbolically linked to his sexual past. All of these things suggest to me that Ramakrishna was not fully aware of his own homosexual desires" (Kripal 1998: 320). Why could Ramakrishna not recognize his homosexual desires? In conjunction with the cultural and social taboos surrounding homosexuality in nineteenth-century India, Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna's disavowal of his homosexual desires could be tied to the trauma of sexual abuse that he likely suffered as a child and young adult (Kripal 1998: 303).

In a "classical" psychoanalytic fashion Kripal claims:

I would not deny that Ramakrishna suffered what Masson calls 'massive traumas' in his childhood and early adult life. Indeed, of the three types of trauma Masson lists as essential components of the ascetic's past – sexual seduction, overt or covert aggression, and the loss of a loved one – Ramakrishna clearly suffered that last (twice) and most likely endured the first as well, and many times at that. Nor would I question the importance of such events in setting up the *psychological conditions* for Ramakrishna's mystical experiences⁴⁷ (Kripal 1995: 303).

⁴⁶ Kripal states: "when I use the expression the unconscious or unconscious, I refer simply to a secret dimension or dimensions of the human person of which he or she is not aware" (Kripal 1998: 43). In his paper, *Ramakrishna: Mystical, Erotic, or Both?* (1998) Alan Roland questions Kripal's "viewing of both spiritual states of heightened consciousness and unconscious conflicts as deriving from a more general unconscious... This does not really encompass psychoanalytic definitions of the unconscious nor what spiritual states of consciousness are all about. The joining together of the two is a highly speculative leap on Kripal's part" (Roland 1998: 33).

⁴⁷ Ramakrishna's Father died when he was seven. His second father-figure, his older brother Ramkumar, died when Ramakrishna was a teenager. This double loss could be the cause of Ramakrishna's pattern of seeking "to replace his 'paternal loss' with a 'maternal gain'" i.e. his identification with the female goddess Kali (Kripal 1998: 57). Regarding the issue of sexual abuse, Kripal admits "that there are no clear indications of early sexual abuse in the biographies. But why should there be? These are, after all, hagiographies, and hagiographies rarely dwell on such forbidden subjects as the sexual complexities of childhood. Despite this surface silence in the texts, however, the symbolic connections and religious

Kripal is acutely aware of the developmental critiques of “classical” psychoanalytic theory and, to a certain extent, accepts them. However, at the same time, by drawing on his concept of the erotic, Kripal is forced to “question the assumption that such conditions are sufficient to explain the *meaning and content* of the experiences themselves” (Kripal 1998: 303). Kripal states:

It is one thing to suggest that Ramakrishna was abused as a child and again as a young adult, and that this set up certain psychological conditions that made the saint particularly prone to unusual states of consciousness. It is quite another to claim that this somehow explains away the religious meanings and genuine depth of all such states. It does not. No matter how many dark secrets we uncover about the saint’s hidden past, the fact remains that Ramakrishna experienced many of his later ecstasies as profoundly pleasurable and that healing and revelatory energizers were often transmitted from these states into his disciples (Kripal 1998: 303).

In other words, although the effects of childhood trauma may play a determining role in structuring certain idiosyncratic details of Ramakrishna’s ecstatic visions of the mystical, it cannot explain the transformative and ultimately emancipatory quality of his mysticism.

Whereas a history of sexual abuse may not necessarily explain Ramakrishna’s mysticism, it does shed light on Ramakrishna’s numerous bouts with madness. Kripal

teachings of the saint do point in just such a direction, as does the general textual pattern of revealing and concealing that I have analyzed throughout this study” (Kripal 1998: 298). Kripal speculates that the village woman of Kamarkpukur, certain spiritual teachers, such as Bhairavi, and Tota Puri, and Mathur, the temple manager, are all possible “perpetrators of abuse” (Kripal 1998: 68). But how is this alleged sexual abuse related to Ramakrishna’s mysticism? According to Kripal, “it is indeed remarkable that the vast, if young and still debated, literature on sexual trauma suggests that individuals who have experienced abuse become adept at altering their state of consciousness, ‘split’ their identities to separate themselves from the traumatic event, lose control of their bodily, and especially gastrointestinal, functions, experience visions and states of possession, become hypersensitive to idiosyncratic stimuli (like latrines), symbolically re-enact the traumatic events, live in a state of hyperarousal, regress to earlier stages of psychosocial development, develop various types of somatic symptoms (including eating disorders and chronic insomnia), become hypersexual in their language or behaviour, develop hostile feelings toward mother figures, fear adult sexuality, and often attempt suicide. The list reads like a summary of Ramakrishna’s religious life” (Kripal 1998: 299).

suggests that “there seems to be little question about whether some of Ramakrishna’s behavior and states were at times pathological, or in the terms of his own culture, mad” (Kripal 1998: 321). Ramakrishna admits that, “I had all the experiences that one should have, according to the scriptures, after one’s direct perception of God. I behaved like a child, like a madman, like a ghoul, and like an inert thing” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002:159). If, however, Ramakrishna’s appeal to “scripture” is momentarily adumbrated for the sake of a more psychoanalytic reading, it becomes possible to interpret Ramakrishna’s various states of “divine madness” as a reaction formation to some kind of childhood trauma and thus symptomatic of what Freud refers to as a “return of the repressed” (Freud 1939: 127). Yet, as Kripal’s analysis makes clear, such a “classical” psychoanalytic reading only goes so far and is ultimately challenged by the fact that certain aspects of Ramakrishna’s “divine madness” exhibit curative properties. In other words, “if Ramakrishna was mad, he was mad in a particularly healing way” (Kripal 1998: 321). Perhaps Romain Rolland best captured the heart of this issue in his biography of Ramakrishna when he stated, “there is no difficulty in proving the apparent destruction of his whole mental structure, and the disintegration of its elements. But how were they reassembled into a synthetic entity of the highest order?” (Rolland 1984: 38).

How was Ramakrishna able to empower himself and others through the mystico-erotic energies of his “divine madness”? Drawing on the dialectical hermeneutics of Gananath Obeyesekere (1990), Kripal argues the following:

By deft use of religious symbolism, Ramakrishna was able to use his homosexual desires as the driving, shaping force of his mystical life: what was once a crisis became a secret, not only of his mystical and charismatic success, but of his very divinity. Kali’s

iconographic form was the primary symbolic focus of his transformation, of this dialectical movement back and forth between regressive and the progressive. Her sword, her motherly and sexual features, her upside-down erotic posture, her gracious yet shocking feet, her lolling tongue – empowered with all their historical associations, seeming contradictions, and poetic ambiguities – would turn a lonely young man despairing of his life into a charismatic religious leader surrounded by some of Calcutta’s most talented men, young and old (Kripal 1998: 325).

In other words, Ramakrishna was able to internalize the cultural symbolism surrounding Kali in particular, and Tantra in general, to create a private, mystically oriented healing-strategy. Or, as Kripal puts it, “he took what were regressive symptoms and, through Kali and her Tantric world, converted them into progressive symbols, into genuine experiences of a sacred, mystical realm” (Kripal 1998: 324).

From a “classical” psychoanalytic perspective, this process of converting “regressive symptoms” into “progressive symbols” can be interpreted as a form of sublimation. To a certain extent, this is an accurate interpretation, given that Ramakrishna appears to sublimate his repressed homosexual desires for service of a “higher” cause, namely, his mysticism. However, Kripal is hesitant to fully accept such a “classical” explanation. Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan,⁴⁸ Kripal argues that the

⁴⁸ Lacan’s most comprehensive discussion of the mystical appears in his 1972-73 seminar XX, later published in his work *Feminine Sexuality* (1982). The main issue that Lacan seeks to address in this lecture is the question of how sexual difference relates to mystical *jouissance* (Hollywood 2002: 151). The term *jouissance* generally refers to enjoyment in the sense of sexual pleasure, but more precisely, it denotes a site of ecstatic pleasure-in-pain (Evans 1999: 9). *Jouissance* is the pain of a pleasure that is never fully satiated, or, as Micheal Eigen humorously puts it: *jouissance* is “the never ending ouch and yum of things” (Eigen 1999: 97). Perhaps *jouissance* can be best understood in terms of how it opposes desire. According to Dylan Evans, for Lacan, “desire is not a movement towards an object, since if it were then it would be simple to satisfy it. Rather, desire lacks an object that could satisfy it, and is therefore to be conceived as a movement which is pursued endlessly, simply for the enjoyment (*jouissance*) of pursuing it. *Jouissance* is thus lifted out of the register of the satisfaction of a biological need, and becomes instead the paradoxical satisfaction which is found in pursuing an eternally unsatisfied desire” (Evans 1999: 5). According to Lacan, *jouissance* is gendered, that is, there is a male *jouissance* and a female *jouissance* (Lacan 1982: 147). Male *jouissance* is characterized by a conflation of the *imaginary* penis (*the object petit a*) and the *symbolic* phallus (the Other) (Hollywood 2002: 160). Within the *symbolic* register, the phallus is a signifier

answers provided by the “classical” psychoanalytic approach, which tend to frame Ramakrishna’s mystical experiences as some kind of defensive maneuver aimed at shielding his ego from the “truth” of his sexuality, are “woefully inadequate as long as they assume a materialistic understanding of sexual energies that in effect reduces the

of *imaginary* plenitude and wholeness, which determines and maintains the cultural coordinates of language, subjectivity, and power. Male, or “phallic *jouissance*” refers to the enjoyment attained through an *imaginary* realization of *symbolic* plenitude and wholeness. In contrast, feminine *jouissance* is characterized by the “not-all,” meaning that the mode of enjoyment that defines the female subject cannot be fully translated or appropriated by the *symbolic* (Lacan 1982: 147). According to Lacanian theory, because the feminine subject “lacks” (the phallus), the source and character of her *jouissance* is different from the males, and it is precisely this difference that enables feminine *jouissance* to transcend the dialectic of desire that defines conventional (read: male) *symbolic* discourse (Hollywood 2002: 155). Because the feminine subject lacks (the phallus) she is able to remain at odds with the oppressive powers structures that traditionally dominate the phallic-economy of the *symbolic*. Simply put, it is this distance from the phallus that allows the feminine subject to access alternative modes of *jouissance* and thus construct an alternative mode of subjectivity (Hollywood 2002: 151). Lacan states: “I believe in the *jouissance* of the women in so far as it is something more” (Lacan 1982: 147). Lacan is suggesting that feminine *jouissance* exceeds the boundaries of the *symbolic*, it offers “something more” than language can convey, and thus it elicits a “*jouissance* which goes beyond” the phallus (Evans 1999: 10). While it is true that for Lacan feminine *jouissance* is generally associated with female mystics, he notes that there are rare exceptions in which a male mystic can repudiate phallic *jouissance* and put himself “on the side of the not all” (Lacan 1982: 147). This is possible because for Lacan, “male” and “female” are constructions of language. As Amy Hollywood puts it, “Lacan claims that the position one occupies in language is not dependent on the kind of body one has. Anatomically or genetically defined males and female human beings can occupy either the position of the masculine speaking subject or that of the feminine speaking subject. The difference between the two positions is in the relationship they take toward the phallus, the transcendental signifier within male-dominated society through which meaning is fixed and grounded” (Hollywood 2002: 154). In other words, in Lacanian theory it is possible for a male mystic to situate himself “on the side of the not all” as a feminine speaking subject because “male” and “female” are malleable constructs of signification. Hence, Lacan makes the claim, “there are men who are just as good as women. It does happen. And who therefore feel just as good. Despite, I won’t say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense that there must be a *jouissance* which goes beyond. This is what we call a mystic” (Lacan 1982: 147). Unlike male *jouissance*, which is the product of a subject’s *imaginary* recovery of the *symbolic* phallus, feminine *jouissance* is product of an encounter with the real of the body. Hence, for Lacan, mystical experience is equated with a “*jouissance* of the body” (Hollywood 2002: 165). According to Hollywood, “this *jouissance* of the body belongs neither to the *imaginary* nor to the *symbolic*, but to the real, which is both the source and result of the tension between these two registers” (Hollywood 2002: 166). In other words, the *real* emerges when the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* collapse. The *jouissance* of the body that defines mystical experience, characterized by certain bodily affects, such as, pleasure-in-pain, eroticism, and ineffability, signifies a subject’s traumatic encounter with the real. Such an encounter, Lacan notes, is an existential event and a product of something more than mere sexual desire. Hence, Lacan claims, “what was tried at the end of this century, at the time of Freud, by all kind of worthy people in the circle of Charcot and the rest, was an attempt to reduce the mystical to questions of fucking. If you look carefully, that is not what it is all about. Might not this *jouissance* which one experiences and knows nothing of, be that which puts us on the path of ex-istence?” (Lacan 1982: 147).

mystical, in the words of Jacques Lacan, ‘to questions of fucking’” (Kripal 1998: 325). Kripal believes that the empowered character of Ramakrishna’s mystical states cannot be fully explained as a sublimation of “repressed libidinal energies” (Kripal 1998: 327). Yes, “repressed libidinal energies” play a formative role in the unique construction of Ramakrishna’s erotic mysticism; however, according to Kripal, there is “something more” to his mysticism than just a desire to “fuck.”

Kripal finds the issue of whether or not Ramakrishna’s mysticism is to be viewed as pathological or transformative boils down to the following question: “was Ramakrishna ‘sublimating’ sexual energies into admittedly powerful but nevertheless perfectly ‘natural’ states? Or was he ‘realizing’ the erotic divinity in his own cosmic body?” (Kripal 1998: 326). In other words, borrowing from Lacan, Kripal asks: what is the source of Ramakrishna’s “coming” (jouissance)? Kripal’s answer is that “the saint’s experiences were ‘coming from’ the ontological ground of his Tantric world, and that this ‘coming’ was as much a realization of a divine eros as it was a sublimation of sexual energies”⁴⁹ (Kripal 1998: 327). Kripal goes on to “insist, moreover, that such a realization be understood on its own terms, as a genuine religious experience, and neither be reduced to the mechanics of our own making nor be effaced by a condemnation dictated by our own morality” (Kripal 1998: 327).

Thus, similar to Lacan’s understanding of mystical jouissance, Kripal’s concept of the erotic prohibits him from reducing the meaning of the mystical to “questions of fucking.” At the same time, like Lacan, Kripal argues that psychosexual issues relating to

⁴⁹ William Parsons frames Kripal’s understanding of “*realization*” as “opposed to sublimation, that is, the realization that the ground of the sexual already and always was the mystical” (Parsons 2008: 75).

gender, body, and sexual orientation do play a formative role in the construction, interpretation, and representation of the mystical. I argue that it is precisely Kripal's concept of the erotic that enables him to entertain a both/and (nondualistic) perspective, which can reasonably accommodate both "questions relating to fucking" and questions relating to that enigmatic "something more" that traditionally defines the mystical. Such a viewpoint, however, begs the question: what is the nature of this "something more" that defines the mystical? In *Kali's Child*, Kripal remains silent on the issue, limiting his presumptions about its nature with an appeal to Tantric ontology. However, even if the source of Ramakrishna's "coming" remains a mystery, Kripal is certain about one thing, namely, that the erotic world of Tantra is the privileged theater upon which Ramakrishna sought to dramatize his most secret mystical desires.

Kali's Child was awarded the 1996 American Academy of Religion prize for best first book in the history of religions and has received outstanding reviews by many acclaimed scholars.⁵⁰ However, *Kali's Child* has also been the subject of much criticism by certain scholars and devotional communities who question the validity of Kripal's thesis. For example, shortly after being awarded a Prize by the AAR, Narasingha Sil produced an "inflammatory" review of *Kali's Child* in the Calcutta newspaper, *The Statesman* (Kripal 1998 xi). According to Keith Urban, Sil, "decried Kripal as a sloppy scholar with a perverse imagination who has thoughtlessly 'ransacked' another culture

⁵⁰ For example, Kripal calls attention to the positive reviews of his book by Haberman, Hawley, Hayes, Padoux, Parsons, Patton, Radice Urban, Vaidyanathan, and Williams (Kripal 1998: 629). We can also add to the list Carl Olsen who wrote the following in his review of *Kali's Child*: "The book is a model of clarity, sensitivity, single-minded pursuit of the truth, a joy to read, an example that textual studies need not be boring and deserves to be widely read by everyone in the field of religious studies, Indian studies, and among educated readers in general" (Olsen 1997: 202).

and produced a work which is, in short, ‘plain shit’” (Urban 1998: 318). The public reaction to Sil’s review intensified the controversy surrounding *Kali’s Child* and the newspaper was inundated with “a flood of letters, more, the editors claimed, than they had seen in recent memory” (Kripal 1998: xi). Consequently, according to Kripal, “English and Bengali newspapers in India reported on the central government’s move to consider banning the book”(Kripal 1998: xii).

The secondary literature surrounding *Kal’s Child* is immense. I will limit myself to an examination of three of the most substantial charges leveled at *Kali’s Child*: faulty translations, reductionism, and neocolonialism. Perhaps the most widely known critique of Kripal’s supposed faulty translations appears in Swami Tyagananda’s online review “Kali’s Child Revisited or Didn’t Anyone Check the Documentation?” (2000). According to Tyagananda, “Kripal’s conclusions came via faulty translations, a willful distortion and manipulation of sources, combined with a remarkable ignorance of Bengali culture”⁵¹ (Tyagananda 2000). Tyagananada goes on to document numerous examples of Kripal’s “faulty translations.” For instance, Tyagananada accuses Kripal of mistranslating “lap” as “genitals” or “defiled place,” “head” as “phallus,” “touching softly” as “sodomy” and “*tribhanga*” as “cocked lips.” Furthermore, Tyagananada questions the erotic gloss that Kripal assigns to such terms as “*vyakulata*” and “*uddipana*.” Tyagananda believes that “one of the real problems with this book is the lack of consistency. When it suits the

⁵¹ Svami Atmajnanananda (1997) presents a similar critique of *Kali’s Child*. According to Atmajnanananda, “time and again his translations of terms presupposes the very attitudes he is trying to prove. Kripal consistently misreads situations, takes events out of their cultural context, assumes attitudes without justification, and allows his fertile imagination to conjure up incidents for which there is no concrete evidence, such as cases of sexual abuse by Ramakrsna’s spiritual preceptors and devoted admirers” (Atmajnanananda 1997: 402).

author, he translates ‘literally’ – even at the expense of the correct meaning of the words. And when it suits him, he indulges in an interpretative translation – even if the interpretation has nothing to do with the actual words used” (Tyagananda 2000). Tyagananda concludes that, “there is no textual evidence of his thesis” (Tyagananda 2000).

Kripal addresses Tyagananda’s critiques in his paper “Textuality, Sexuality, and the Future of the Past: A Response to Swami Tyagananda” (Kripal 2003a).⁵² According to Kripal, “many of the errors Tyagananda points out are not errors at all but differences of opinion regarding the interpretation of texts, which, like all texts, can always be interpreted in any number of legitimate and mutually enlightening ways” (Kripal 2003a). Kripal writes that “the issue, then, is not translation but the art of interpretation, or what we call hermeneutics. Basically, I understand the relationship between sexuality and textuality very differently than Tyagananda. I believe that when a text uses sexual language, it often, if not always, reflects real physiological and psychological analogues. Tyagananda, on the other hand, seems to think that language can work only on one level, that ‘enkindling’ or ‘reminding’ can only imply ‘enkindling’ or ‘reminding,’ and that when a term is in fact sexualized, it can only be as a safe metaphor or traditional trope devoid of any ‘real’ sexuality” (Kripal 2003a). Kripal believes that much of

⁵² This essay was originally published by *Evam in Forum on Indian Representations* 1:1-2 (2002): 191-205. I obtained this essay from the Rice University Website dedicated to the controversy surrounding *Kali’s Child*: <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~kalischi/textuality.html>. I cite each of the essays on this Website as follows: “Textuality, Sexuality, and the Future of the Past: A Response to Swami Tyagananda (2003a); “From the Heart” (2003b); “Secret Talk: Sexual Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Hindu Tantrism” (2003c); “The Tantric Truth of the Matter: A Forthright Response to Rajiv Malhorta” (2003d).

Tyagananda's confusion over his interpretations "issue from a kind of textual literalism that is seriously out of touch with how human beings (and religious texts) actually use language to encode the sexual dimensions of human life" (Kripal 2003a).

With regard to Tyagananda's accusation that, "there is no textual evidence of his thesis," Kripal replies as follows:

All of the legitimate errors can be easily corrected without altering the substance or conclusions of the book, as they all, even taken together, amount to very little before the hundreds upon hundreds of passages I reference, interpret, translate and use to demonstrate my theses. The sense I had over and over again reading through Swamiji's document was something like this: "Well, yes, that is a fair and valuable correction, but what of the 'big picture' will really change when I make this correction?" Repeatedly, I had to answer, "Very little" or "Nothing." It was as if Tyagananda was focusing on some admittedly twisted trees and broken branches and missing entirely the larger forest in which they were located and grew so freely. Moreover, he was very careful to focus his readers' attention *only* on what he perceived to be the broken branches. He studiously avoided the rest of the forest and its fertile growth, since such a broader vision would require a very different conclusion about the meaning of the twists and breaks. What makes the present case stand out is not the errors themselves but the fact that they would have gone undetected in any other work that did not have the (mis)fortune of attracting so much attention (Kripal 2003a).

In his article "Polymorphic Sexuality, Homoeroticism, and the Study of Religion" (1997), Gerald James Larson accuses Kripal's study of Ramakrishna as succumbing to reductionism (Larson 1997: 658). According to Larson, Kripal's "treatment overall lacks balance and proper contextualization and in the end falls into the trap of monocausal reductionism" (Larson 1997: 658). By "monocausal reductionism" Larson seems to suggest that Kripal utilizes one dimension of Ramakrishna's life, namely, his "homoerotic fantasies," in order to explain the whole of his mysticism (Larson 1997: 659). Larson claims that, "none of the evidence cited in the book supports a cause-effect relation between the erotic and the mystical (or the religious), much less an identity!

That erotic symbolism, including to some extent homoerotic symbolism, is clearly present in some, or even many, of the saint's unusual religious experiences, in no way establishes a causal relation between the two. There is a clear correlation, but to be sure, possibly an "elective affinity" in the Weberian sense, but hardly an established causal relation or any kind of identity!" (Larson 1997: 660).

Larson goes on to claim that by ignoring the "larger framework of evidence Kripal ends up with a monocausal reductionism that is nearly a classic example of what Whitehead called 'the Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness,' that is, focusing on only one abstract dimension of an issue and thinking that one has then given a concrete explanation" (Larson 1997: 661). Larson chastises Kripal for engaging "in precisely the same sort of exercise with his 'hermeneutical key,' taking one aspect of one dimension of Ramakrishna's life (that is, the specifically homoerotic from among the total sexual evidence) and then arguing that this single dimension somehow explains the totality of Ramakrishna's mystical experience" (Larson 1997: 661). Larson concludes that, "I am inclined to believe that his book would have been much more balanced and would have avoided reductionism had he taken the trouble to engage in a frank intellectual exchange about his interpretation with the community about which and in which much of his material centers" (Larson 1997: 663).

Kripal addresses Larson's critiques in his paper "Mystical Homoeroticism, Reductionism, and the Reality of Censorship: A Response to Gerald James Larson" (1998a). According to Kripal, "the reductionism charge (monoreductionism) he completely misreads. I spent pages and pages discussing: my adoption of a 'nondual

methodology' that can dialectically incorporate something of both psychoanalytic theory and Tantric experience (17-24); the role of social factors in the construction of Ramakrishna's visions and ecstasies (34-34, 219-220, 312-313, 319-325); my own consistent rejection of a Freudian reductionism (6-7, 21-24, 37-46, 67, 296-304, 317-328); and the logical impossibility of reducing the mystical to the sexual in a radically monistic universe (22-24, 43-46)" (Kripal 1998a: 629). Moreover, Kripal writes: "Larson wants to argue that I am advancing a single cause, when in fact I mapped out two primary levels (the tantric and the incarnational) and eight different dimensions (the textual, the political, the psychological, the social, the ontological, the ritual, the anal, and the theological) in the production and process of Ramakrishna's secret (310-317)" (Kripal 1998a: 629).

Furthermore, Kripal disputes Larson's heavy-handed suggestion that *Kali's Child* could have avoided the pitfall of reductionism if only "he had taken the trouble to engage in a frank intellectual exchange about his interpretation with the community about which and in which much of his material centers" (Larson 1997: 663). In response, Kripal writes the following:

There were good historical reasons for my decision not to share my research before publication. After all, my work on the historical textual tradition proceeds only through a hermeneutical recovering of that which has been suppressed, censored, and denied by the tradition. There is thus no way in which works like mine could not be controversial; to the extent that it reveals esoteric truths that have been concealed by the tradition, it must be contested and ultimately rejected by that same tradition (Kripal 1998a: 630).

Perhaps the most serious critique leveled at *Kali's Child* is that it perpetuates a neocolonial understanding of the life and teachings of Ramakrishna. In his review of

Kali's Child (1998), Keith Urban claims that one of the most “troubling problems” of the work is “Kripal’s tendency toward sensationalism and at times an almost journalistic delight in playing on the ‘sexy,’ ‘seedy,’ ‘scandalous,’ and shocking nature of his material. With headings sections such as Cleaving the Bitch in Two, Tantric Latrine, Ecstatic Diarrhea and Pansomatic Orgasm, it is not surprising that many Indian readers should have taken offence; nor is it difficult to understand why some Indian critics should regard Kripal’s work as yet another example of neocolonialism and the West’s exploitation of the ‘exotic Orient’ in the form of ‘slickly produced paperbacks” (Urban 1998: 319).⁵³

An even more damning commentary about the neocolonial effects of *Kali's Child* is advanced by the acclaimed scholar of religions, Huston Smith, who writes the

⁵³ Kripal responds to the charge of “sensationalism” as follows: “I have always recognized that my work is potentially offensive to some kinds of readers (hence, again, I addressed this issue directly and immediately on the very first page of the first edition). But I also knew that this perceived offense is a function, first and foremost, of the texts themselves and their Tantric spirit, that is, their consistent attempt to break what Ramakrishna called the ‘bonds of shame, disgust and fear,’ to transgress the purity codes of Brahmanical Hinduism, and to engage in mystical practices with the body and its fluids that are *intentionally* offensive and transgressive, ‘offense’ or ‘transgression’ here functioning as the emotional components of a kind of mystical technique. I tried my very best to capture this transgressively Tantric spirit in the rhetoric, content and style of my own writing – it was at once an artistic and a hermeneutical effort to re-create the energy of the texts I had come to know and love with the inspiration of both indigenous discourses and practices (like Sakta Tantra and the iconography of Kali) and Western critical theory (like psychoanalysis and feminist literary theory). In my own mind, the work, in both its conception and performance, was and still is a thing of intellectual beauty and religious power (*sakti*), if also, I admit, of Tantric vertigo. With Georges Bataille, I could say, ‘I write for the one who, entering into my book, would fall into it as into a hole, who would never again get out.’ I fully realize that such a reading experience can be terrifying, and that some readers, rather than deal creatively and positively with this fear, have sought to turn this vertiginous beauty into a thing of ugliness, condemnation and willed deception. But such negative readings on the part of these readers reflect their perspectives and values, certainly not mine. For me, both the book and its subject are realities of deep religious power and intellectual beauty. Put simply, I have never intended any genuine offense, although I have always recognized that the materials I was working with are, by their very nature, ‘offensive.’” (Kripal 2003a).

following: “I doubt that any other book – not even those of early, polemical, poorly informed, and bigoted missionaries – has offended Hindu sensibilities so grossly. And understandably, for despite Kripal's protestations to the contrary in ‘Secret Talk: The Politics of Scholarship in Hindu Tantrism’ (HDSB, Winter 2000/01), *Kali's Child* is colonialism updated” (Smith 2001). Both Urban and Huston’s views are further echoed by Rajiv Malhorta’s online essay, *Wendy’s Child Syndrome* (2002), which claims that Kripal’s work on Ramakrishna essentially rehashes “the negative stereotyping of Indic traditions” and is yet another “form of Eurocentrism being projected upon ‘others’” (Malhorta 2002).

Perhaps one of the most erudite critiques of *Kali's Child's* supposed neocolonial shortcomings is offered by S. N. Balagangadhara in his two online articles, “India and Her Traditions: A Reply to Jeffrey Kripal” (2002a) and “India and Her Traditions II: An Open Letter to Jeffrey Kripal” (2002b). According to Balagangadhara, the controversy surrounding *Kali's Child* is essentially “about *cultural sensibilities*” (Balagangadhara 2002a). Balagangadhara argues that Kripal is “blind” to the fact that his reading of Ramakrishna “trivializes” the life and experiences of the saint; this “trivializing process” serves to “deny our own experiences” of Ramakrishna in particular and Indian culture in general (Balagangadhara 2002a). Hence, according to Balagangadhara, devotional communities and certain segments of the Indian population are rightfully outraged by Kripal’s claims about Ramakrishna because “*our experiences are being trivialized, denied, distorted and made inaccessible by someone else’s experience of the world*”

(Balagandhara 2002a). Balagandhara goes on to criticize Kripal's work as an insidious form of intellectual colonization:

Colonization, as many have pointed out, was not merely a process of occupying lands and extracting revenues. It was not a question of us aping the Western countries and trying to be like them. It was not even about colonizing the imaginations of a people by making them 'dream' that they too will become 'modern', developed and sophisticated. It goes deeper than any of these. It is about denying the peoples and cultures their own experiences; of rendering them aliens to themselves; of actively preventing any description of their own experiences except in terms defined by the colonizers (Balagandhara 2002a).

Furthermore, Balagandhara argues that Kripal's appeal to psychoanalytic theory and his application of his concept of the erotic fails to actually explain Ramakrishna's experiences. Rather than explaining Ramakrishna's experience, Balagandhara takes Kripal to task for "merely redescribing Ramakrishna's religious life as a cluster of symptoms of a sexually abused person" (Balagandhara 2002b). Balagandhara concludes with a stinging accusation: "you provide no explanation of any sort except a trivial one. And you do that by merely redescribing the saint as a pathological person. You trivialize whatever you touch, including the experience of another culture. In the process, you inflict violence on your fellow human beings" (Balagandhara 2002b).

Kripal is acutely aware of the abhorrent history of Western cultures colonization of India and is sympathetic to certain claims advanced by his critics.⁵⁴ However, Kripal

⁵⁴ Kripal states: "Certainly, I have never intended my work to be either demeaning or colonizing in any way – quite the contrary, for me the Sakta tradition is a marvel of psychological depth, aesthetic shock, and intellectual beauty, and the ancient erotic riches of India are just that, riches – but I do understand how my work could be misunderstood in this way, particularly if it is not actually read through in its own terms (which, let us admit it, is almost always the case). I fully acknowledge and deeply regret the colonial pasts of Western discourses on Hindu spiritualities and believe that this colonial past must be openly admitted and thoroughly worked through in rigorously systematic and honest ways: postcolonial theory is perhaps our finest ally here. Moreover, I do not pretend to understand, for a moment, the depth of human suffering and injustice that such a colonial history has imposed on so many people in so many places for so long.

maintains that the accusations of neocolonialism and “intellectual imperialism” directed at *Kali’s Child* are completely misplaced. According to Kripal, “most of the problems and misunderstandings revolving around my work, I think, lie in our different cultural positions, life-experiences, and subsequent moral values” (Kripal 2003b). Kripal defends the evolution of his position as follows:

Historically speaking, my own project emerges not from British colonialism per se, but from the nineteenth-century missionary efforts of Swami Vivekananda in America (which, of course, was itself a response to Western colonialism) and, more recently, from the American counter-culture of the 1960's and its warm embrace of Tantric forms of Hinduism and Buddhism as powerful means to subvert and renew Western culture, what Agha Khan once correctly predicted would develop into a kind of scholarly ‘Tantric Renaissance’ in the States. I cannot and will not speak for others, but for me at least, it is the American counter-culture, not British colonialism, that most deeply formed me and my work” (Kripal 2003b).

How then does Kripal understand the seemingly contradictory reception of *Kali’s Child*? Kripal argues that the crux of the problem revolves around the way different cultures and religious traditions view sexuality, and particularly, homosexuality. Hence, Kripal states:

It is my own conviction that the ‘contradictory’ receptions of *Kali’s Child* are not really contradictory at all. Those readers who do not fear or condemn homosexualities read the book exactly as it was written - as a warm, deeply sympathetic portrait of a remarkable Hindu Tantric mystic, a ‘disturbingly delightful celebration’ indeed, filled with those very things that graced Ramakrishna’s historical presence: loud laughter (some of it quite bawdy), sexually suggestive religious visions, and moments of ecstatic joy in the presence of beloved human beings. Those readers, however, who reject homosexualities as somehow aberrant, impure or ‘Western’ project their own fears and hatreds onto the book (and me) and so read it as something it was not, is not, and never will be - an ‘attack’ on Ramakrishna or, more bizarrely still, on Hinduism itself. What is genuinely

This cannot be said enough times or in enough ways. Clearly, this postcolonial context and these painful memories of gross injustice and cultural imperialism go a very long way in explaining the present controversy. The consciously sincere intentions of a single author must appear to mean very little indeed here. I recognize this” (Kripal 2003b).

contradictory, then, is not the book itself but the moral sensibilities that its different readers bring to it (Kripal 2003c).

In other words, Kripal identifies the core issue surrounding the controversy of *Kali's Child* not so much as colonial but rather sexual. Following Kripal, I argue that more often than not, critics who bemoan his psychosexual reading of Ramakrishna's mysticism are not actually responding to the intellectual weight of his argument, but are rather participating in a form of "negative transference," which consequently highlights "the ethical status of homosexualities within our religious traditions" (Kripal 2003d).⁵⁵ Much of the criticism levelled at *Kali's Child*, such as translation errors, reductionism, neocolonialism, and even the *ad hominon* attacks on Kripal's scholarly acumen, fails to diminish the creditability of Kripal's central thesis that Ramakrishna's homoerotic desires played a formative role in constructing the "symbolic contours" and shape of his mysticism. This is not to say that *Kali's Child* is beyond criticism, but only that Kripal's central thesis, though admittedly provisional in certain areas,⁵⁶ is overall a valid hypothesis.

⁵⁵ Kripal believes that "what we are seeing in the controversy surrounding the book is not a balanced scholarly debate about an open historical question but a turbulent wake produced by the book's passage through the troubled waters of a deep cultural rejection of homosexuality. In Indian and devotional contexts, at least, the book often lacks what sociologists call 'plausibility,' that is, a sociological context in which its ideas can be freely and safely entertained. Its truths are quite literally un-believable... *Kali's Child* is a case in point. It has been lauded by scholars in numerous contexts for 'being right,' but it nevertheless remains completely unbelievable in other, primarily devotional and Indian, contexts, not because of any inherent fault in the book's arguments or evidence, but because there are at present simply too few social, cultural, psychological and religious support structures available in such contexts to render its ideas widely thinkable. For such reasons, any open, public discussion of such matters becomes emotionally, epistemologically and morally impossible, and anyone who dares engage in such a discussion is labeled 'deviant' or 'sinister.' It is always easier to silence an 'impossible,' implausible thought (and him who thinks it) than to change one's world to accommodate this new possibility" (Kripal 1998: xxii).

⁵⁶ In particular, following Balagandhara, I argue that perhaps one of the most problematic issue confronting Kripal's analysis is the question of how to explain the exact mechanisms by which Ramakrishna was able to transform his unconscious sexual conflict into an empowered mysticism? Balagandhara frames the

Accordingly, Kripal writes, “at some point, my critics will have to explain why, if I am wrong, other scholars, both Western and Bengali, have come to virtually identical conclusions or to analogous, powerfully sexualized readings” (Kripal 2003d).⁵⁷

Essentially, Kripal believes that the controversy surrounding *Kali's Child* is not a result

problem as follows: “Ramakrishna’s homoerotic unconscious ‘sublimated’ itself into his religious life. Very well. One can accept this ‘explanation’ if you explain *the how: how did such a transformation occur?* How did the unconscious resolve the conflicts and ‘sublimate’ them? What were the mechanisms? Here is how you answer these questions: ‘(F)or the homoerotic energies themselves, freed from the usual socialized routes by the ‘shameful’ nature of their unacceptable objects, *were able to transform themselves, almost alchemically*, until their dark natures began to glitter with the gold of the mystical’ (p.322; my italics)... You might want to say that we are not clear about the mechanisms. And that the ‘somehow’ and ‘almost alchemically’ merely function as place holders for a currently non-existent but a possible future explanation. And that this is merely a hypothesis you are putting forward. However, do you realise the price you pay for giving these possible answers? You render your explanation both trivial and *ad hoc*. To appreciate the charge of triviality, consider the following: Ramakrishna’s neural structure ‘somehow’ generated his religious life; Ramakrishna’s genes ‘somehow’ interacted with his environment to enable his religious life... and so on. Do such claims advance our knowledge of anything? They do not. *They are trivially true: all things happen ‘somehow’*” (Balaghandra 2002b). As much as I sympathize with Balaghandra’s frustration, I believe that his characterization of Kripal’s thesis as “trivial” is mistaken. Indeed, Ramakrishna’s “neural structure,” his “genes” and his “environment” likely did play an important part in the production of his mysticism. However, for whatever reasons, Balaghandra fails to consider the preponderance of evidence that Kripal amasses that, although it does not incontrovertibly confirm a causal connection between Ramakrishna’s sexual desires and his mysticism, it does nevertheless indicate a strong correlation between the two that verges on identity. Just because Kripal cannot specifically locate the exact point upon which the sexual and the mystical meet in Ramakrishna’s unconscious phantasies (who could, for that matter?), does not necessarily mean that a dialectical encounter between the sexual to the mystical, and vice versa, does not occur. I believe that it speaks to Kripal’s scholarly merit that he is able to articulate such a substantial argument given the difficulty of trying to interrogate the psychological significance of subject matter that is ostensibly ineffable.

⁵⁷ For example, Malcolm Mclean “translated the entire *Kathamrita* and concluded, among many other things, that Ramakrishna’s homosexuality was central to understanding his relationships with his male disciples (1983). Sumit Sarkar, the great Bengali social historian, has suggested similar homosexual patterns in his “The Kathamrita as a Text” (1985). More recently, Parama Roy has used postcolonial and queer theory to write about Ramakrishna’s erotic feminine identification, his simultaneous worship of women and gynophobia, his rejection of sexuality as a rejection of (hetero)sexuality, his erotically charged relationship to the young Narendra (Swami Vivekananda), and Vivekananda’s subsequent transformation of Ramakrishna’s mysticism into a hyper-masculine heterosexual nationalism (1998). All of these patterns fit *seamlessly* into the homoerotic hermeneutic of *Kali's Child*. And then there is the important work of Narasingha Sil, who has published three volumes so far on Ramakrishna and Vivekananda (1991, 1997, 1998), all of which profoundly sexualize (if in quite different directions) both the guru and the disciple. Even more recently, Brian Hatcher, a historian of religion specializing in Bengali religious history, traveled to Calcutta to do fieldwork on the reception of my work there, found support for it among Bengalis, and returned to some of the more controversial passages in the Bengali text only to come up with virtually identical readings (2001). Indeed, now reversing our temporal focus, if we count the unexplained ‘scandalous interpretations’ that one Bengali text records Ramakrishna’s own contemporaries advancing when his temple manager gave him women’s clothes to wear in the manager’s presence, we could easily argue that the homoerotic thesis is both indigenous to Bengal and about 150 years old now” (Kripal 2003d).

of his sloppy scholarship or of his moral failings, but stems primarily from “our contemporary debates about gender, homosexuality and religion” (Kripal 2003d).

It is difficult to deny the fact that *Kali's Child* has contributed much to expanding our contemporary understanding of how “gender, homosexuality, and religion” impacted Ramakrishna’s ecstatic vision of the mystical. Most significantly, by exposing the secret erotic roots of Ramakrishna’s mysticism, Kripal challenges his readers to critically reflect on how we traditionally view the relationship between the sexual and the mystical. From Kripal’s erotic perspective, the life and teachings of Ramakrishna demonstrate that the traditional understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the mystical as mutually exclusive categories must be reconsidered for a more nondualistic viewpoint. Rather than framing the relationship between sexual and the mystical in terms of some kind of antagonistic dualism, Kripal believes that a more fruitful avenue of approach is to think of the sexual and the mystical as complementary categories that mutually imbricate each other in various meaningful ways throughout the historical, cultural, social, and political construction of human discourse.

Perhaps John Stratton Hawley best captures the significance of Kripal’s contribution to our contemporary understanding of the relationship between sexuality and mysticism when he wrote the following in his review of *Kali's Child*: “Kripal not only reveals Ramakrishna’s homoerotic secret, but turns that secret into a searching beacon. Instead of accepting that childhood dramas of sexuality determine religious behavior, he bathes psychoanalysis in the light of Tantra and asks, in effect, ‘What *is* homoeroticism?’ ‘What is the deep meaning of sexual conflict?’ In doing so, he spreads open the gates of

that sometimes terrifying mansion of fun in which Ramakrishna lived, and suggests that in some dimension each of the rest of us lives there, too” (Hawley 1998: 404). I think Hawley’s assessment of Kripal’s achievements is exactly right.⁵⁸ Most importantly for my own thesis, I believe that in conjunction with providing an illuminating portrait of Ramakrishna’s erotic mysticism, *Kali’s Child* also offers a new direction for the contemporary psychoanalytic study of mysticism.

I argue that Kripal’s conception and utilization of the erotic is key to defining his innovative approach to the psychoanalytic study of Ramakrishna’s mysticism. According to Kripal, the erotic is “specifically a methodological category, where the horizons of religious experience and psychoanalysis can meet in the act of interpretation” (Kripal 1998: 23). By seeking to accommodate “religious experience” and “psychoanalysis” through his concept of the erotic, Kripal’s study of Ramakrishna can be ultimately read as championing a “transformational” psychoanalytic approach to the study of mysticism (Parsons 1999: 135). Recall that according to Parsons a “transformational” approach seeks to overcome the rigid dogmatism of the “classical” perspective by utilizing an interdisciplinary method that can “display cross-cultural sensitivity” and a “marked sympathy with the transcendent, religious claims of mystics” (Parsons 1999: 11). And this is exactly how Kripal utilizes the erotic; namely, it acts as a dialogical bridge between (Western) psychoanalytic theory and (Eastern) Tantric ontology.

A clear example of Kripal’s adherence to the “transformational” approach, which, I argue, is typical of his overall treatment of Ramakrishna, is evident in the sophisticated

⁵⁸ Commenting on Hawley’s remarks, Kripal admits that, “no one has captured the intended spirit of the work more accurately” (Kripal 1998: xix).

manner in which he interprets Ramakrishna's attempted suicide. Kripal suggests that Ramakrishna's attempted suicide "can be understood *both* as a genuinely religious experience driven by mystical longing (the culturally accepted interpretation advanced by Saradananda in his *Lilaprasanga*) *and* as a desperate attempt to put an end to his tormenting shame fueled by homosexual longing (as hinted at in psychologically analogous passage recorded in the *Kathamrta*). The latter, it seems, somehow triggered the former – *an erotic crisis led to a mystical experience*" (Kripal 1998: 77). Here, we see how Kripal's *transformational* approach permits him to interpret Ramakrishna's suicide attempt as a psycho-erotic crisis that is *religiously meaningful*.

I argue that it is precisely Kripal's nondualistic methodology, as embodied by his concept of the erotic (the *coincidentia* of the sexual and the mystical), that enables him to posit an explanation of Ramakrishna's attempted suicide that can simultaneously accommodate *both* the critical insights of psychoanalytic theory *and* the ontological specificity accorded to Tantric mysticism. A purely psychoanalytic reading of Ramakrishna would paint an entirely different portrait of his mysticism than one that relies solely on Tantric categories, and vice versa. The advantage of Kripal's concept of the erotic is that it brings both perspectives to the table – the psychoanalytic and the Tantric – which when working in conjunction, displays a well-rounded view of Ramakrishna as an entirely human "saint," who, despite his unconscious conflict, is capable of transforming his "madness" into what can perhaps be best described as mystical artistry.

Most significantly, I argue that Kripal's "transformational" approach reflects his personal commitment to the establishment of a mutually beneficial cross-cultural dialogue for advancing the comparative study of mysticism. This is evident in how he utilizes the erotic in order to call attention to the parallels that can be drawn between Western psychoanalytic theory and East Asian Tantra. Kripal states:

Without denying the very real and important differences between the two systems, I would like to suggest that psychoanalysis can poetically be described as a kind of Western Tantra, as a century-long meditation on the powers of sexuality, the body, life, death, and religion. Psychoanalysis, after all, gazes into zones of human experience that were previously off-limits, obscene, unthinkable. And it accesses altered states of consciousness – dreams, hypnosis, hysteria, trance states, fantasy, free association, and so on – to advance its claims about the nature of human being. Moreover, again not unlike Tantra, psychoanalysis is something of a scandal to the larger culture, and embarrassment to many, a horror to more than a few (Kripal 2003: 197).⁵⁹

At the same time, however, Kripal is hesitant to belabor the similarities between the two systems, pointing out that "Tantra and psychoanalysis, then, might share common characteristics, but they nevertheless remain distinct in the levels and nature of their understandings" (Kripal 1998: 327). In other words, although they share some common methodological and theoretical viewpoints, in the final analysis, both psychoanalysis and Tantra participate in two very different ontological frameworks.

For instance, Kripal's study of Ramakrishna shows that psychoanalytic theory can be useful in exposing and interpreting certain psychosexual determinants central to the production of Ramakrishna's mysticism. However, Kripal is clear that psychoanalytic theory is often times limited by its materialist leanings (Kripal 1998: 39). In other words,

⁵⁹ Furthermore, Kripal claims that, "psychoanalysis even possesses a similar esoteric ritual structure, with analysis' and anlaysands trained in closed private sessions, accessing a kind of personal gnosis or jnana reserved for the few who can understand" (Kripal 2003: 197).

a psychoanalytic explanation of the mystical can only reach so far. It may help to elucidate the meaning of certain psychosexual elements, but fails to account for the full ontological significance of Ramakrishna's encounter with the mystical. The ontological limitations of psychoanalytic theory were aptly captured by the Tantric guru Bhagwan Rajneesh, who famously quipped that, "Freud only got to the third *chakra*" (Kripal 1998: 45).⁶⁰ Kripal recognizes these ontological limitations of psychoanalytic theory, and thus, in what can be described as a clearly "transformational" move, we see how in *Kali's Child* Kripal attempts "to use psychoanalytic categories, but only *within* Ramakrishna's Tantric world" (Kripal 1998: 38). In accordance with the views of the "transformational" tradition, Kripal believes that psychoanalysis "*can* be used to interpret non-Western cultures," but it "first must be 'reshaped' to fit each and every cultural context in which it is applied" (Kripal 1998: 38).⁶¹

It is Kripal's employment of the erotic that permits him to reshape certain psychoanalytic assumptions about the nature of mystical desire in such a fashion that they can "fit" the cultural demands that define East Asian Tantra. In more specific terms, Kripal's application of the erotic moves his study of Ramakrishna from what could be

⁶⁰ According to Kripal, Rajneesh "was saying at least two things, namely, that Freud's drive theory and Tantra's *kundalini* yoga are comparable models of occult energy and sublimation, and that Freud missed the 'deeper' or 'higher' bliss of the id beyond the first three centers of the anal, genital, and digestive systems (that is, the first three *chakras*). Freud, in other words, was not wrong; he simply did not go far enough (Kripal 2007: 144).

⁶¹ Kripal assumes that psychoanalytic theory is applicable cross-culturally because "the human mind possesses certain characteristics – a common biological base, a symbolizing function, defensive censoring strategies such as repression, displacement, and projection, a tendency to imagine in the language of the body and its shapes, and so forth – that gives its functioning a certain universal character. The basic psyche or biological unity, however, is profoundly differentiated by such cultural forms as child-rearing practices, social organization, and religious doctrine, all of which differ radically from culture to culture" (Kripal 1998: 37).

easily considered a “classical” analysis to that of a more “transformational” one. In contrast to previous “classical” psychoanalytic studies of Ramakrishna, the advantage of Kripal’s concept of the erotic is that it can accommodate critical psychoanalytic theorizing about the mystical without excluding certain ontological variables that might lie outside the domain of both mind and culture.

Finally, I suggest that by reshaping psychoanalytic theory to be more sympathetic to the transcendent claims of mystics, and in conjunction with his own “ontological critique” of “classical” psychoanalysis, Kripal’s erotic interpretation of Ramakrishna’s mysticism rests squarely within the “transformational” lineage of Romain Rolland and Jacques Lacan. Most significantly, by emphasizing the emancipatory potential of certain mystical states of consciousness, as represented by the ecstatic visions and teachings of Ramakrishna, *Kali’s Child* demonstrates that Kripal is a vocal advocate for the creation of a “mystical psychoanalysis” (Parsons 1999: 38). What can this “mystical psychoanalysis” tell us about the embodied nature of the mystical? For Kripal the answer is unabashedly Tantric: “the secret of the mystical is the erotic” (Kripal 1998: xviii).⁶² We will see in the coming chapters what this truly means for Kripal, namely, that mystical enlightenment is a reflection of the erotic potency of the human body. Or, in more simple terms, matter *is* mystical.

⁶² Kripal states: “When I assert something like ‘the mystical is the erotic,’ I do not mean all religious experiences can be fully explained by hormones and sex organs. Rather I mean some types of religious experience (of which there are many historical forms) draw on the energies of human sexuality (of which there are many historical forms) to express and reveal an astonishing range of human being that can well be poetically described as ‘divine’ or of ‘mythological proportion’.” (Kripal 2006: 123).

READING THE EROTIC

Jeffrey J. Kripal's second book, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom: Eroticism and Reflexivity in the Study of Mysticism* (2001) expands on the erotic thesis that informed his first work, *Kali's Child*. In *Kali's Child*, Kripal illustrates how the erotic manifests in the life and teachings of a specific mystic, Ramakrishna. In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal extends the scope of his erotic thesis by moving his object of focus from the study of a particular mystic to a more broad interrogation of the various erotic issues underlining the study of mysticism in general. This move from a localized reading of Ramakrishna's erotic mysticism to a more generalized reading of how the erotic operates within the study of mysticism is precipitated by Kripal's desire to demonstrate the relevance of his erotic thesis from a comparative perspective.

I argue that *Roads of Excess* serves two mutually inclusive purposes. First, it signifies a response to those critics of *Kali's Child* who deny a link between the sexual and the mystical by showing that erotic issues are central to the comparative study of mysticism; and second, it shows that both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism have been in large part shaped and directed by certain scholars who are themselves trying secretly to realize their own personal mysticism *through* their public study of the mystical. In effect, Kripal wants "to address twentieth-century study of mysticism as itself a kind of mystical tradition, with its own unique history, discourses, sociological dynamic, and the rhetorical strategies of secrecy" (Kripal 2001: 3).

Keeping these two purposes in mind, I argue that *Roads of Excess* essentially signals Kripal's attempt to establish a "comparative erotics," which he refers to as "the study of

the different ways that mystical traditions employ, deny, construct, deconstruct, realize, and transform human sexualities” (Kripal 2001: 36).

Both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* share a similar theoretical framework. As in *Kali's Child*, Kripal in *Roads of Excess* draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory, particularly, the views associated with the “transformational” tradition.⁶³ The central theoretical assumption guiding Kripal’s “transformational” approach in *Roads of Excess* is the same as in *Kali's Child*, namely, that there is a profound link between human sexuality and the mystical. Kripal refers to this link between the sexual and the mystical as the erotic. In *Road's of Excess*, Kripal defines the erotic as “that specifically dialectical manifestation of the mystical and the sexual that appears in any number of traditions through a range of textual and metaphorical strategies which collapse, often together, the supposed separation of the spiritual and the sexual. In other words, I intend by ‘the erotic’ a radical dialecticism between human sexuality and the possible ontological ground(s) of mystical experience” (Kripal 2001: 22).

The methodological approach that Kripal employs in *Roads of Excess* is also similar to *Kali's Child*. Both approaches draw heavily on phenomenology and hermeneutics. However, unlike *Kali's Child*, Kripal’s hermeneutical approach in *Roads of Excess* is marked by an explicit self-reflexivity that performatively mirrors his central thesis that “academic writing can also be a form of mystical writing” (Kripal 2001: 28).

⁶³ Kripal states: “Here my approach can be described as ‘transformational’ in Parson’s sense, that is, as a method that engages the critical powers of psychoanalysis but is ‘open to the possibility that the mystical element in religious traditions transcends the purely developmental and maps levels of consciousness which can in a general sense, be designed by the label primordial. The latter term is used to point to the existence of deep, archaic, and mystical levels of being without implying that those levels are necessarily primitive, regressive, childish, or defensive” (Kripal 2001: 334).

Kripal urges his readers to read certain sections of *Roads of Excess* as a confession or, more pointedly, as a “secret talk” about how his own personal mystico-erotic experiences shaped his hermeneutical approach to studying mysticism. Kripal thus describes his own method in *Roads of Excess* “as mimetic, reflexive, and literary” (Kripal 2001: 28).

In what Peter Homans describes as a “radical” move, Kripal’s reflexive method essentially situates himself inside his object of study (Homans 2001: 176). This is radical because such an approach effectively blurs the boundary between subjective and objective theorizing. From this perspective, Kripal’s approach is clearly “postmodern.”⁶⁴ Kripal’s reflexive method can also be read as an implicit call to action for scholars of mysticism to “come out of the closet,” as it were, and publicly embrace the epistemological potential of their own “secret” experiences. In other words, Kripal believes that to truly gain a transparent understanding of how scholars of mysticism produce knowledge about the mystical requires the creation of a more reflexive epistemological framework. This is a radical suggestion because it runs counter to the positivistic epistemologies currently employed by the academy, which tend to favor a strict separation between subject and object. Essentially, I argue that the underlining assumption guiding Kripal’s thesis in *Roads of Excess* is that the epistemological

⁶⁴ Perhaps “post-structuralism” is a more accurate designation. According to Jeremy R. Carrette, “Postmodernism” traditionally refers “to the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, who can be seen to comment on the social conditions of ‘postmodernity,’ or the social conditions of late capitalism” (Carrette 2001: 111). In contrast, “post-structuralist thinking questioned the idea of a given structure and critically explored the sense in which something is either continually ‘deferred’ in a chain of arbitrary linguistic signs or ‘constructed’ through social and historical processes. These post-structuralist ideas were most classically represented in the work of Jacques Derrida (Deconstruction) and Michel Foucault (History of Ideas), although it is also related to the work of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and Louis Althusser” (Carrette 2001: 111). There is often an overlap between postmodernism and post-structuralism, due to the fact that the contestation of a given structure can often call into question the stability of meta-narratives and vice versa. I choose to keep the term “postmodern” because that is how Kripal describes his own approach.

strategies we currently employ to study mysticism can be greatly enhanced by a more thorough investigation of the many hidden ways our subjectivity conditions our “objective” study of the mystical.

In *Roads of Excess* Kripal claims that certain influential scholars of mysticism have secretly encoded their personal (subjective) experiences of the mystical within the body of their texts (Kripal 2001: 14). Why would scholars feel the need to keep their personal experiences secret? Historically, there are good reasons why certain scholars of mysticism might choose to conceal their personal experiences of the mystical. For example, they might fear that a frank discussion about their personal experiences of the mystical might make them more vulnerable to intellectual persecution by both their peers and the public at large, who may or may not be capable of appreciating the subjective profundity of their confessions (Kripal 2001: 25). This is an especially valid concern for scholars because, as mentioned above, academia is traditionally inclined to privilege the political and financial advancement of theories that endorse a positivistic epistemology, which ideally can demonstrate both the objectivity and repeatability of its findings.⁶⁵ This of course is problematic for scholars of mysticism because historically, the traditional object of their study, i.e. mystical experience/consciousness, is notoriously immune to clinical analysis.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Kripal states: “Religiosity, for various historical and social reasons, is too easily equated with fuzzy thinking, rampant subjectivity, and theological dogmatism. So recent was its birth from confessional theology and so omnipresent are the bestsellers of quacks and dilettantes that many scholars in religious studies still cling desperately to the scientific ideal of complete objectivity, as if it could somehow remove our troublesome humanity and allow us to study human beings as classifiable plants and minerals (Kripal 2001: 26).

⁶⁶ Hence the reason why Freud writes the following about the “oceanic feeling” in *Civilization and its Discontents*: “The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back to clear outlines as far as the feeling of

In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal attempts to negotiate this difficulty, first, by employing a nondualistic model of understanding the mystical that directly challenges the traditional binary distinctions between subject and object, inside and outside, private and public, body and soul etc., which typically characterize the contemporary study of mysticism in Western religious discourse; and second, by addressing the phenomenological import of certain mystical states of consciousness as a hermeneutical reality. That is, “as a subversive and transgressive kind of writing” Kripal’s analysis moves the traditional object of focus from mystical experience/consciousness to a more accessible location, namely, human language (Cupitt as quoted by Kripal 2001: xiii). Rather than extracting the study of the mystical from its textual moorings in history, culture, and language, Kripal’s “comparative erotics” shows how certain mystical states of consciousness are in fact conditioned by “a triadic process of self, divine other, and text, none of which appear to exist in any independent objective fashion” (Kripal 2001: 7). Although the concepts of “self” and “divine other” are opaque categories that remain problematic to define from a comparative point of view, “text,” on the other hand, is a category that is tangible, translatable, and historically traceable. Hence, in *Roads of Excess*, Kripal’s primary source of data is textual, in particular, the textual representations of certain mystical states of consciousness as presented by various religious traditions.

There are two main assumptions informing Kripal’s understanding of how mystical states of consciousness are represented in texts: “1. these textual representations are overdetermined aggregates of both the traditions themselves and the psyches and

infantile helplessness. There may be something further behind that, but for the present it is wrapped in obscurity” (Freud 1986: 260).

bodies of the hermeneuts who write about them, and 2. similar hermeneutical process of mirroring and reflection have always been at work in the writing practices of the traditions themselves” (Kripal 2001: 6). Kripal suggests that when the phenomenological import of certain mystical states of consciousness are transferred to a textual format, that is, when a mystical experience or mystical state of consciousness is recorded in words, these textual representations semantically reflect “the meaning events which they encode”⁶⁷ (Kripal 2001: 7). In other words, many mystical texts tend to secretly encode the “meaning events” of their author’s personal experience of the mystical. Even more intriguingly, Kripal believes that alongside this representational function, the “meaning events” of certain mystical texts also serve a performative function, which means that they can potentially evoke an experience of the mystical *through* language. Kripal refers to this process as “*mystical hermeneutics*,” which frames the act of writing and reading about the mystical as a participatory event that can potentially activate a reader’s experiential encounter with the mystical (Kripal 2001: 8).

By calling attention to the various ways in which the mystical experiences of certain scholars of mysticism shape his or her “objective” study of the mystical, Kripal’s analysis aims to expose the often-unacknowledged overlap existing between the private and public construction of the study of mysticism. Kripal suggests that the hermeneutical tension that frequently arises between the private and public construction of the study of

⁶⁷ Michael Sells describes a “meaning event” as follows: “The meaning event is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union. It does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union.” (Sells as quoted by Kripal 2001: 7). According to Kripal, “such a notion allows Sells to move away from the modern concept of ‘experience’ (with all its unapophatic, dualistic-object structure) and to approach the mystical texts as literary devices designed to evoke semantically the meaning events which they encode” (Kripal 2001: 7).

mysticism tends to revolve around issues relating directly to the erotic. In other words, much of what the scholars of mysticism choose to conceal or disclose about their personal mystico-erotic experiences and their relationship to how one publicly studies mysticism is largely contingent on: a) how they personally understand and value the erotic; and b) how the public domain understands and values the erotic. Hence, Kripal believes that the erotic is key to bridging the gap in how we understand the relationship between the subjective (private) and the objective (public) construction, interpretation, and representation of mystical discourse.

What will the future study of mysticism look like when scholars of mysticism can openly and critically discuss the various ways in which his or her private mystico-erotic experiences informed their public views about the mystical? How will such a reflexive position impact the way the relationship between the sexual and the mystical is comparatively studied and understood? What can a “comparative erotics” tell us about the embodied meaning of the mystical? Most significantly, how does an embodied understanding of the mystical affect our contemporary conceptualization of human sexuality and gender? These are the types of difficult questions that Kripal seeks to address in *Roads of Excess*.

Roads of Excess focuses primarily on the writing of five influential scholars in the study of mysticism: Evelyn Underhill, Louis Massignon, Agahenanda Bharati, R.C. Zaehner, and Elliot Wolfson. Kripal believes that the work of these scholars has contributed a great deal to how the study of mysticism operates both historically and presently in academia. Kripal attempts to reread their various assumptions about the

mystical and their contributions to the study of mysticism through the hermeneutical lens of the erotic. What Kripal discovers is that the various ways in which these scholars frame both the mystical and the study of mysticism is as much a reflection of their own personal mystico-erotic experiences as it is an objective statement about the “truth” of mysticism. In the following discussion I examine the evolution of Kripal’s “comparative erotics” as it manifests the work of the aforementioned scholars. First, I provide a brief outline of Kripal’s interpretation of these scholars’ general contributions to the study of mysticism, focusing primarily on how these scholars address the erotic significance of the mystical; and second, I examine the central content of Kripal’s “secret talk,” which I argue will help to elucidate the biographical origins of Kripal’s innovative approach to studying the mystical.

Kripal reads Evelyn Underhill’s (1875-1941) classic work *Mysticism* (1911) in two parts: First, as a “transitional” text that struggles to bridge the gap between the “premodern” understanding of mysticism, which draws heavily on traditional religious sources, and the “modern” understanding of mysticism that emerged at the turn of the century in the psychological writings of such influential scholars as William James, James Leuba, and R. M. Bucke (Kripal 2001: 34). Kripal thus suggests that Underhill’s text is fueled by an underlining hermeneutical tension existing between her religious (premodern) understanding of mysticism on the one hand, and her psychological (modern) understanding of mysticism, on the other. Second, Kripal reads *Mysticism*, as “a literary expression of her private religious life,” that is, as a secret statement of Underhill’s own personal mysticism (Kripal 2001: 36). In other words, Kripal claims that

Underhill's public and supposedly objective view of the mystical as represented by her text *Mysticism*, and the underlining tension within its pages between the religious/premodern and the psychological/modern, is a reflection of her own personal understanding of the mystical. Or, as Kripal puts it: "Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*, then, was, quite literally, her mysticism – a discursive art or textual practice where her own religious experiences and deepest existential concerns could come to know and express themselves, if always implicitly, always 'in secret,' through the selection, ordering, and interpretation what she often called simply 'the mystics'" (Kripal 2001: 36).

Although Underhill never openly addresses her own personal experiences of the mystical in her text, there are certain biographical events in Underhill's life, which Kripal suggests, may have helped shape her views in *Mysticism*. One of the most significant events occurred around 1907, when Underhill, an Anglican by birth, experienced a profound mystical vision after visiting a French Franciscan Convent. This visionary experience convinced her to convert to Catholicism and devote her life to God (Kripal 2001: 40).⁶⁸ However, as the prospect of marriage loomed ever larger in her life, she opted to deny her conversion experience and eventually married. Thus, in effect, "she chose a human love over a divine claim" (Kripal 2001: 41). Kripal posits that, "*Mysticism*, which appeared a few years after this failed conversion and this decision to renounce a mystical marriage for a human one, was in great part a dramatic response to a series of events in Underhill's life that placed her squarely and painfully in a kind of

⁶⁸ Underhill states: "I was 'converted' quite suddenly once and for all by an overpowering vision which had no specific Christian elements, but yet convinced me that the Catholic Religion was true" (Underhill as quoted by Kripal 2001: 40).

religious marginality or homelessness. In Peter Homans's apt terms, its writings issued from a kind of mourning, a mourning of lost cultural and religious objects that deprived her of culturally shared sources of meaning and drove her back into the unconscious margins of both her psyche and her Christian culture" (Kripal 2001: 42).

In conjunction with her failed conversion experience and subsequent spiritual "homelessness," Kripal suggests that the way Underhill structures her argument in *Mysticism* is indicative of how she personally viewed and valued the mystical.⁶⁹ For example, the style and rhetoric she uses in her text, and the particular mystics and mystical teachings that she privileges, is evidence of her personal bias, which, according to Kripal, is clearly Christian-centric (Kripal 2001: 47). Underhill's Christian bias is especially obvious in how her text privileges the traditional Christian conception of a "Mystic Way," which she presents as a developmental process consisting of five mystical stages: "1) the awakening of the self to the spiritual life, 2) purgation, 3) illumination, 4) the dark night of the soul, and 5) union" (Kripal 2001: 48). Kripal believes that "what is important to recognize about this stage model is that it assumes a definitive end in union with a personal God, that is to say, the map is a Christian map" (Kripal 2001: 48).

Underhill's "stage model" is central to her understanding of the mystical. Most significantly, it calls attention to the way she utilizes her Christian bias as a means of both

⁶⁹ Kripal believes that "there are numerous places in her writing – in terms of both rhetorical form and actual content – where the states of the writer and the mystic overlap and seem to implode into one another. The most obvious and least dramatic example of this is the manner in which Underhill's quoting style results in a rhetorical situation where her own text quite literally *is* a mystical text, or better, a series of classical mystical quotations strung together, often rather loosely, with Underhill's brief glosses and transitional comments connecting them. This may seem like a rather superficial observation, but its end result is nonetheless quite significant, for what the reader often ends up reading is not Underhill at all, but Ruysbroek, Eckhart, and Teresa of Avila selected and arranged by Underhill" (Kripal 2001: 60).

structuring her text and substantiating her arguments. But perhaps what is most revealing is what is missing from her “stage model.” For example, Underhill openly struggles to accommodate the possibility of a “sixth stage” to the “Mystic Way,” which she identifies as “the mystic’s total absorption into and identification with the divine Presence” (Kripal 2001: 50). Commonly associated with “oriental mystics,” the “sixth way” of total absorption is a prospect that Underhill found troubling precisely because it could potentially undermine the theistic roots of her Christian worldview (Kripal 2001: 50). In other words, the possibility of mystical monism, that is, of a mystic merging or fully identifying with God, is a belief that runs counter to the theistic dualism that traditionally characterizes the Christian worldview that Underhill personally identifies with and, moreover, a position that she is seeking to uphold in her text. Kripal argues that, “to further guard against the challenge of a ‘sixth stage’ and the ontological claims of the ‘eastern contemplative,’ Underhill adopts a clear and distinct perennialism, that is, the claim that all mystical traditions share a ‘common core’ or central message, which of course, in her case, ends up sounding very Christian” (Kripal 2001: 51).

Another revealing aspect of Underhill’s personal mysticism is the ambivalent way in which her text tries to manage the contributions of the modern psychology of religion. Kripal believes that “Underhill herself was deeply influenced and quite convinced by many of the claims of the early psychology of religion, particularly in its American and French forms” (Kripal 2001: 53). This becomes most apparent in the parallel Underhill draws between “traditional mysticism and modern psychology” as “analogous human enterprises,” that is, “they were two approaches to the same subject, one ‘from the

inside,' the other 'on another plane,' 'on the outside,' we might say" (Kripal 2001: 53). From "the outside," Underhill believed that modern psychology is very useful in helping to elucidate the aesthetic potency of the mystical. Hence, she states: "Mysticism, the most romantic of adventures, from one point of view the art of arts, their source and also their ends, finds naturally enough its closest correspondences in the most purely artistic and most deeply significant of all forms of expression" (Underhill 1957:76). Moreover, Underhill draws on certain psychological principles as a means to help her assess the authenticity or "Mystical Fact" of a particular mystic's experience of the mystical (Kripal 2001: 44). Kripal states: "Underhill believed that the existence of an experiential core could be affirmed or denied by looking for the psychological detail, the personal touch, the rhetorical clue that identified a particular passage or text as 'genuinely' mystical, that is, as pointing beyond mere poetic flair or amateurish suggestion to an actual psychological experience" (Kripal 2001: 59).

However, Underhill will only accept psychological theorizing up to a certain point. In particular, Underhill refuses to reduce the "real transcendent spark" that defines her understanding of the mystical to "the libido" of the psychologist (Kripal 2001: 55). And it is here, with the emergence of the sexual as a threat to the mystical, where we see how Underhill's text is quick to exile psychology to the realm of the "outsider." From an "insider" perspective, that is, from the perspective of "the mystic," psychological terms like "the libido" and "the unconscious" are no longer relevant to Underhill's (premodern/religious) understanding of the mystical because she believes that the mystical ultimately transcends all human conception, that is, its meaning is ultimately

ineffable (Kripal 2001: 66).⁷⁰ It appears as though Underhill will only accept the contributions of modern psychology up to that point at which it threatens to reduce the meaning of mysticism, in the words of Lacan, “to questions of fucking” (Lacan 1982: 147).

It is at this point in Underhill’s text, when “questions of fucking” arise in direct relation to the mystical, where Kripal begins to utilize Underhill’s text as a rhetorical foil for his own polemic about the erotic significance of the mystical. Kripal is particularly interested in highlighting how Underhill’s text addresses the various ways in which the erotic manifests in the writings of certain influential Christian mystics. According to Kripal, for Underhill, “the sexuality of the mystics in particular was something well outside the boundaries for her, a borderland she would not enter, a form of mystical excess she could not accept” (Kripal 2001: 68). Underhill is quite comfortable with such notions as *agape* or divine love, but she refuses to accept *eros*, base sexuality: “any discussion of sexuality – and I mean real physical sexuality – had to be banished to vague footnotes at the bottom of the page, where such unspoken secrets could be revealed only in the contorted forms of euphemism, suggestion, simile, denial, or perhaps more commonly, bibliographical reference” (Kripal 2001: 68). Why does Underhill abhor the association of mysticism with physical sexuality? Kripal answers, “because Underhill does not like, at all, the conclusions that had already been reached about the sexual nature of mystical eroticism” (Kripal 2001: 69).

⁷⁰ Underhill states: “Nor must we allow ourselves to use the ‘unconscious’ as the equivalent of man’s transcendental sense” (Underhill as quoted by Kripal 2001: 55).

According to Denys Turner, “the language of the love of God in the Western Christian tradition is notably erotic” (Kripal 2001: 70). In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal moves one step further to claim that the language of the love of God in all monotheistic religious traditions is generally rooted in an erotic discourse that implicitly privileges a symbolic, textual, and rhetorical framework that is secretly homoerotic.⁷¹ In terms of Christianity, Kripal suggests that Christianity’s tendency to characterize the god-image as male has a severe impact on the way male Christian mystics construct, interpret, and represent their relationship to the divine. For instance, in the case of Christian bridal mysticism, when a male mystic speaks and writes about a personal encounter or union with the presence of a male God, he is both symbolically and rhetorically participating in a male-to-male structuring of mystical experience (Kripal 2001: 70).⁷²

Kripal suggests that this homoerotic structuring of male bridal mysticism “is a function of Christian theology, which posits a male divinity (usually in the form of Father or Christ) with whom the male mystic ‘unites.’ That a man’s soul is imagined to be female in relationship to the divine does little to hide the fact that what we finally have, after all the usual adjectives are hurled at the psychologist and the reductionist, is a male

⁷¹ According to Kripal, “by ‘homoerotic,’ then, I mean to imply the textual existence of a male-to-male symbolic structure in which mystical encounters are framed along same-sex lines, often with the human male coded as female in a hetererotically structured encounter” (Kripal 2001: 18). In *God’s Phallus* (1994), Howard Eilberg-Schwartz presents a similar examination of the relationship between monotheism and homoeroticism, particularly, as it manifest in Judaism. Eilberg-Schwartz claims that, “the various myths and rituals of ancient Judaism attempted to suppress the homoerotic impulse implicit in the male relationship with God” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994: 3).

⁷² Kripal states: “I am not suggesting that every male bridal mystic was homosexually inclined. What I am suggesting is that Christian male erotic mysticism is inevitably homoerotic in doctrinal structure, and that this doctrinal structure privileges a homosexual orientation, certainly in mystical textual expression and most likely in actual physiological response as well” (Kripal 2001: 72).

mystic using sexual language to describe his uniting with a male divinity, that is to say, a homoerotic symbolism” (Kripal 2001: 70). By privileging a homoerotic symbolism, male bridal mysticism, and subsequently, male Christian mysticism in general, effectively marginalizes the experiences of mystics that fail to conform to this male-to-male dynamic. Hence, Kripal argues, “there is simply no place for a heterosexuality within this male mystical universe” (Kripal 2001: 79).⁷³

Taking the various psychological, sociological and political ramifications of this homoerotic Christian mysticism into careful consideration,⁷⁴ Kripal goes on to examine the various ways Underhill’s text addresses the erotic symbolism of Christian mysticism in general. First, Kripal claims that female heterosexual symbolism is “everywhere, a textual feature that is no doubt a function of both the traditional nature of such symbolism and Underhill’s own comfort level with her own gender and this type of female sexuality” (Kripal 2001: 75).⁷⁵ Second, Kripal claims that male homoerotic symbolism is also “everywhere in *Mysticism*, although never of course acknowledged as such” (Kripal

⁷³ Kripal believes that, “it is not, then, that mystical heterosexuality is actually denied to canonical males; it is that homosexually oriented or simply homoerotic males become canonical by virtue of their sublimated homosexualities, which happen to ‘fit’ the textual, doctrinal, and symbolic structures of the Catholic tradition” (Kripal 2001: 73).

⁷⁴ Kripal states: Psychologically speaking homosexuality, condemned as a horrible offence against God eventually associated with the “sin of Sodom,” was probably always more likely to be repressed and driven under, where it could sublimate itself into other types of human expression, including mystical forms of eroticism. In more sociological terms we might say that homosexualities are not ‘captured’ by society for the purposes of procreation and social stability and so are more free to be sublimated, transformed, and ‘realized’ on other dimensions. Politically speaking, these same sexualities, to the extent that they preserve a male object as divine and authoritative, do not overtly challenge the patriarchal structures of society and heaven” (Kripal 2001: 73).

⁷⁵ Some notable examples of certain mystics whose work participate in this female heterosexual symbolism are: Julian of Norwich, Mechthild of Hackborn and Teresa of Avila (Kripal 2001: 75).

2001: 78).⁷⁶ And third, according to Kripal, “genuine male mystical heteroeroticism appear nowhere in *Mysticism*, except in a few marginal or heretical poets and a decidedly nontraditional Protestant mystic” (Kripal 2001: 79).⁷⁷ Reflecting on Underhill’s textual representations and implicit evaluations of the various erotic mysticisms of Christianity, Kripal concludes that, “the mystic’s response to divine love will always be psychologically patterned after his or her specific responses to human love” (Kripal 2001: 72). For the male Christian mystic this means that, “a man’s erotic love for God is inversely related to his sexual love for a woman” (Kripal 2001: 78).

Overall, Kripal sympathizes with Underhill’s effort to reconcile the premodern, “religious” understanding of the mystical with the more modern, psychologically-oriented understanding of the mystical. The hermeneutical tension in her text between the two is in large part a result of Underhill’s own personal experiences of the mystical. She felt torn between her allegiances to the traditional religious outlook that initially spawned her passion for the mystical, i.e., Christianity, and her own intellectual vision that evolved through her exposure and subsequent attraction to modern psychology, which, in many ways, effectively challenged some of her most cherished religious beliefs. In the end, “Underhill wanted to take mysticism back to its traditional, premodern roots, but enriched now with the intellectual gifts of modernity” (Kripal 2001: 35). But if her text *Mysticism* is any indication, Underhill in fact fails to reciprocate the intellectual gifts

⁷⁶ Some notable examples of certain mystics whose works participate in this male homosexual symbolism are: Suso, Rolle, Tauler, Ruysbroeck, Bernard, and John of the Cross (Kripal 2001: 78).

⁷⁷ Kripal is referring here to Jacob Bohme, “whose writings, not surprisingly, were banned in his own day” (Kripal 2001: 79).

she received from modernity, that is, rather than critically engaging with the erotic findings of modern psychology, which calls attention to the psychosexual etiology of the mystical, she chooses instead to let these findings get buried under the weight of Christian dogmatism.

However, despite the many shortcomings of her text, in particular, its lack of historical context, its strategic sanitization of the erotic, and inconsistent utilization of psychology, *Mysticism* does present Kripal with a clear example of how hermeneutical scholarship can be read “as mystical literature” (Kripal 2001: 114). Recall, that for Kripal, “mystical hermeneutics” refers to a dialectical process found within most mystical texts in which a mystic/scholar secretly encodes his or her personal experience of the mystical, which, in turn, can serve an evocative function for the reader that can potentially (re-) activate a textually mediated experience of the mystical. In terms of Underhill’s own “mystical hermeneutics,” Kripal states: “The reading of contemplative texts thus takes on a decidedly mystical function for Underhill, as the divine spark of the reader is ignited, or at least set aglow, by the divine spark of experience shimmering in the text. The hermeneutical experience thus becomes a kind of spiritual awakening, an ontological ‘shock’ into new forms of awareness and being” (Kripal 2001: 59). Perhaps Underhill’s “mystical hermeneutics” is expressed most powerfully by the way she structures her text, which replicates her conception of the “Mystic Way.” “The text thus mimics or performs its thesis about the Mystic Way, imaginatively taking the reader through this contemplative process as it rhetorically recreates it as text. Taken as a whole, *Mysticism* is what Sells might call a “meaning event,” a textual performance of

that of which it speaks” (Kripal 2001: 44). We might also add that Underhill’s Mysticism is also a “textual performance” of that of which it refuses to speak, namely, that the mystical is deeply rooted in the sexual.

Kripal’s examination of Louis Massignon’s (1883-1962) work lends further support to his thesis about homoeroticism that he outlined in his discussion of Christian male bridal mysticism. Kripal summarizes his view of male bridal mysticism as follows: “to the extent that a male mystic encounters the divine as a masculine Presence and uses sexual language to express the experienced truth of that encounter, those expressions will, by definition, be structured along homoerotic lines” (Kripal 2001: 98). Kripal’s reading of the life and writings of the French Islamicist Louis Massignon maintains this homoerotic thesis while moving the setting of the discussion from a Christian register to an Islamic one. In more specific terms, Kripal argues that Massignon’s four-volume masterpiece *The Passion of al-Hallaj* (1982) hermeneutically reflects Massignon’s own private mystico-erotic struggle to come to terms with his homosexual desires. Kripal suggests that Massignon’s five-decade long research into the life and teachings of the Persian Sufi mystic al-Hallaj stems from his own personal desire to work through and alleviate his own sexual conflict. In more general terms, Kripal aims to highlight “how *The Passion* treats Sufi homoeroticism in light of Massignon’s struggle with his own homosexuality” (Kripal 2001: 99). Kripal does this in two parts: first, by elucidating the pertinent biographical details of Massignon’s life which lead up to his writing of *The Passion*; and second, by outlining the various ways Massignon’s text addresses the erotic significance of the mystical.

Perhaps one of Massignon's most formative experiences of the mystical occurred in 1908. At the time Massignon was working on an archaeological mission in Mesopotamia (Kripal 2001: 105). While on site a furious argument broke-out between Massignon and one of his servants concerning some reported rumors about Massignon's sexuality, in particular, his "effeminate manners" (Kripal 2001: 106). Shortly thereafter Massignon boarded a steamer with the intent of returning to Baghdad. However, while aboard the ship Massignon began to behave erratically, possibly as result of malaria, sunstroke, fear, or even his personal "sexual shame" (Kripal 2001: 106). Massignon's spontaneous bout of madness culminates with "a weak attempt at suicide" (Kripal 2001: 106). Consequently, Massignon was "bound hand and foot in the captain's cabin" for the sake of his own safety and that of his fellow passengers (Kripal 2001: 106). While literally trapped by his personal trauma, Massignon was struck by "the lightening of revelation," that is, he had a profound mystical experience (Kripal 2001: 106).

The mystical Presence (or, "Stranger") that he encounter on the steamer continued to visit him and eventually convinced "him that the truth he longed for could be found in Catholicism" (Kripal 2001: 107). Massignon's conversion experience to Catholicism compelled him to seek absolution for his homosexual desires. Thus, Massignon "visited the Church of Saint Joseph in Beirut on June 28 and decided to make the Way of the Cross by extending his arms to form a cross and lying on the ground, face down in intense prayer" (Kripal 2001: 107). Kripal interprets Massignon's pious actions as follows: "he clearly recognized his suffering in those of Jesus on the cross, as he attempted to crucify and so redeem his forbidden sexual desires within a traditional

Catholic ritual acted out on the hard floor of an actual Church” (Kripal 2001: 107).

However, over time, Massignon recognized that Catholicism could never fully attend to the trauma of his sexual conflict and he eventually identified himself as an agnostic (Kripal 2001: 108).⁷⁸

Massignon’s personal and scholarly interest in the study of Islam began in earnest shortly after he encountered “a twenty nine-year-old Spanish aristocrat by the name of Luis de Cuadra (Kripal 2001: 103). Massignon and Cuadra became lovers.⁷⁹ Although Massignon was already familiar with Muslim culture, it is probable that his relationship with Cuadra led “to Massignon’s abiding interest in Sufi mystical literature” (Kripal 2001: 104). Most significantly, it was Cuadra who introduced Massignon to the writings of al-Hallaj, the preeminent homosexual Sufi mystic. According to Kripal, “the facts that Hallaj’s mysticism was read homoerotically by both his contemporaries and immediate descendants, that he desired a male God, and that he passionately interacted with any number of male disciples rendered the secret of Hallaj’s sublimation all that more significant for Massignon. Here indeed was a saint who knew how to accomplish exactly what Massignon himself so desperately needed” (Kripal 2001: 110). What exactly did Massignon need? He needed a mysticism that could make sense of his eroticism. More

⁷⁸ Kripal asks: “How could Massignon have possibly accepted his own homosexuality within the orthodox doctrinal world of his early twentieth-century Catholicism? For Massignon, at least, an agnostic position was a natural and reasonable corollary of his homosexuality. He solved his existential dilemma by removing one side of the contradiction – his Catholicism” (Kripal 2001: 108).

⁷⁹ It is revealing that Cuadra later committed suicide, a fact that, according to Kripal, speaks to Massignon’s tendency to link homosexual love with death (Kripal 2001: 110).

specifically, he needed a homoerotic mysticism. And this is precisely what he found in the writings of al-Hallaj.⁸⁰

Inspired by his attraction to al-Hallaj's homoerotic mysticism, Massignon set about on a lifelong quest to understand personally and communicate publicly the teachings of his own personal patron saint. *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, then, can essentially be read as the public fruit of Massignon's personal desire to incorporate the teachings of al-Hallaj. Massignon found one of al-Hallaj's teachings particularly appealing, namely, "two moments of adoration suffice in love, but the preliminary ablution must be made in blood" (al-Hallaj as quoted by Kripal 2001: 104). Massignon's attraction to this influential Hallajian verse foreshadows some of the central themes that would come to characterize his personal understanding of the mystical. In particular, this verse, much like Massignon's personal views, links mystical love with both sacrifice and death. Kripal thus claims that Massignon's identification with al-Hallaj enabled him "to deal with his own sexual desires through a kind of deathlike sublimation of them – a symbolic crucifixion, if you will, that he could enact within a lifelong pursuit of (sexual) purity, sacrificial sanctity, and the asceticism of scholarship" (Kripal 2001: 109). In other words, reading and writing about the life and teachings of al-Hallaj provided Massignon with a public outlet from which he could hermeneutically sublimate his private homoerotic desires. *The Passion* is a product of this sublimation (Kripal 2001: 110).

⁸⁰ According to Kripal, "it is an undeniable fact that a homoerotically structured mysticism runs throughout both Hallaj's life and Massignon's treatment of it, with page after page delineating the minutest psychological, doctrinal, and political consequences of 'loving Him'" (Kripal 2001: 123).

One of the most common mystical practices associated with the type of Sufi mysticism popular at the time of al-Hallaj is the “witness practice,” which refers to “that spiritual discipline of seeing God in the unveiled beauty of the unbearded (that is, the young) male face and form” (Kripal 2001: 122). The symbolic structure of the “witness practice” is explicitly homoerotic.⁸¹ This homoerotic structuring of the “witness practice” paradigmatically reflects Sufism’s general conception of mystical experience as an erotic gaze between a male mystic and a male god. Drawing on the hermeneutical resonance of this homoerotic gaze, Kripal offers the following interpretation of Massignon’s text:

The phenomenon of *The Passion* can and should be read as an intricately developed homoerotic gaze on the tortured male body, crucified for its radical (and assumedly illicit) love of a male God. Through this remarkable textual project of five decades, Massignon could both crucify and sublimate his own homosexual desires, driving them into another plane of experience that found more than enough legitimacy, not in the symbolically heterosexual world of Christian mysticism, but in the explicitly homoerotic universe of Hallajian Desire (Kripal 2001: 135).

The Passion, then, can be read as a hermeneutical reflection of Massignon’s personal identification with al-Hallaj. Reading and writing about al-Hallaj provided Massignon with a legitimate way of sublimating (and, possibly realizing) his mystico-erotic desires. This process is made possible for Massignon because he “believed that certain gifted writers (who, by the way, could also be scholars) were capable of communicating something of the original experiences of the mystics to their readers, who could then recreate the experience for themselves within their hermeneutical encounters

⁸¹ Kripal notes how “the gender pattern we saw in Christian bridal mysticism – with the problem of a union between a male mystic and a male God – are here as well, but with the Sufi witness practice they are more open, more honest, and quite simply, more resolved in an explicit homoerotic pattern. The human Sufi can retain his male gender before a male Beloved because the model of love is defined from the beginning, as explicitly homoerotic. What was implied but still opaque in the Christian case is thus made obvious and redundant in the Sufi one. Sufism, we might venture to say in the mirror of comparison, is more honest about its homoerotic roots than Christian bridal mysticism ever could be” (Kripal 2001: 123).

with the scholarly texts” (Kripal 2001: 118). Thus, for Massignon (and, I might add, Kripal), reading and writing about the mystical can tantamount to participating *in* the mystical. The life and teachings of Massignon is a clear demonstration that this kind of textual participation in the mystical; or “mystical hermeneutics,” as Kripal puts it, is intimately tied to issues relating directly to the erotic.

Eroticism is central to R.C. Zaehner’s (1913-1974) understanding of the mystical.⁸² Zaehner was a specialist in ancient Iranian languages and the study of Zoroastrianism (Kripal 2001: 156). Today, he is widely known as a comparativist scholar of mysticism and “mystical critic” (Kripal 2001: 159). Kripal’s examination of Zaehner’s contributions to the study of mysticism focuses primarily on two texts: *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* (1957) and *Concordant Discord* (1970). Kripal’s discussion of *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* focuses on the way Zaehner’s “tripartite developmental typology of mysticism” is influenced by his personal experiences of the mystical (Kripal 2001: 169). In similar fashion, Kripal’s also reads *Concordant Discord* as a reflection of Zaehner’s personal understanding of the mystical. However, Kripal’s overall discussion privileges *Concordant Discord* because he believes that this text encapsulates Zaehner’s most clear

⁸² According to Kripal, “the erotic functioned on numerous levels in Zaehner’s work and life: as an ontological critique of Augustinian dualism and what he perceived to be the deleterious effects of Neoplatonism on Christianity, as an understanding of gender that grounded and more less reified femininity as the proper sign of the human soul and its creaturely passivity and masculinity as the proper sign of the divine and its primary agency, as a struggle with psychoanalysis and its own reductive reading of religious eroticism as essentially libidinal and conflictual, as the end and summation of the mystical life in a normative and universally true ‘mystical marriage’ of the female/passive human soul and the single male/active God, as a proper eschatological language with which to speak about the end of history and humanity in a final cosmic-erotic unity-in-diversity modeled after the Trinity itself, and finally, as a personal psychosexual struggle carried on in the secret spaces of Zaehner’s emotional and sexual life” (Kripal 2001: 181).

and erudite understanding of the relationship between the sexual and the mystical (Kripal 2001: 158).

Following in the same lines as his discussion of Massignon, Kripal argues that Zaehner's sexual conflict played a formative role in how he came to conceptualize and value the meaning of the mystical. In more specific terms, Kripal suggests that similar to the way Massignon's homosexual desires structured his approach and subsequent representation of the mystical, in the case of Zaehner, his struggle to control his homosexual desires inadvertently shaped the way he approached and represented the mystical. However, whereas Massignon privileges an Islamic perspective, Zaehner, in contrast, privileges a Christian one. Yet despite these different religious settings, both theorists do indeed share a similar attraction to homoerotic mysticism. Both Massignon and Zaehner were sexually conflicted males who sought to realize their private homoerotic desires through their hermeneutic (and public) study of the mystical.

Zaehner's most popular work, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* can be essentially read as a response to Aldous Huxley's famous monograph on the relationship between drugs and mysticism, *The Doors of Perception* (1954) (Kripal 2001: 167). In *The Doors of Perception*, Huxley equates his own drug-induced mystical experience with the god-induced mystical experiences of traditional mystics. Huxley's experience convinced him that drugs, or, more specifically, altered states of consciousness, act as doorways to the mystical. As an orthodox Catholic, Zaehner was horrified by the implication of Huxley's message, namely, that an experience of the mystical can be attained without the grace of God. Zaehner found this idea revolting because it explicitly undermines the orthodox

teachings of Catholicism with which he personally identified with in his writings. More specifically, Zaehner was deeply troubled by the fact that if God is considered expendable to the attainment of the mystical, then by extension so also is the ethical. Hence, Kripal writes, “Zaehner understood Huxley’s experiences as a serious ethical problem and a profound theological challenge” (Kripal 2001: 168). In *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* Zaehner responds to this challenge by asking how it is possible to determine if a mystical experience is sacred or profane if not by the grace of God?

Kripal describes Zaehner’s model for understanding the mystical in *Mysticism Sacred and Profane* as follows:

His model is a developmental one that is tripartite in structure and psycho-theological in approach, that is, it combines both psychological and theological models to explain different types of mystical experience that constitute different stages along a normatively constructed ‘path’ or developmental trajectory (in this, it replicates numerous traditional typologies of mystical experience constructed by the various traditions themselves). Accordingly there are three distinct stages of the mystical path for Zaehner, each of which corresponds to a different type of mystical experience and a different psych-theological level” (Kripal 2001: 169).

Zaehner’s first stage, “The Panenhenic Experience, or Nature Mysticism,” refers to those mystical experiences that elicit a mystic’s full identification with “the natural world in a manic-like state of positive ego inflation” (Kripal 2001: 169). According to Zaehner, the nature mystic “sees the human self as encompassing all Nature, the subjective ‘I’ is merged into the cosmic All” (Zaehner 1957: 59). From a phenomenological perspective, there are typically three characteristics that define a “natural mystical experience” for Zaehner: First, a keen sense that “without and within are one”; second, a personal realization of the absurdity of death; and third, the

transcendence of space and time (Zaehner 1957: 41). It is important to point out that Zaehner himself had a mystical experience of the natural type “at the age of twenty two shortly after reading Arthur Rimbaud’s poem *Saison en Enfer*” (Kripal 2001:168). However, Zaehner’s “natural mystical experience” was eventually overshadowed by his conversion to Catholicism in 1946, which he describes as “an experience of what I can only assure Mr. Huxley is of another order – the attempt, however, bumbling and inept, to make contact with God through what the Catholics call the normal channels of grace” (Zaehner as quoted by Kripal 2001: 168).

Kripal believes that Zaehner’s identification with the Catholic mystics is key to understanding how he comparatively evaluates the mystical. This point is made explicit by Zaehner’s stage-model, which, we will see shortly, culminates with his endorsement of theistic (read: Christian) mysticism. But first, Zaehner’s understanding of the second stage must be explained, which he refers to as “soul mysticism,” or as Kripal puts it, “The Isolation of the Self or the Mysticism of Isolation” (Kripal 2001: 170). “Soul mysticism,” which Zaehner equates with monism, refers to a mystical experience of isolation, when the soul is absorbed into an impersonal and undifferentiated One that transcends space and time (Zaehner 1957: 59). Zaehner typically associates “soul mysticism” with the mystical traditions of the East, “especially Advaita Vedanta, Samkyha and, to a lesser extent, Madhyamika Buddhism” (Kripal 2001: 170). In comparison to “nature mysticism,” “soul mysticism” signifies an “advance” for Zaehner because “it makes a clear distinction between Nature on the one hand and the immortal soul or spirit on the other” (Zaehner 1957: 125). However, according to Zaehner’s

typology, “soul mysticism” is still deficient because it tends to mistake the self for God (Kripal 2001: 171).

Kripal refers to the final stage of Zaehner’s model as “The Return of the Self to God or the Mysticism of Love” (Kripal 2001: 171). Commonly associated with theism, this type of mysticism is defined by Zaehner as “the mysticism of the love of God” (Zaehner 1957: 59). For Zaehner, a distinction must be made between those mystical traditions “where love is pivotal and those where it is not” (Zaehner 1957: 172). Zaehner believes that theistic mysticism is a more authentic and thus valuable form of mysticism in comparison to the panenhenic and monistic mystical experience, because, first, theistic mysticism privileges the central role of God’s grace; and second, because theistic mysticism recognizes the social applicability of love, and thus offers a more sophisticated moral framework.⁸³

For Zaehner, the main problem of both “nature mysticism” and “monistic mysticism” is that they lack a theistic conception of God and are thus morally impoverished and prey to antinomianism. And here we come to the heart of both Zaehner’s private and public understanding of mysticism, namely, that mysticism proper can only be framed morally, in relation to a transcendent God of love, or, more specifically, to the transcendent God of the Christian tradition. Essentially, Zaehner

⁸³ Kripal writes: “Only the third, theistic stage of the mystical path, then, is properly and genuinely moral for Zaehner, and this is for both ontological and ascetic reasons. Ontologically speaking, it makes no sense to talk about ethics without some sort of duality, as we have already noted, and true duality appears only here in the theistic stage. Moreover, ascetically speaking, theistic mystical experience requires moral perfection, whereas nature mysticism is quite possible without effort of any kind... sanctification, holiness and ascetic practises are the only adequate methods we have of judging between divine and natural forms of mysticism. It is ethics, and ethics alone, we might conclude, that separates ‘mysticism sacred and profane.’ Or, put differently and devotionally (and erotically), *it is love*” (Kripal 2001: 177).

believes that theistic mysticism, or more specifically, Christian mysticism, is superior to “nature mysticism” and “soul mysticism” because it recognizes the moral imperative inherent to any authentic mystical state of consciousness. How else, asks Zaehner, are we to determine if a mystic is a saint or a scoundrel if not by the moral measure of how well they exemplify God’s love? The drug user or “nature mystic” may experience something extraordinary in terms of accessing states of consciousness that were previously barred. However, they lack God; they lack grace; and thus their vision of the mystical is at best, solipsistic. At its worst, it is morally dubious.

Drawing on the observations made by Zaehner’s former student, Lee Siegel, Kripal speculates that Zaehner’s public privileging of a theistic-moral mysticism can be interpreted as a product of his private struggle to mitigate his homosexual conflict. According to Kripal, “Siegel reads his former mentor as an unwilling gay man who used his Catholic piety to struggle more or less successfully against his own sexual desires (we are reminded of Massignon here). Siegel speculates that Zaehner himself understood these desires to be essentially evil; hence his lifelong obsession with the reality of Satan and evil, beliefs which Siegel reads as displaced or projected forms of homosexual guilt” (Kripal 2001: 190). If Siegel’s assessment is accurate then it logically follows that Zaehner’s homosexual guilt likely played a large role in determining how he approached the study of mysticism. This is perhaps most evident in the way Zaehner seems to gloss over the homosexual symbolism and rhetoric associated with his own favored mystical tradition, Catholicism. For instance, in discussing the significance of the male mystical

marriage in *Concordant Discord* (in this case, from within a Islamic context), Zaehner writes the following:

To say that mysticism of this type is no more than a sublimation of sex is really rather absurd since the majority of the mystics in all traditions – a vast majority in the case of the Muslims – have in fact been men. Anyone rash enough still to put forward this theory must carry his theory to its logical conclusion, namely, that all male mystics must be, whether they know it or not, pathetic homosexuals. If you believe this, you can believe anything (Zaehner 1970: 168).

Not surprisingly, this is exactly what Kripal expects us to believe.⁸⁴ According to Kripal, Zaehner's privileged theistic model of understanding the relationship between the mystic and the male God defines "the human as both female and passive...for any human male Zaehner's theory posits an ontological necessary feminization or passive mystical homoeroticism, as it insists on a basic dualism, a sexual dimorphism between the human soul (feminine/passive) and God (masculine/active)" (Kripal 2001: 187). Why could Zaehner not recognize the homoerotic implications underlining the symbolism and rhetoric of the male bridal mysticism?⁸⁵ Because such an acknowledgment would require him to confront his own homoerotic desire "to encounter sexually and spiritually – for, again, the two can never be separated for Zaehner – the divine male" (Kripal 2001: 188).

⁸⁴ However, Kripal notes that, "all male mystics do not use homoerotic language to induce and describe mystical encounters, Zen, Theravada Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta, for example. Zaehner was quite aware of this and even insisted that such writers do not use sexual language because it is not reflective of their monistic experiences, but this is precisely what bothered him so much about these traditions. In psychoanalytic terms, we could say that erotic language is not salient to these mystics because their religious experiences are rooted in more primordial, essentially narcissistic psychic structures that were developmentally prior to their oedipally structured sexualities, whatever these may or may not have been" (Kripal 2001: 188).

⁸⁵ Kripal writes: "Indeed, I know of no passage anywhere in Zaehner's writings where he discusses Christian homoeroticism. Sufi homoeroticism, certainly, (was this what attracted him to Persian studies in the first place?). Christian homoeroticism, definitely not. Such a double standard, of course, makes good sense in the light of Siegel's thesis about Zaehner's defensive employment of Catholicism as a pious bulwark against his 'evil' homosexual desires" (Kripal 2001: 191).

Zaehner's public inability and personal denial to read male bridal mysticism

homoerotically is a serious problem for Kripal because:

Once the psychoanalytic and feminist hermeneutical perspectives are taken seriously, Zaehner's claim appears indefensible, as we can see that such divine and human genders (and the specific mystico-erotic experiences to which they give rise) witness not so much to the metaphysical nature of the deity or the normative end of some objectively real and universally true spiritual path as to the psychosexual biographies of the mystics in question and, more importantly, to the larger psychosexual patterns of the cultures that produced the historical mystics' psyches in the first place and preserved their teachings as valuable reflections of their own patriarchal systems and axiologies. In blunt terms, for whatever else it may or may not be, the male mystical marriage is clearly a psychosexual product of patriarchy, which defines divinity as male, essentializes women (and secondarily, male souls) as passive, denies actual historical homosexuality any livable social reality or legitimacy, and permanently exiles male heterosexualities from the realm of erotic divinity, where they could function only as threats to a single male God. Seen anthropologically, that is, as if it were an external, observable culture, bridal mysticism wants to produce a symbolic system in which a single Alpha male can have sex with anyone and everyone (of whatever apparent gender), but only after he has denied to these same sexual partners (through institutional celibacy, asceticism, sexual suffering, or more likely, all three) any semblance of a normal sexual life with each other. And this, we are asked to believe, is the ultimate goal and summation of the religious life (Kripal 2001: 193).

Although Zaehner may have failed to fully address the larger political, social, and cultural ramifications of the gender essentialism underlining his understanding of male bridal mysticism, he was however acutely aware of the central role human sexuality plays in structuring the mystical.⁸⁶ This is aptly demonstrated by Zaehner's discussion of the erotic in his work *Concordant Discord*, in which he describes the erotic as that sacred site where "spirit and matter are indissolubly linked, merging into one another, making whole and thereby holy" (Zaehner as quoted by Kripal 2001: 181). According to Kripal, Zaehner "privileges sexual language as the *locus classicus* of the very highest stages of

⁸⁶ For example, in *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, Zaehner writes: "There is no point at all in blinking at the fact that the raptures of the theistic mystic are closely akin to the transports of sexual union, the soul playing the part of the female and God appearing as the male" (Zaehner 1957: 151).

mysticism and sexual language as the most appropriate expression of these states” (Kripal 2001: 183). For example, Zaehner believed that there is an “awkward resemblance between the raptures of divine love and sexual orgasm” and thus similar to the mystics he studies, he draws a phenomenological parallel between sexual intercourse and mystical ecstasy as two similar processes in which “the human ego melts away and is, so to speak, lifted out of itself” (Zaehner as quoted by Kripal 2001: 183).

Zaehner’s understanding of the erotic is tied to his personal identification with theism. Zaehner writes, “once mysticism admits the existence of a God who is distinct from the self and who is felt to be supremely lovable, erotic imagery cannot be avoided, for there is a certain harmony between the physical and spiritual world.” (Zaehner 1970: 159). Kripal believes that much of what drives Zaehner’s theistic understanding of the erotic and subsequently, how this understanding structured his approach to studying the mystical, is in large part a product of his own mystico-erotic experiences. Accordingly, Kripal speculates: “Would Zaehner have been so interested in erotic mysticism had he not been so sexually conflicted? Would he have been so hard on the isolation of monism and stressed the necessity of love had he not been so isolated and lonely himself?” (Kripal 2001: 191).⁸⁷ In other words, Zaehner’s public representation of the mystical issues largely from his private mystico-erotic experiences, that is, much like Massignon, Zaehner’s “research flowed naturally out of religious experience” (Kripal 2001: 112).

⁸⁷ According to Kripal, “Zaehner told Siegel that he had no sexual relations since his conversion to Catholicism. Twenty-five years of conflicted, pent-up sexuality will have its way somehow. In Zaehner’s case, that way seems to have been writing about (and experiencing) erotic mysticism” (Kripal 2001: 190).

⁸⁸ For example, in interpreting the experiences of the “nature mystics,” “Zaehner employs a Jungian model and reads these states, when uncontrolled, as an absorption of the ego into the collective unconscious, or, when controlled, as an integration of the conscious and unconscious” (Kripal 2001: 170).

It is also significant to note that Zaehner was ambivalent about psychoanalytic theory's contribution to the study of mysticism. According to Kripal, "he understood and accepted much of Freud's theorizing" (Kripal 2001:183). Moreover, Zaehner showed a keen interest in the work of Jung, often times utilizing Jung's theories to substantiate his own understanding of the psychology of mystical experience.⁸⁸ However, much like Underhill, Zaehner's utilization of psychoanalytic theory is inconsistent. For instance, Zaehner is quick to pathologize non-theistic mystical experiences, yet, he refuses to apply the same psychoanalytic hermeneutic to his reading of theistic mysticism (Kripal 2001: 192). As with Underhill, it appears as though Zaehner will only accept psychoanalytic theorizing to a certain extent, namely, up to that point in which it begins to impinge on the sovereignty of the Catholic dogma with which he personally and textually identifies.

Ultimately, both Zaehner the scholar and Zaehner the mystic could not tolerate the psychoanalytic suggestion that the love of the (theistic) mystic is reducible to "a sublimation of the sexual instinct" (Zaehner 1970: 186). Thus, Zaehner would reject Kripal's conclusion that Zaehner's two main texts about the mystical – *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane* and *Concordant Discord* – can generally be read as a hermeneutical reflection of his desire to sublimate his homosexual conflict and, moreover, "that the mystical marriage, however sublime or pleasurable, is inevitably consummated on the ruins of a once (or never) active sexual life" (Kripal 2001: 193).

⁸⁹ Bharati was born Leopold Fischer, in Vienna, Austria. While living in Vienna he took the Hindu name Ramakchandra. It was not until he travelled to India that he was formally "initiated into Hinduism as Aghananda Bharati" (Kripal 2001: 210). Commenting on the complexities surrounding Bharati's conversion, Kripal suggests that, "much of Bhartai's written corpus can be read as a defence of his physical corpus, that is, as a life long attempt to justify his conversion and legitimate and establish his chosen identity as a 'big white' Hindu" (Kripal 2001: 211).

Agehananda Bharati's⁸⁹ (1923-1991) iconoclastic views of the mystical offer a much needed counter-balance to the traditional views outlined above by Underhill, Massignon, and Zaehner. Underhill, Massignon, and Zaehner are largely writing from a Western (Christian/Islamic) perspective that tends to privilege a theistic-dualistic conception of the mystical that emphasizes asceticism, morality, and transcendence. In contrast, Bharati is largely writing from an Eastern, Tantric perspective, and his writings privilege a monistic understanding of the mystical that tends to emphasize hedonism, antinomianism, and immanence. It is not surprising then that Bharati is a controversial figure in the contemporary study of mysticism. Most significant for the purposes of the present study is the fact that much of the controversy surrounding Bharati's work stems from his "radical sexualization of mysticism" (Kripal 2001: 229). Hence, Bharati writes, "I constantly harp on and recur to sex, because I hold that the erotic part of it is the prototype and in a way the consummation of the rich life. I will show you later that the monastic and mystical life are entirely based on a particular set of experiences which are, in the last analysis, erotic" (Bharati as quoted by Kripal 2001: 247).

Kripal's study of Bharati focuses primarily on the three texts that constitute his "Tantric Trilogy:" *The Ochre Robe* (1960), *The Tantric Tradition* (1965), and *The Light at the Center* (1976). As in his reading of the previous scholars/mystics, Kripal claims that Bharati's "academic method...flowed from his mystical path, and his mystical path was part of his academic method" (Kripal 2001: 238). However, in clear contrast to the methods of the previous theorists, Bharati's method is essentially Tantric in both form

and content; that is, “a certain kind of Tantric esotericism defined the parameters – both negatively and positively – of how Bharati read mystical texts and subsequently wrote his own” (Kripal 2001: 209). Kripal attempts to outline Bharati’s Tantric model of the mystical first by tracing its nascent development in his biography and, second, by calling attention to the central role the erotic plays in both his personal understanding and public approach to the study of mysticism. Kripal states: “My basic thesis here is that Bharati, psychologically and politically conditioned by a personal history of anti-authoritarianism, experienced aesthetic profundity and genuine mystical experiences in Tantric ritual transgression and subsequently theorized out of this personal history and ritual experience to create a radically transgressive, amoral model of mysticism” (Kripal 2001: 218).

Kripal traces the emergence of Bharati’s anti-authoritarian views of the mystical to the religious and political climate of his childhood in Vienna (Kripal 2001: 215). According to Bharati, both Catholic and Nazi education produced the same result, namely, “spiritual nausea” (Bharati 1961: 41). Moreover, both ideologies suffered from the same fallacious thinking: “With both teachings, the Nazi and the Catholic, I experienced the same thing: the prohibition of interest on the one hand, and the imposition of interest on the other. The Nazis did not want me to learn Sanskrit and go to the opera; the Catholics did not want me to learn Sanskrit and go to the opera. In each case the reason was the same: they did not want me to escape from their sole source of grace” (Bharati 1961: 42). Consequently, Bharati was forced to become “a political and religious apostate” (Bharati 1961: 42).

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Kripal interprets Bharati's disillusionment with Nazi and Catholic ideology and subsequent apostasy as follows:

Bharati later identified his dual rebellion against these two patriarchal traditions as a major cause of his conversion to Hinduism (which, we should remember, was defined in part by his love for the Tantric mother-goddess and India as Mother). We could thus read Bharati's enthusiastic apostasy from Christianity and equally passionate conversion to Hinduism in classical Oedipal terms as religiously encoded responses to the psychological dynamic set up in his home and culture: such a dramatic transformation in his identity and emotional life could both "kill" the hated father of home, church, and state and win the mother over as a sexual partner (something, as we shall see, Bharati did in fact accomplish through the medium of Tantric ritual and mythology⁹⁰ (Kripal 2001: 216).

The Tantric tradition is central to both Bharati's personal and public understanding of the mystical.⁹¹ Bharati defines Tantrism as "a technique or techniques towards the achievement of the ecstatic, encoded in scriptural terms, defined as a short-cut method of achieving a theologically postulated freedom, by harnessing, rather than subduing, the sensuous equipment present in all people" (Bharati as quoted by Kripal 2001: 224). Bharati actively participated in various tantric practices that directly facilitated his own experience of the mystical (Kripal 2001: 227).⁹² Accordingly, Bharati

⁹⁰ Bharati comments that his family household was marked by an atmosphere of tension, "there was certainly no sort of communication between my parents, and that affected us children" (Bharati 1961: 26). Kripal suggest that Bharati's "contentious and bitter relationship with his parents were important psychological factors in his subsequent asceticism" (Kripal 2001: 214).

⁹¹ Kripal states: "What Bharati called the Tantic tradition is actually a complex of mystical traditions indigenous to a number of South Asian, East Asian, and Himalayan cultures that emphasize, among other things, (1) a variety of decidedly esoteric hermeneutical strategies to achieve, ritualize, protect, and textually recreate various mystical-ecstatic states of consciousness; and (2) antinomian ritual techniques that work against much orthodox philosophy and praxis, including, in the classical Indian tradition, the ingestion of drugs, the eating of meat, and the ritual use of sexual intercourse, all highly polluting to an orthodox Hindu" (Kripal 2001: 209). Following the work of Andre Padoux and Hugh Urban, Kripal calls attention to the fact that "the modern connotations of the categories of 'Tantra' and 'Tantrism' are as much products of Western colonial, scholarly, and popular discourse as they are continuations of South Asian traditions and texts" (Kripal 2001: 223).

⁹² Bharati notes at least four mystical experiences: "his first mystical experience at age twelve during a hypnagogic state" (Kripal 2001: 225). His second mystical experience occurred when he was confined to a

reads the phenomenological import of his mystical experiences through the lens of Tantra, which, in turn, helped to shape his approach to studying the mystical.

This is evident in his writings, which tend to frame mystical experience as an explicitly transgressive event. Bharati states: “this should be clear through an honest and randomized reading of mystical texts: that by far the greatest portion of the mystic’s report is of an asocial, even anti-social, autocentric, self-indulgent kind, marginally or artificially related to moral and social considerations” (Bharati 1976: 87). In a more provocative tone, Bharati argues that, “mysticism in its motivation and in its pursuit constitutes what is *illicit*, anathema in any specific social and religious tradition” (Bharati 1976: 200). Bharati considers mysticism to be illicit because he believes that it engenders an experience that is autonomous, individualistic, and radically intimate. The radical intimacy elicited by mystical experience compels a mystic to repudiate or at least resist the communal demands of conventional society. Thus, according to Bharati’s model, mystical experience ultimately poses a threat to the (political and religious) authority of any given establishment.⁹³

cell in the Indian Legion (Kripal 2001: 225). Bharati describes the experience as follows: “I was suddenly everything, the All, and I surveyed everything that was... I am God - that is the supreme wisdom” (Bharati 1961: 59). Bharati’s third mystical experience was a product of “the initiatory ritual phase in the Tantric community in Assam” (Kripal 2001: 225). The fourth mystical experience was triggered by a mixture of LSD and sexual intercourse “with a woman named Matsuko” (Kripal 2001: 225).

⁹³ Bharati states: “The record of our history is that technology and ritual have prevailed over mysticism. Mystics are an embarrassment to the established order. If they cannot be suppressed, they will be neutralized” (Bharati 1976: 201).

⁹⁴ According to Kripal, Bharati assumed that, “there is only one zero-experience, although there are many mysticisms generated by the cultural, linguistic, and doctrinal context of this experience” (Kripal 2001: 242). In other words, the actual zero-experience is ‘doctrinally “pure”’ (Kripal 2001: 230). It is only after the fact, during the secondary process of interpretation via the sanctioned culture code where the zero-experience is ceremoniously dressed-up in “over-beliefs” and revised to cohere with the dogmatic particulars dictated by a specific religious tradition. From Bharati’s perspective then, the orgasmic essence

Bharati's Tantric understanding of the mystical is also evident in the way his writings highlight the erotic significance of mystical experience. Bharati refers to the height of mystical consciousness as "the zero-experience,"⁹⁴ which refers to "his coined and central expression for the monistic mystical experience before and beyond any interpretive schemas" (Kripal 2001: 229). According to Bharati, "the zero-experience is a peak-experience, in one category perhaps with totally consummated erotic experiences" (Bharati 1976: 75). In other words, the zero-experience for Bharati is akin to sexual orgasm. Bharati believes that it is precisely a mystic's desire to attain the orgasmic pleasure of the zero-experience that compels him or her to transgress the boundaries of the conventional order. Bharati states: "To the mystic, temptation is desirable... The mystic plays with temptation because all temptation reminds him of the zero-experience; the establishment must dissuade and warn from temptation, and hence discourage the zero-experience" (Bharati 1976: 59).

The traditional "religious" interpretation of mystical experience as represented by the work of Underhill, Massignon, and to a certain extent, Zaehner, tends to read the sexual language of mystics metaphorically. Drawing on his own personal erotic experience with Tantra, Bharati claims that alongside its metaphorical value, the sexual language of certain mystics ought to be also recognized as a literal expression of sexual pleasure (Kripal 2001: 222). Bharati is adamant that a mystic's "ecstatic often eroticised report is much more than an analogy to him; *he does It* – he actually transgresses the rules

of all forms of mystical consciousness is identical at the zero point, the experience is couched in different terms only after the fact in order to appease the prevailing ideological demands of a particular religio-

of his society, he elicits within himself the keenest pleasure, and if successful, he creates what no husband, lover, or lecher succeeds in doing: he makes orgasm permanent, uninterrupted” (Bharati 1976: 200).

The pleasure of sexual orgasm is not only metaphorically similar to the ecstasy of the zero-experience, but, according to Bharati, in the right context, actual physical, bodily sex acts can often facilitate a genuine encounter with the mystical. If this is true, why then do so many religious traditions demonize sex and, by extension, the body, as obstacles toward the mystical? Bharati responds: “My reading of the hatred of sex on the part of the people at large – Eastern and Western alike – is that people fear autonomy in others, as they evade it themselves, hiding their autonomous potential behind many masks – wedlock, juries, sets of rules, etiquettes, politeness”⁹⁵ (Bharati 1976: 203). In contrast to the traditional anti-body, anti-sex worldview that so often characterizes the writings of Western monotheistic mystics, Bharati’s Tantric model offers an alternative viewpoint that frames an authentic mystical experience as a mutual amplification of *both* mind *and* body (Bharati 1976: 139).

To reiterate, in Bharati’s Tantric model, the mystical is transgressive, subversive, illicit, because first it separates the individual from the collective; and second it fosters a desire for an erotic pleasure that resists the regulatory strictures of the symbolic order.

The pleasure of the zero-experience is a private affair, and thus from the vantage point of

⁹⁵ It is significant to note that Bharati draws a correlation between traditional religions hatred of the body/sexuality and the oppression of women. Bharati believes that, “the official teachings of the world discriminate against sex and most of them discriminate against woman” (Bharati 1976:131). According to Kripal, “on numerous occasions he expressed his moral indignation at Indian culture’s patriarchal oppression of women, misogyny, fear of sexuality, and phobic reactions to female sexuality” (Kripal 2001: 226).

the establishment, a mystic is suspect, his or her pleasure is a potential threat to the stability of the status quo. Bharati states: “Intimate drugs, intimate love, and mysticism – the most intimate of all if it were known to the establishmentarians – these are the real dangers, for they alienate a man’s mind and body from the king; hence they are illicit. Mysticism was known to the priests as the supreme danger, as the irrevocable launching site for alienation from the king and his sacerdotal allies” (Bharati 1976: 202). Here Bharati is explicit that mystical experience is necessarily antithetical to the authoritative demands of conventional society, precisely because it breeds a radical individualism. The autonomous quality of the pleasure associated with the zero-experience, its radical intimacy, alienates both a mystic’s mind *and* (sexualized) body from the conventional social order. Hence, Bharati writes how a mystic “becomes autonomous and begins to use his body as he wishes, withdrawing it from the public reservoir of bodies, and seeking autonomy through mysticism, sex, poetry, music, and drugs” (Bharati 1976: 208).

A common way in which a mystic attempts to maintain his or her autonomy within the confines of the culturally established symbolic order is to create a “monolexis” (Bharati: 1976: 67). According to Bharati, a “monolexis” refers to a mystic’s “individual code for absorbing and transmitting doctrine without risking dysfunctional conflict with his surroundings” (Bharati 1976: 67). In other words, mystics often construct a private language, an idiosyncratic rhetoric, which strategically insulates his or her (transgressive) interpretation of zero-experience from public persecution. Kripal interprets Bharati’s “monolexis” as a “nontraditional hermeneutical strategy” that mystics use “to read the traditional texts, in effect transforming the historical scripture into a symbol or metaphor,

for his or her own mystical experiences” (Kripal 2001: 243). Thus, reinforcing his thesis about “mystical hermeneutics,” Kripal believes that “for Bharati, mystical experience can grant the cognitively gifted scholar both a rhetorical power for reading and writing his or her own texts and a certain hermeneutical gnosis for reading those of others. The mystical overflows into the hermeneutical” (Kripal 2001: 243).

In Bharati’s model, understanding how a mystic uses language is key to understanding how to study mysticism. Bharati states: “Talking, thinking, and writing about mysticism is not mysticism, just as talking, thinking, and writing about poetry isn’t poetry” (Bharati 1976: 37). In order to properly study mystical texts, Bharati’s suggests that a distinction must be made between etic and emic speech, “the former being the objective, descriptive, ‘outsider’s’ understanding of the phenomenon under study, the latter the subjective, emotional, ‘insider’s’ view” (Kripal 2001: 239). Historically, a common problem with mystical texts is that mystics tend to confuse the emic with the etic and thus they often try to make objective truth claims about their subjective experiences⁹⁶ (Kripal 2001: 240).

Bharati believes that the study of mysticism could benefit greatly by adopting a critical hermeneutics that can distinguish and expose the differences between an etic and emic perspective. However, such a move is not without consequence because many religious and political institutions draw their authority from certain “divine” emic claims that are disguised etically. According to Kripal, “Bhartai thus recognizes that there were

⁹⁶ According to Kripal, “there are thus for Bharati two kinds of mystics, and subsequently, two kinds of scholars of mysticism: ‘wise’ mystics and scholars, who do not claim any objective referent for mystical experience; and ‘unwise’ mystics and scholars who do” (Kripal 2001 240).

and still are political issues at work in the construction and preservation of emic speech and the suppression of etic language, for the in past to speak etically about such experiences would have in effect amounted to a radical challenge to both the church and the political authorities, both of whom built their right to rule on the emic-etic confusion of theology and objective truth” (Kripal 2001: 241).

Like the work of the previous mystics/scholars that Kripal examined, Bharati’s writings also exhibit an ambivalent appreciation of psychology’s contributions to the study of mysticism. It is quite possible that Bharati’s ambivalence towards psychology stems from his overexposure to certain psychoanalytic theories in his childhood. For example, Bharati relates how in his adolescence Freud was “all the rage” in Vienna (Bharati 1961: 27). Subsequently, Bharati’s mother was deeply influenced by Freud and she accepted many of the psychoanalytic precepts he identified concerning the onset of childhood sexuality. Bharati recalls that, “one of her principles was that you must not be ‘repressed’ and ‘inhibited’” (Bharati 1961: 27). In retrospect Bharati claims that he ultimately found Freud’s (and thus his mother’s) perspective “revolting” (Bharati 1961: 27). According to Kripal, “Bharati suggests that it was his mother’s annoying Freudian insistence on the necessity of sexual indulgence which laid the psychological seed, ‘if only unconsciously,’ for his later celibate lifestyle; he rejected an active socialized sexuality, in other words, because his mother tried to force him into an indulgent direction. The Oedipal irony here is overwhelming, with a negative childhood reaction to a mother’s Freudian sexualism leading to a form of adult celibacy that, by all accounts (including and especially his own), was itself hypersexualized” (Kripal 2001: 215).

Yet, despite Bharati's distaste for Freud, "psychological reductionism," and "psychological diagnostic categories" in general, he nevertheless "did not hesitate to apply a psychoanalytic hermeneutic to himself, to fellow monks, to historical mystics and even entire religious traditions or cultural institutions" (Kripal 2001: 213). Bharati's utilization of a psychoanalytic hermeneutic is perhaps best demonstrated by his alternative reading of the transformative merits of mystical experience. Bharati claims that, "the zero-experience cannot generate sanctity, extra-mystical skill, wisdom, academic qualification, political leadership, or even charisma, any more than orgasm can generate good citizenship, good parental virtue, or even love in the romantic-erotic sense" (Bharati 1976: 110). If there is any transformation at all, argues Bharati, it can only be understood in terms of psychology: "It should be possible to explain the yield of the zero-experience in psychological terms: changes in the view of self, in self-esteem, security, etc."(Bharati 1976: 100).

How does a mystical experience alter the psyche of a mystic? Although Bharati rarely engages in any form of sophisticated psychological analysis of mystical experience, he does believe that "the zero-experience invades the person's ego-perspective" (Bharati 1976: 100). What this means is that a mystical experience can potentially destabilize the ego and subsequently, this disruption can alter a mystic's self-perception. However, Bharati is careful to point out that while mystical experience may alter an individual's self-perception, it does not however change a person's "interactional pattern" with others (Bharati 1976: 100). Consequently, Bharati believes that "the mystic who was a stinker before he had the zero-experience remains a stinker, socially speaking,

after the experience. This, of course, does not mean that he cannot stop being a stinker; but for such change, he must make efforts of an ethical order, which have nothing at all to do with his mystical practice” (Bharati 1976: 53).

Furthermore, Bharati posits that mystical experience can be interpreted as a unique form of “auto-therapy” and he even goes so far as to suggest that some mystical practices may someday supplant psychoanalysis as the definitive form of Western therapy (Bharati 1976: 225). However, in the end, like Underhill and Zaehner, Bharati refuses to reduce the full significance of the mystical to any simple psychological explanation. Accordingly, Bharati concludes: “My approach is anti-psychological, or rather anti-Freudian. No problem goes away when it is given a name. Fear, lust, bad mama or good mama, lecherous or impotent father – the mystic remains a mystic, he has zero-experiences, he thinks about them, talks about them – and the psychological etiology of the experience leaves him cold” (Bharati 1976: 143).

Rather than seeking to conform the “zero-experience” to any kind of psychological, social, or even, religious register, Bharati’s model calls for an aesthetic understanding that can approach the mystical as “psyche-experimentalism” (Bharati 1976: 91). In other words, once the theological, ontological, and moral claims traditionally associated with mysticism are recognized for what they are, namely, ornamental creations forcibly graphed on the interpretation of the “zero-experience” after the fact, then the mystical can be appreciated aesthetically, on its own terms, as the

pleasure of “psyche-experimentalism.”⁹⁷ Hence, for Bharati, mystical experience “is to be sought not because it is noble as wisdom and goodness are noble, but because it is an additional skill: a skill which confers delight. It also yields a highly pragmatic result, which again is value-free, it inures the practitioner against the vicissitudes of life, against boredom and despair” (Bharati 1976: 75).

Bharati’s pragmatic reading stems from his own experiences of the mystical. Alongside tantric ritual practices, Bharati also experienced the mystical through the secular use of drugs and sexual intercourse, two unorthodox techniques of ecstasy, which by traditional “religious” standards are often considered taboo. Bharati argues that, “for at least two and a half thousand years, yogis, mendicants, and mystics have thought that the specific technique they used and transmitted to their disciples was necessarily bound

⁹⁷ According to Bharati, “*the mystical experience does not confer any ontological status upon its content*” (Bharati as quoted by Kripal 2001: 239). What this means is that there is “no objective referent” for mystical experience” (Kripal 2001: 240). Thus, Bharati argues that mystical experience harbours no extraordinary moral insight whatsoever. Bharati is sceptical of moral claims based on mystical experience because the height of mystic consciousness, the “zero-experience,” is essentially an experience of oneness and questions of a moral nature require a non-monistic worldview. In other words, with the onset of the zero-experience the mystic attains a state of oneness with his or her intuitively mediated understanding of the cosmos. Moral concerns are contingent upon difference, that is, an “other” from which to relate to, and in the “zero-experience” there is no “other,” there is only oneness. Bharati states: “the mystic’s experience has no merit beyond itself; assigning moral or other value to it is both logically wrong and dangerous” (Bharati 1976: 74). It is wrong because the moral domain is predicated on difference, while mysticism is concerned with unity. It is dangerous because, if history is any indication, the collapsing of morality with mysticism can lead to religious and political despotism. However, according to G. William Barnard, Bharati’s claim that mystical experience lacks an inherent moral imperative is refuted by the historically documented cases of the Christian saints, whose charitable works demonstrate the innate connection between morality and mysticism. Barnard states, “these individuals, more than any logical argument or rousing rhetoric, make a mockery of Bharati’s claim that mystical experiences have ‘absolutely no effect on one’s moral character’” (Barnard 2002: 79). But Barnard fails to recognize the subtlety of Bharati’s position, namely, “that changes of moral quality and the addition of skills *may or may not* follow upon the mystical experience” [my italics] (Bharati 1976: 99). In other words, Bharati is not claiming that mystics cannot be moral, but rather, that the degree of moral behaviour exhibited by a saint or mystic is a product of their personal constitution and not a result of some kind of transcendent moral revelation. The question of morality is contingent on the character of the mystic separate from his or encounter with mystical consciousness. Thus, it is possible that an experience of the mystical *can* produce a moral perspective in conjunction with social expectations, but it is not necessarily an intrinsic quality of the experience per se.

to the style of life which they led and which they recommended. Again, they were and are wrong: any technique can and is used along with any style of religio-mystical life” (Bharati 1976: 132). From a cross-cultural perspective it is evident that there are a variety of different mysticisms, and each mystical tradition favors a different, cultural-specific method of attaining the “zero-experience.” Given the anthropological fact that there are so many different methods of achieving the “zero-experience,” Bharti believes that it is impossible to claim that any particular method is the “right” one.⁹⁸ All methods are equally valid, providing that they achieve the desired aim, namely, the attainment of the “zero-experience.” When it comes to the question of how to determine which methods are more valuable than others, Bharati remains a staunch pragmatist: “Mystical methods, then, are all good methods if they provide the goods: if they lead to the zero-experience” (Bharati 1976: 140).

⁹⁸ Bharati states: “It is irrelevant how a person came by his experience – through fasting, prayer, drugs, self-mortification, fornication, standing on his head, grace, listening to *Tristan and Isolde* unabridged three times in a row, etc. What counts is whether the experience satisfies criteria set up for it as autonomous” (Bharati 209: 1976)). Bharati suggests that certain methods of attaining the “zero-experience” are privileged by particular mystical traditions because, ultimately, they serve as mechanisms of political power. In other words, by sanctioning the legitimacy of a particular method for achieving mystical consciousness, the authorities of the “establishment” aim to utilize the successful achievement of the zero-experience (by means of the prescribed method) as an experiential substantiation of their ideological truth-claims. The particular methods privileged by various mystical traditions are favored precisely because they implicitly or explicitly affirm the reigning powers’ ideological domination of a given culture’s social conditions. Furthermore, by designing complex, time-consuming methods for achieving mystical consciousness, certain religious traditions try to control any anomalous or unorthodox interpretations of the zero-experience. Bharati states: “the processes of gradual training towards mystical ends are so time-absorbing, so highly formalized, and so schedule-bound, that the disciples have neither the time nor the energy to get funny ideas” (Bharati 1976: 130). In other words, mystical practices and rituals function to tame the transgressive individualism engendered by mystical experience (Bharati 1976: 130). By attempting to sanctify the “zero-experience” via religious ritual, the religious and ideological establishment of a given cultural tradition seeks to sanitize any transgressive interpretation of the “zero-experience” that does not affirm the normative worldview.

Drawing on the work of James Horne, Kripal concludes that, “Bharati was clearly arguing for the superiority of the ‘mixed mystic,’ the mystic who does not allow mysticism or its techniques to become ends in themselves but uses them to struggle with some intellectual, artistic, social, or scientific problem” (Kripal 2001: 237). Perhaps one of the greatest problems occupying Bharati’s corpus of work is the question of how to construct and maintain a “rational mysticism.” According to Bharati, “a rational mysticism is not a contradiction in terms; it is a mysticism whose limits are set by reason: a quest for the zero-experience without any concomitant claim to world-knowledge, special wisdom, or special morality. These latter three must be directly generated by reason, and by reason only” (Bharati 1976: 234). Bharati’s rational mysticism can be read as his personal attempt to construct a “mystical humanism”⁹⁹ that can simultaneously draw on the finding of both Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism. This hermeneutical marriage between the two is grounded in Bharati’s own personal mystico-erotic experiences: “Bhartai’s sexuality was a Tantric sexuality, a ritualized, aesthetic, mystical sexuality out of which he attempted to construct a cross-cultural synthesis of what he considered to be the best of Western and South Asian cultures, that is, an individualistic, rational, and cosmopolitan humanism and the stunning beauty and

⁹⁹ Bharati’s “mystical humanism” calls for a total humanization of the mystical. By this I mean that Bharati locates the value of the mystical “entirely on the constitution of the individual thinking human being,” separate from any religious moralizing and superfluous meta-physical arguments (Bharati 1961: 23). Kripal maintains that “If Bhartai was a Tantrika, then, he was first and foremost a humanist Tantrika who insisted on the secular and physical components as themselves worthy of respect, dignity, and sacrality (Kripal 2001: 248). However, although Bharati appears appreciative of the advancements a humanist critique can provide for a general understanding of mysticism, in the final analysis, the ideals of humanism are subsidiary to his mystical convictions. Bharati states: “the humanist is interested in only the human being, or, rather, in the finest achievements and possibilities of the humans individual but I seek emancipation from all bonds including humanism” (Bharati 1964: 83). Thus, Bharati remains a mystic first and a humanist second.

transformative powers of mystical experience” (Kripal 2001: 222). Ultimately, Kripal believes that Bharati's public writings are a reflection of his private mystico-erotic desires, which call attention to his personal belief that, “the most intimate and intense pleasures of the human body, far from being a hindrance on the mystical path, are in fact potent and potential sites for some of the most emotionally staggering and aesthetically beautiful revelations that human experience has to offer” (Kripal 2001: 222).

In many ways, Bharati's iconoclastic understanding of the mystical is echoed in the work of Kripal. I believe that there are at least six significant ways in which Bharati's and Kripal's views of the mystical coincide: 1) Each theorist strongly believes that “the mystical is transgressive to its psychophysiological core” (Kripal 2001: 249). 2) Both Bharati and Kripal maintain that mystical experience does not confer any transcendent moral knowledge. 3) In regard to the question of how mystics use language, both Bharati and Kripal agree that “only the scholar-mystic who could speak about the mystical in both an emotionally warm, even ecstatic, emic fashion and in an analytical, descriptive, and philosophically astute, etic way will finally be able to ‘crack the code’” (Kripal 2001: 244). 4) Issues pertaining to human sexuality, body, and gender, are central to the theoretical and interpretive strategies of both theorists. 5) The writings of both Bharati and Kripal share a mutual goal of constructing a critical dialogue between the domains of (Western) rationalism and (Eastern) mysticism, which advocates the benefits of a cross-cultural “mystical humanism.” 6) The final point of similarity concerns both Bharati's and Kripal's private and public desire “to advance a Tantic model of the mystical as the erotic” (Kripal 2001: 233).

The final theorist Kripal examines in *Roads of Excess* is the American Kabbalah scholar, Elliot Wolfson. Wolfson is a unique addition to Kripal's study for two reasons: first, he is a living author who is still writing; and second, he is Kripal's colleague and personal friend (Kripal 2001: 259). Kripal admits that Wolfson's work has played an influential role in shaping his understanding of mystical hermeneutics: "my own understanding of hermeneutics as a mystical practice is best reflected in, and indeed has been enriched and deepened by, Wolfson's own hermeneutical understandings and philosophical acumen" (Kripal 2001: 260). Wolfson's most influential text, *Through A Speculum that Shines* (1994), is the primary focus of Kripal's discussion, which he describes as a "masterful work on medieval Jewish mysticism" (Kripal 2001: 259). Kripal reads the text in two ways: "as a textual-historical study of medieval kabbalistic erotics and hermeneutics, which posited the event of revelation in and as the act of reading Torah; and as a postmodern, postcritical performance of this same erotic and hermeneutical mysticism in and as *Speculum*" (Kripal 2001: 258). In other words, *Speculum* presents Kripal with another example of his thesis about "mystical hermeneutics" in which a scholar's text performatively (re-)enacts the object of its study, in this case, the erotic mysticism of medieval Kabbalah (Kripal 2001: 279). I argue that Kripal aims to elucidate the erotic core of Wolfson's understanding of Kabbalah in particular and his hermeneutical mysticism in general. Kripal does this in two parts: first, by outlining the pertinent biographical details of Wolfson's life that led to his interest in the academic study of mysticism; and second, by tracing the various ways in which

Wolfson's text uncovers the hidden homoeroticism that characterizes his controversial reading of Kabbalah.¹⁰⁰

Wolfson was raised in Brooklyn New York in an orthodox household (Kripal 2001: 260). His father was a rabbi and many of his childhood teachers were refugees and survivors of the Holocaust (Kripal 2001: 260). According to Kripal, "the Jewish culture of his childhood...was all encompassing and strongly hinted with an aura of religious difference, historical memory, and cultural survival" (Kripal 2001: 260). As a young student Wolfson's attraction to secular philosophy and psychology deepened and he soon developed a "personal passion for mysticism"¹⁰¹ (Kripal 2001: 262). Kripal describes the evolution of Wolfson's interest in studying mysticism as follows: "Disillusioned with the surface 'pots and pans' quality of American Judaism, disturbed by orthodoxy's aversion to philosophical reflection, and seeking a spiritual discipline that did not rest on an intellectually impossible personal theism, Wolfson finally decided to pursue a path in religious studies" (Kripal 2001: 262). Kripal suggests that Wolfson's attraction to religious studies and the study of Kabbalah can in large part be read as a response to his personal estrangement from the religious and cultural upbringing of his childhood: "The existential result – much as we saw in Massignon and Bharati but in an entirely different

¹⁰⁰ According to Kripal, Wolfson's "work calls into serious question, many of the orthodoxies and common assumption of an earlier generation of Kabbalah scholars, particularly as regards the structuring nature of gender in kabbalistic culture" (Kripal 2001: 263).

¹⁰¹ Kripal writes the following about Wolfson's own personal mysticism: "In the end, I think, we must admit that there is little that we can say about the personal religious experience of Elliot Wolfson. But this, I must add, is exactly what we would expect with a Jewish mystical writer, for... the dichotomy between revelation and interpretation collapses in Jewish mysticism within an infinite textuality or hermeneutical circle in a manner that effectively renders the very categories of our essentializing question inappropriate, even a bit silly. To reiterate once again, hermeneutics itself is a kind of mysticism" (Kripal 2001: 293).

intellectual key – is some very powerful scholarship and a searching sense of religious homelessness on the margins.” (Kripal 2001: 264).

Wolfson’s general approach to the study of mysticism is largely grounded in the study of texts. For Wolfson, mystical texts signify a hermeneutical gateway from which an author and reader can mutually participate in a continual construction/deconstruction of a text’s various meanings. Wolfson claims, “the text is a mirror that reflects the reader and the reader a mirror that reflects the text” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 258).

This hermeneutical reflection between text and reader, an encounter invariably conditioned by the specific historical and cultural background of each, is the key to locating the “meaning events” encoded in mystical texts. Commenting on Wolfson’s hermeneutical approach, Kripal states:

The act of reading can be thought of as a double mirroring, with both text and reader mirroring and giving being to the other. There is no text without a reader, and there is no reader without a text. Both ‘make each other up’ within the mystery of the hermeneutical act. As Maurice Blanchot put it, the book does not become ‘the work’ until someone reads it and the word ‘being’ is pronounced: ‘The event occurs when the work becomes the intimacy between someone who writes it and someone who reads It’. We are very close here to what I have called a hermeneutical mysticism” (Kripal 2001: 270).

However, as important as “intimacy” is to the creation of a text’s “being,” Wolfson claims that a strategic distance from the text is also vital to ensure a well-rounded reading of the text’s hidden meanings, that is, its encoded “meaning events.” An uncritical intimacy or over-identification with a text can foster a naive sense of authority within the reader that the ultimate “truth” of the text’s meaning can be mastered if only he or she displays the right amount of piety or faith (Kripal 2001: 270). As with Bharati’s distinction between emic and etic mystical speech, Wolfson makes a valuable

distinction between a “pious” reading and a “scholarly” reading of mystical texts.

Wolfson writes: “The hermeneutical dialectic of the scholar requires the distancing of the reader from the text so that the reader can hear the word of the text, whereas the hermeneutical dialectic of the pious seeker demands a narrowing and eventual obliteration of distance” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 271). When it comes to the question of how to read mystical texts, then, Wolfson favors an intermediary position between intimacy and distance that can accommodate both sympathy with the meaning events of a text *and* an explicit space for criticizing those same meanings events. Kripal summarizes Wolfson’s hermeneutical position as follows:

There is no pure experience outside of or before language, and one need not escape the text to know transcendence, for the text itself calls one out of oneself by the very fact of its hermeneutical distance. What is required, then, is a kind of ‘uninterrupted listening’ and a certain ascetic approach to the act of reading as the process through which one loses oneself in the world of the text. It is only here, in the self-cancellation of the hermeneutical experience, that the meaning of the text can assert itself. This distance and this self-cancellation, moreover, are invaluable safeguards against the nationalistic and chauvinistic poses now so common in contemporary religious studies (Kripal 2001: 268).

In Wolfson’s model, reading and writing about the mystical is a dialectic process in which text/author and reader mutually engage each other in a continual and often conflicting play of intimacy and distance, disclosure and concealment, which makes the hermeneutical process itself a highly erotic practice. And it is precisely this erotic element of the hermeneutical process that Wolfson seeks to reveal in his study of Kabbalah. In *Speculum*, Wolfson frames Kabbalah as an esoteric, highly eroticized form of Jewish mysticism that “is defined by an all-encompassing androcentric phallogentrism” (Kripal 2001: 273). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, in particular, the

work of Luce Irigaray, Wolfson calls attention to how this andocentric phallogocentrism that defines Kabbalah routinely effaces female identity and experience through a complex network of rhetorical, symbolic, and theoretical maneuvering, which, in the final analysis, serves to veil an implicit homoerotic mysticism. For Wolfson, then, the question of how to address the secret meaning of Kabbalah mysticism is directly tied to various issues relating to human eroticism, sexual orientation, and gender.

Traditionally, the act of writing in Kabbalah literature is framed as an erotic activity that is often associated with the symbolic functioning of the phallus. For example, one of the most influential Kabbalah texts, the Zohar, “identified the writing instrument with the phallus and the tablet or page with the female: writing was thus homologized to phallic penetration, an inscription that becomes in other linguistic contexts a ‘knocking against’” (Kripal 2001: 275). Or, as Wolfson puts it: “the active agent of writing is the male principle; the written letters are the semen virile; and the tablet or page upon which the writing is accomplished is the female principle” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 275). Thus, in Kabbalah mysticism writing is presented as an explicitly male activity and draws its authority from the male’s capacity to possess the phallus. Because the “female principle” lacks the phallus it therefore occupies a subsidiary position in comparison to the males, signifying rather the “page” or vessel that contains the male mystic’s word/phallus.

Kabbalistic scholars traditionally interpret the Jewish rite of male circumcision as another example of “the phallic way of writing” (Kripal 2001: 277). According to Kripal, “the incision itself is seen as an act of writing, a semiotic mark, an insertion of the sign of

the covenant (*'ot berit*) on the (sexualized) flesh of the infant boy. The cut, moreover, inscribes a physical opening that in turn corresponds to an ontological opening within God through which the visionary can witness the divine pleroma” (Kripal 2001: 277). Wolfson draws an interesting connection between the symbolism of circumcision as “the opening of the flesh” to God and the hermeneutical process of reading and writing about mystical texts, for each – circumcision and the hermeneutical process – are often structured erotically in Kabbalah as a “disclosure of what has been concealed” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 278).

The imagination plays a vital role in how kabbalistic mystics understand the relationship between mystical experience and its textual representations. Generally speaking, the imagination is believed to act as the mediating agent between a mystic’s experiential vision of God and how this experiential vision is hermeneutical realized. Kripal states: “in the kabbalist world the symbolic imagination is that ‘divine element of the soul that enables one to gain access to the realm of incorporeality by transferring or transmuting sensory data and/or rational concepts into symbols” (Kripal 2001: 281). Stated simply, the kabbalist believes that the gap between the mystical (experience) and the hermeneutical (text) is bridged by the imagination.¹⁰² It is the mutual participation between an author’s imagination and a reader’s imagination that facilitates contact

¹⁰² It is important to point out that although Wolfson privileges the study of mystical texts, he does however recognize that these textual representations are in all likelihood based on real, bodily experiences. Wolfson states: “One must assume that the visions and the revelatory experience recorded in the apocalypses are not simply literal forms but reflect actual experience deriving from divine inspiration” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 283). Kripal adds that, “this is essentially the thesis of the present study, applied here to the kabbalistic texts.” (Kripal 2001: 283).

between the two across both time and space. This is possible because mystical texts are encoded with the imaginative “meaning events” of the author/mystic. In other words, according to kabbalistic mysticism, a reader can engage the author/mystic’s imagination via the text, and in turn, this hermeneutical engagement can potentially elicit an experiential encounter with the “meaning events” encoded in the text. Kripal states: “There is a very thin, perhaps dotted line, then, between the original recoded visions and the imaginative recreation of it in the mind of the reader, and under the right circumstances, the latter may actually lead to an experience of the former, always of course refashioned in terms of the visionary’s culture and psyche” (Kripal 2001: 284).

The notion that mystical texts can elicit an experiential encounter with the mystical is a widely held belief in Kabbalah (Kripal 2001: 284). Wolfson draws on the relationship between mysticism and hermeneutics as a central thesis of his *Speculum*. However, as Kripal points out, “what is of particular interest beyond this is Wolfson’s further claim that this hermeneutical mysticism was also an erotic mysticism, that the exegetical process was sexualized and gendered (and rather complexly so) down to its ontological core” (Kripal 2001: 284). Hence, Wolfson states that in Kabbalah, “textual study is presented as an intensely erotic experience...the movement of the imagination is from the human body to God and from God back to the human body again” (Wolfson as quoted by Kripal 2001: 289).

This movement of the human male body to the male God is traditionally understood to be mediated by the divine female presence or *Shekhinah* (Kripal 2001: 287). The contemplative aim of the male kabbalist mystic is to conjoin with the female

presence through the experiential, hermeneutical, and communal act of reading the Torah. The ideal result of this textual intercourse between the male mystic and the female presence is a (phallic) vision of God (Kripal 2001: 287). On the surface it is true that in Kabbalah the female presence is commonly framed as an indispensable component of the male mystic's advancement towards God. Borrowing from Wolfson, Kripal states that the female principle is "the crown that symbolizes the soul's phallic union with the divine, a union that is often described in intensely erotic terms" (Kripal 2001: 288). However, as important as the female presence is to the male kabbalist, Wolfson calls attention to the fact that the overall phallocentricism of the male kabbalist's mystical vision effectively renders the female principle void of any real meaning separate from its capacity to act as a steppingstone for the male mystic's union with a male God. The female presence ultimately serves a strategic function; namely, it veils the male mystic's secret desire to "know" a male god. In more simple, yet no less provocative terms, the heterosexually dressed symbolism surrounding the mystical heights of Kabbalah conceals a clear male homoerotic mysticism.

Commenting on Wolfson's treatment of this homoerotic structuring of the male kabbalist's mystical vision, Kripal writes the following:

One important implication of all this is that the kabbalistic vision is, much like Christian bridal mysticism and Sufi eroticism, unmistakably homoerotic in its final structure. Unlike all our previous authors, however, Wolfson sees this clearly and states it explicitly. He knows the secret, and he refuses to deny it: 'In the Jewish mystical texts it is always the male mystics visually confronting the male deity.' Indeed, he radicalizes it with his insistence that the phallocentric nature of both the mystic's sight and the object seen render the encounter doubly homoerotic, for 'the singular bond that connects the male deity and male worshiper is the penis.' Granted, there is plenty of heterosexual symbolism in the kabbalistic universe – again, just as there was in the Christian and Sufi

worlds – but it is all predicated ‘on the ontological reintegration of the feminine in the masculine, that is, heterosexuality is transformed by kabbalistic symbolism into a homoeroticism: the union of male and female is a reconstitution of the male’” (Kripal 2001: 290).

Wolfson’s work resonates with Kripal on many levels. Kripal clearly admires Wolfson’s unique approach to studying the mystical and he identifies with Wolfson’s desire to expose the erotic underbelly of the mystical, especially as it pertains to questions of gender, sexual orientation, and the interpretative art of hermeneutics.¹⁰³ Most significantly, Kripal admits that his own reading of *Speculum* was profoundly mystical:

The hermeneutical experience of reading *Speculum*, then, was quite literally a mystical one for me, not because it recorded the confessionally shared mystical experiences of Elliot Wolfson, but because it reflects back to me my own mystical experience through the mirrors of the kabbalistic texts and Wolfson’s sympathetic mirroring of them in his own eloquent prose. Exactly as the kabbalists (not to mention Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati,) claimed and Wolfson made so clear, the act of reading a text was capable of reproducing, at least at the levels of memory and nostalgia, something psychologically akin to the visionary experience that first ecstatically produced it. In Sells terms, the text encoded a meaning event that in turn could hermeneutically reflect a whole series of mystical experiences, in this case, my own (Kripal 2001: 295).

In the end, what Kripal discovers in his reading of Wolfson is both a kindred soul and a scholarly companion. For both Kripal and Wolfson are in a sense “homeless”

¹⁰³ Reflecting on the many parallels between his own work on Ramakrishna and Wolfson’s work on Kabbalah, Kripal writes: “Both of us, quite independently, had demonstrated a whole series of theses with entirely different material; that the symbolic system set up by a male mystic to sexually encounter a male deity; that the former fact inevitably transformed symbolic heterosexuality (female soul/male divine) into a lived homoeroticism (human male/divine male) that the sexual nature of the mysticism results in a distinctly esoteric structure; that such esoteric-erotic systems, while seeming to affirm a feminine aspect of the Godhead, actually end up erasing woman almost entirely from the system; that psychoanalytic reductionism, while helpful as a hermeneutical tool, in the end collapses within the symbolic world of the tradition, since the ground to which the kabbalists or Tantrikas reduced their own visionary and mystical experiences was posited as divine (in the kabbalists case, the divine soul; in the Tantric case, the goddess’s divine sakti); and that, in Wolfson’s terms, the “renunciation of heterosexual carnality and the concomitant affirmation of the homosocial rapture of mystical ecstasy expresses itself in terms of an erotic passion that binds together a mystical fraternity, in the kabbalist context through the phallic gaze encountering the divine phallic object, in Ramakrishna’s case through the symbol of the self-born phallus (lingam) that generates devotional love between the avatar and his all-male community” (Kripal 2001: 297).

scholars who seek to peer behind the secret veil of orthodoxy in order to radically challenge the sexual prejudice that insidiously shadows so many mystical traditions in both the East and the West. Moreover, each scholar recognizes that one of the most valuable tools in combating this problems is the utilization of a psychoanalytically-grounded hermeneutic that can both sympathetically and critically address the erotic significance of the mystical. Overall, I believe that the work of both Wolfson and Kripal is especially concerned with highlighting the various ways the erotic impacts the broader social and ethical understanding of the politics of embodiment and the pivotal role gender and sexual orientation plays in the construction, interpretation, and representation of the mystical.

I have highlighted three interrelated theses operating throughout Kripal's *Roads of Excess*. First is Kripal's thesis that scholarly texts about mysticism often reflect a scholar's personal experience of the mystical. These mystical experiences are often encoded as "meaning events" within the body of a scholar's text. Alongside this representational function, mystical texts can also serve an evocative function; that is, under the right conditions reading mystical texts can potentially activate or "rekindle" the encoded "meaning events," which, in turn, can bring about a reader's hermeneutical encounter with the mystical. Kripal refers to this process as "mystical hermeneutics."

Second, some of the most historically salient features of this mystical hermeneutics tend to revolve around issues relating directly to the erotic. In other words, when the "secret" of the mystical is encoded in a text, it is usually expressed in erotic terms. This tendency to express the mystical through the erotic stems from the

phenomenological parallels many mystics of various mystical traditions have identified between the heights of sexual experience and the heights of mystical experience. Each experience can potentially produce an embodied sense of ecstasy that is ostensibly beyond words.

Third, Kripal claims that the relationship between the erotic and this mystical hermeneutics is gendered. Within monotheistic religious traditions this gendering process tends to privilege a theoretical, symbolic, and rhetorical understanding of mystical experience as a male-to-male experience. Once this male homoerotic mysticism is considered canonical to tradition, it systematically erases or at least mutes any alternative understanding of the mystical. Furthermore, if history is any indication, it is particularly hazardous to the alternative experiences of women mystics and heterosexually oriented males.

In *Roads of Excess* Kripal not only calls attention to the erotic significance of mystical hermeneutics, but also demonstrates that the various ways certain mystics and scholars of mysticism write about the mystical has serious psychological and social ramifications concerning how human beings relate to “God,” “self,” and “other.” In other words, a mystic’s desire for God’s love does not end in “heaven,” it always returns back again, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, as an inverse reflection of where this desire began, namely, in the human body. In Kripal’s model, then, the realization of the secret that mystical love is an empowered reflection of human love is key to unlocking the emancipatory potential of certain mystical states of consciousness. I believe that

Kripal's public acknowledgment of this erotic secret stems from his own private mystical experiences, to which I now turn.

THE NIGHT THAT ILLUMINATES

Roads of Excess is interlaced with five confessional interludes that constitute Kripal's "secret talk." Taken from his personal journals, Kripal's "secret talk" reflects his thoughts about how his own personal mystical visions and experiences impacted both his theoretical and methodological approach to studying the mystical (Kripal 2001: 14). In effect, Kripal's "secret talk" documents the experiential evolution of how his own mystical dreams, visions, and ecstasies helped inspire, shape, and direct the writings of his first two major works, *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*. It is here, in the content of Kripal's "secret talk" that the self-reflexivity of Kripal's overall method becomes most apparent. With such a confessional move, Kripal aims to directly engage the reader at a personal level by publicly sharing his secrets and performatively replicate his thesis of "mystical hermeneutics." The following discussion will first examine Kripal's understanding of how his mystical experiences impacted his personal and public study of the mystical. Second, in light of Kripal's "secret talk," I will briefly discuss the seven "palaces of wisdom" that Kripal outlines in his conclusion of *Roads of Excess*, which I believe neatly summarizes his innovative approach to studying the mystical.

Kripal's first "secret talk," titled, *The Vajrasva Vision*, provides a glimpse into the adolescent turmoil that set in motion Kripal's interest in the erotic study of mysticism. Specifically, Kripal relates how he was haunted by a troubling memory of a "waking fantasy shortly after puberty" (Kripal 2001: 90). Kripal describes the fantasy as follows: "I would see a naked ithyphallic Jesus on the cross with myself and the Virgin Mary standing beneath him" (Kripal 2001: 90). Given Kripal's Catholic upbringing it is no

surprise that his erotically toned fantasy of Jesus and Mary generated deep feelings of shame and guilt. Kripal's guilt gradually consumed him and he recalls that, "for the next six years, from shortly after puberty to my junior year in the seminary, I would engage myself in various ascetic practices, mostly involving different forms of fasting, until my once 6'1" frame was reduced to a skeleton-like 125 pounds, a mere shadow of my former physical self – a modern American case of what Rudolph Bell would call, appropriately I think, 'holy anorexia'" (Kripal 2001: 91).

Kripal discovered a way to deal with his "neurosis" while studying to be a monk at a Benedictine seminary (Kripal 2001: 91). Under the guidance of a psychoanalytically-trained monk, Kripal began to come to terms with the possibility that his guilt-laden fantasy likely stemmed from an unresolved Oedipus complex. According to Kripal, "the divine erection, I realized, was aimed, if always unconsciously, at (the Virgin) Mother, and for this it had to be crucified, it had to be killed" (Kripal 2001: 91). Hence, Kripal's desire to starve himself, which he interprets as an unconscious coping mechanism: "To cope with my unacknowledged oedipal feelings, I had effectively attacked the source of my illicit desires, the body, with a piece of deadly symbolic logic: you desire the mother, the mother is food, you cannot have the mother, you cannot have food" (Kripal 2001: 92).

Kripal admits that his exposure to Freud quite literally saved his life (Kripal 2001: 92). Yet, at the same time, he was also convinced that there was "something more" going on within his mind/soul that psychoanalytic theory was incapable of adequately addressing. This "something more" it turns out, was the mystical, which manifested itself

in a dream, or, as Kripal puts it, with “its numinous quality, its energy, and its striking symbolism, it was more of a vision or ‘myth-dream’” (Kripal 2001: 93). Kripal describes his mystical vision as follows:

The dream involved three presences: myself, a young, attractive maiden dressed in the manner of a Greek or Roman woman, and a winged unicorn whose literally burning body appeared like a brilliant black lightening. The maiden said nothing but simply smiled and led me to the edge of what looked like a very deep, very turbulent black sea. Just below the waters burned the fires of a terrifyingly beautiful winged horse with a single horn coming out of its head. Neither the horn nor the wings were fully grown. The Fire fascinated me – dangerous, dark, and yet filled with light. I instinctively know that it was my task to get this mysterious being out of the water, and so I entered the waves and tried to pull him up, but to no avail. The scene then shifted and I saw myself as a youth riding naked on the now fully winged and fully horned being into the sky (Kripal 2001: 93).

This dream-vision had a profound impact on the then twenty-one-year-old Kripal. Most significantly, the contents of this experience, which he later labeled *The Vajrasva Vision*,¹⁰⁴ would subsequently occupy his mind for many years as both a mystic and a scholar of comparative mysticism. For instance, according to Kripal, “the dream was structured around a profound *coincidentia oppositorum* that would engage me for years to come, that between the mystical and the sexual, or what I would later call the erotic. The winged fiery unicorn, after all, embodied at least two sets of opposites in a single form: it was sexual (it had a phallic horn) and yet somehow spiritual (it had wings and flew), and it mysteriously burned under the water. If this was sex, it was God’s sex” (Kripal 2001: 93). It is not an overstatement to claim, then, that *The Vajrasva Vision* played a pivotal role in shaping Kripal’s conception of the erotic. Moreover, Kripal’s interpretation of

¹⁰⁴ Kripal states: “I would decide to call this dream-vision the *vajrasva* vision, as the Tibetan symbol of the *vajra* – at once ritual object, thunderbolt, diamond, phallus, and marker of nirvanic emptiness – mirrored in a striking way the glistening brilliance and felt energies I experienced in the dream of the horse’s (*asva*) horn (*vajra*) and its surrounding images of dark fire, amorphous water, and transcendent wings” (Kripal 2001: 93).

The Vajrasva Vision would also anticipate the “transformational” model that would later come to characterize his psychoanalytic approach to studying the mystical. This is made evident by Kripal’s recognition that alongside its mystical dimensions, the symbolism of *The Vajrasva Vision* also signified a clear oedipal fantasy, one that he would have to confront and work through in order to find any hope of a lasting “resolution” with his unconscious desire to take the Mother as the Lover (Kripal 2001: 93).¹⁰⁵

Seeking to resolve his unconscious conflict, Kripal sought refuge in reading and studying Christian mystical literature, which he hoped could shed light on the meaning of his mystico-erotic vision. However, instead of answers, Kripal only discovered more questions, questions that would deeply alienate him from his cherished religious tradition, and eventually, his chosen vocation as a Catholic monk. Kripal states: “I quickly realized that the symbolism of the bridal tradition was in clear conflict with my own sexual nature: how could I, a heterosexual man, erotically engage a male Christ? It was not that I found the implied homosexuality of the symbolism morally troubling: it was simply that I found it unengaging” (Kripal 2001: 94). In other words, Kripal’s sexual orientation prohibited him from identifying with the male mystics and mystical symbolism of the Catholic tradition because it ultimately privileges a homoerotic structuring of mystical experience that contradicted the heteroerotic revelations of his vision.

¹⁰⁵ In terms of the vision’s oedipal symbolism, Kripal calls attention to the following: “the small-horned unicorn can be read as a self-representation of the little boy and his feelings of sexual inadequacy before the Mother, the fearful waters can be seen as a symbol of the Mother and what it might feel like to be absorbed back into her womb, and the virgin maiden...was operating as a transitional figure between the Mother and the Lover (Kripal 2001: 93).

The ontological framework of Christianity also posed a serious problem for Kripal. Generally speaking, Christian ontology posits an intractable division between “spirit and sex” (Kripal 2001: 94). In similar fashion to the way Kripal’s vision compelled him to reject the homoerotic symbolism of male bridal mysticism, so too Kripal recognized that the ontology of *The Vajrasva Vision* radically challenged the traditional ontological views of Christianity. Kripal states:

Here in the dream-vision there was no division between spirit and sex – they were one and the same. But in waking life, in my religious tradition, these two realms of being were clearly set apart, separated through innumerable symbolic, doctrinal, historical, and institutional structures. What could a sermon on the sacrality of marriage or the holiness of sexuality possibly mean coming from celibate institution that systematically excluded women from its ranks and held up a virgin mother and a sexless savior as the ideal woman and man? Despite what anyone said or could say, it was patently obvious to me that to be holy was to be sexless (Kripal 2001: 94).

Essentially, Kripal’s vision conveys a nondualistic understanding of the relationship between “spirit and sex.” Ontologically speaking, this means that body and soul are two different modes of the same being. This of course is anathema to the traditional Christian perspective, which tends to view the body as inferior to the soul; it is a tomb that must be transcended. Given his personal history of “holy anorexia” and the existential effects of his mystical vision, Kripal could no longer stomach a world-view that could so easily oppress the body and its desires. Thus, he was forced to question his future in the Church.

Kripal believes that the combination of these three factors – his mystical vision, his sexual orientation, and, his “ontological crisis” – precipitated his eventual turn from Christianity (Kripal 2001: 94). Kripal states: “at some point I had to admit that there

simply were no adequately symbolic resources within Christianity to nurture and eventually realize the union of the mystical and the sexual I had known intuitively in the dream-vision. Ontologically, the tradition's dualism (with a God set apart from the created order) rendered any attempt to divinize eros, as my dream had so clearly done, impossible. Symbolically, the male nature of God made a heteroerotic approach to the divine through this eros equally impossible" (Kripal 2001: 94). Estranged from his religious tradition, and desperate to find a suitable way to interpret and realize the mystico-erotic meaning of his vision, Kripal opted to become "my own spiritual director through the art and practice that still made sense to me, the comparative study of religion. I graduated from the seminary and its nurturing monastic tutelage and went to Chicago to study the history of religions" (Kripal 2001: 96).

The comparative study of religion provided Kripal with a rich resource of different materials that could help him to locate an alternative way to decipher and make sense of his mystico-erotic vision. Kripal was immediately attracted to Hinduism in particular because he believed that certain Hindu mystical traditions, especially Tantra, shared a similar mystico-erotic structure as his own vision. Kripal states:

In essence, Hinduism saved me by giving me back who I was by assuring me that being heterosexual and aspiring to a sexually expressed mystical life were not mutually exclusive options. I was struck in particular by the Hindu Tantra, as I saw it as the mirror opposite of Christian bridal mysticism. Here, after all, was a tradition that saw the human aspirant as masculine and the divine as feminine. Here, I believed was a tradition in which I could find an erotic mysticism that made sense, that is, one in which male had erotic encounters with females and not other males. Here, finally and most important, was a tradition that had developed an entire spectrum of monistic and nondual ontologies that, at least in theory, promised to make some sense of the intimate connection between the sexual and the mystical experiences I had seen so darkly in my dreams. Such nondualisms, I hoped, devoid of the usual theistic assumption about God's transcendence,

did not have to ‘split’ the body and soul apart in a dualistic fashion. The sacralization of sexuality seemed to be a genuine possibility here (Kripal 2001: 150).

Drawing on the nondualistic intuitions of his vision, Kripal sought to study Tantra in order to help him conceptualize a complementary understanding of the relationship between the body and the soul, the erotic and the mystical. This search would eventually lead him to the writings of Ramakrishna. While doing research on Ramakrishna in Calcutta, Kripal experienced a series of intense encounters with the mystical.¹⁰⁶ One in particular, which he loosely refers to as “that Night,” proved to be especially profound.

Kripal describes his experience of “that Night” as follows:

Suddenly, without warning, a powerful electric-like energy flooded the body with wave after wave of an unusually deep and uniform arousal. I tried to hold the energies in as *lingams* spontaneously emerged and disappeared in a fluid dream space. At some point, the energies gathered together, as if they themselves were conscious, and erupted ‘in’ a kind of psychic implosion. As I felt my ‘I’ being sucked up into an ecstasy that felt eerily too much like death, I watched my legs and torso float uncontrollably toward the ceiling. Quite unaccustomed to death or weightlessness (be they physical or symbolic), I desperately grabbed the bed frame and, in a scene that seemed as bizarre then as it sounds now, instinctively tried to embody the energies in order to bring them ‘back down’ into my physical frame. After much gymnastic twisting and turning and holding on, I finally awoke (Kripal 2001: 201).

“That Night” proved significant for both Kripal’s personal understanding of the mystical and his public study of the life and teachings of Ramakrishna. In terms of the ladder’s effect, Kripal interprets his experience of “that Night” as an invaluable source of knowledge that helped to facilitate his sympathetic approach to understanding Ramakrishna’s divine “madness.” Kripal states:

¹⁰⁶ Kripal states: “I had a series of highly symbolic ecstatic experiences that were unmistakably sexual and mystical and whose meanings seemed to point in powerful, if still hidden, ways to the ontological identity of human sexuality and the psychological realities experienced in ecstasy, vision, and mystical union. This is what I would later call ‘the erotic’” (Kripal 2001: 200).

I quite naturally added this strange and yet unmistakably real experience to my otherwise perfectly normal academic toolbox; there was historical criticism, there was philology, there was textual analysis, there was psychoanalysis, and then there was that Night. It didn't seem to fit at all, but it was there. The experience was unimportant and even irrelevant to those aspects of the study that could be established through historical, philological, or analytical methods; dream states, after all, are no substitute for historical knowledge, language study, and theoretical sophistication. But the experience did have methodological implications, for it made me very wary of methods that would reduce Ramakrishna's own mystico-erotic experiences to the "nothing but's" and clinical jargon of classical psychoanalysis. Without that Night, I am quite certain that I would have been quite happy with such reductionism and would have painted the saint as hopelessly neurotic; that, after all, is what he and his strange states often look like from the outside, But I had been, somehow, "on the inside" of similar states, and I suspected that the neurotic saint I saw was only a half-truth (Kripal 2001: 202).

Engrossed in his readings of various mystical texts about Ramakrishna and Tantra in general, Kripal had a profound mystical experience that played a major role in shaping the way he interpreted the mystico-erotic experiences of Ramakrishna. In a very real sense, then, Kripal's public reading of Ramakrishna was to a large extent based on his own private (subjective) mystical experiences. From this context, *Kali's Child* can be read as a product of the hermeneutical union Kripal established between his own mystical experiences and those he uncovered "in the Bengali texts" he was studying (Kripal 2001: 201). Kripal admits that "the experience of that Night was a profoundly hermeneutical one. And it became only more so when I recreated it again in my own text (and now again, in this text)" (Kripal 2001: 203). In other words, *Kali's Child* is a textual realization of Kripal's own mystico-erotic desires as mediated by his hermeneutical encounter with Ramakrishna. Similarly, *Roads of Excess*, which documents the various manifestations of this "mystical hermeneutics" in the work of Underhill, Massignon,

Zaehner, Bharati, Wolfson, and Kripal himself, serves as further proof that reading and writing about the mystical can in itself be profoundly mystical.

Kripal's experience of "that Night" also had a deep impact on how he understood the trajectory of his own personal mysticism. Kripal reads his refusal to be fully "absorbed" by the energies of his ecstasy and subsequent descent back into the body (and by extension, the social world in general), as signaling "a phallic position, a 'heroic' decision not 'to become one.' I thus emerge from the Mother a man" (Kripal 2001: 254). In other words, drawing on a clearly Tantric worldview, Kripal argues that his decision to resist "being absorbed into the abyss" is predicated on his desire to engage the divine not as a Mother but as a Lover, which, ideally, can permit him to be a mystic and, to borrow from Leuba, also live "a normal married life" (Leuba 1925: 213). Most significantly, Kripal's decision to maintain his "egoic consciousness" instilled him with the conviction that mysticism is not only about the cultivation of spontaneous bouts of ecstasy, rather, mysticism is about achieving an embodied state of existential continuity with oneself and the cosmos that is teleologically meaningful (Kripal 2001: 257).

In the concluding section of *Roads of Excess* Kripal outlines seven "interior palaces of wisdom" that I believe succinctly captures both the theoretical and methodological aims of his general model for studying the mystical (Kripal 2001: 306). These "palaces of wisdom" signify Kripal's public revelation of how his private mystical experiences and hermeneutical encounters with certain mystics and mystical texts, helped shape the direction of both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*. I argue that the scholarly findings of these two works mutually imbricate each other. Thus they ought to be read as

co-extensive products of Kripal's singular desire to demonstrate the erotic significance of the mystical. Stated simply, the wisdom embodied by both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* is the kind of wisdom that can only be drawn from genuine experience, and both these texts serve as a testimony to Kripal's (postmodern) belief that mystical experience is always already a narrative event.

The first palace of wisdom that Kripal identifies is "excess." Kripal claims that "for whatever else the mystical might be, it is more often than not that which exceeds and transgresses and goes beyond the normal workings of human consciousness. It is that religious technique which employs excess on the road to new forms of consciousness and their subsequent wisdom" (Kripal 2001: 29). Kripal believes that excess is everywhere in the mystical literature of both the East and the West. From Ramakrishna's perverse visions, to Bharati's hedonism and Wolfson's alternative reading of Kabbalah, the mystical, by its very nature, appears to often operate beyond the "normal" working channels of conventional reality. Even in places where this excessive aspect of the mystical is strategically marginalized, as in the cases of Underhill, Massignon and Zaehner, whose writings tend to downplay its significance through various rhetorical maneuvers, it is still present "just behind the corner, in the footnotes, between the lines, in what is not said" (Kripal 2001: 307). Essentially, Kripal's writings suggest that, "when we are looking for mysticism what we usually find is some form of psychological, physical, sexual, or moral excess. Human beings, after all, do not normally unite

themselves with the universe, nor do they routinely leave their bodies to become one with the divine” (Kripal 2001: 307).¹⁰⁷

Kripal’s second palace of wisdom is “absence.” Absence for Kripal refers to a kind of methodological distancing between the researcher and his or her object of study. Recall that Bharati believed that scholars of mysticism must maintain a distinction between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) language in order to clarify a mystic’s truth-claims. Moreover, Wolfson argues that scholars must be cautious that he or she does not over-identify with the texts they study because a certain distance is required to let the text speak on its own terms. Similarly, Kripal claims that, “in order to create art or scholarship or culture out of the mystical, some distance is necessary. It seems more than apparent that mystical experience may often act as a powerful hermeneutical catalyst but that is *not* sufficient to produce sound scholarship. In the end, there simply are no substitutes for philological training, fieldwork, theoretical sophistication, peer criticism, and, above all, radical self-reflexivity. And to be self-reflexive is already to be two, to be distant from oneself”¹⁰⁸ (Kripal 2001: 310).

“Art” is Kripal’s third palace of wisdom. In different ways, the writings of Underhill and Bharati call attention to the correspondence between the mystic and the

¹⁰⁷ Kripal also calls attention to the fact that from a conventional standpoint, many of the traditional mystical techniques designed to facilitate an experience of the mystical can be easily considered excessive. For example, “psychological drugs, sexually transgressive practices, sensory deprivation, paradoxical teachings, sleep deprivation, fasting, and ascetic violence are among the more common means in the history of religions, but psychological and physical trauma of any sort are often equally, if not far more, effective” (Kripal 2001: 307).

¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, likely drawing on his own experiences while writing *Kali’s Child*, Kripal points out that maintaining a distance from one’s object of study can in fact open up new avenues of investigation that would be likely impossible to detect as an insider: “remaining on the outside of a mystical tradition allows one, *precisely by virtue of that same distance*, to go deeper inside than even the insider will allow himself to go” (Kripal 2001: 322).

artist. Kripal also believes that there is some kind of intimate connection between the creative desires of both the artist and the mystic. For Kripal, this connection stems from the unique ability of the both artist and mystic to draw on their imagination to create personal symbols that produce real effects in the bodies, minds, and worlds in which they participate. Parsons' summary of Freud's understanding of art's relationship to psychoanalysis can provide further insight on this point:

Art...never made epistemological assertions about reality, nor was it able to construct a world-view. It was an 'illusion,' but pretended to nothing more. Artists, moreover, existing at the margins of culture, seemed to have an unusual access to the unconscious and the talent to represent unconscious processes in symbolic, experience-distant ways. Art could be therapeutic in providing an outlet for institutional gratification and edifying when it stirred the imagination and ignited introspection. Thus conceived, art had a special relationship to psychoanalysis (Parsons as quoted by Kripal 2001: 310).

Kripal believe that mystics, like artists, "have an unusual access to the unconscious," and much like art, mysticism is an imaginative and introspective pursuit that is gratifying, edifying and potentially therapeutic. In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal is especially concerned with highlighting the creative way in which modern scholars of mysticism employ the art of hermeneutics to engage textually with the imaginations of mystics in history. Most significantly for Kripal, in contrast to the traditional religious approach to mysticism, this "scholarly mysticism," which Kripal's own work exemplifies, "has abandoned its metaphysical pretensions, its historical literalisms, and especially its premodern, authoritarian ethical systems. It has become a kind of mystical humanism or postmodern psychology. It can laugh. It has become the palace of art" (Kripal 2001: 311).

Kripal's fourth palace of wisdom is the "erotic." In many ways, Kripal's public study of the mystical, as represented by *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*, is motivated by his personal desire to discover a heterosexual erotic mysticism with which he could personally identify. To this end, Kripal admits that he failed because what he discovered is that there are relatively very few, if any, genuine male heterosexually oriented mystical traditions (Kripal 2001: 312). However, Kripal's failure did in fact serve a positive purpose in that it exposed him to the fact that all human sexualities, including his own, are a psychosocial construction of history. Kripal notes how "very much like the illusory, constructed nature of my ego, which showed itself as ephemeral and nonexistent that Night in Calcutta, human sexualities appear, after the search, as fluid plural processes of an ever-changing present, not stable and easily identifiable binary things that we can somehow find mirrored in the texts and cultural practices of the past" (Kripal 2001: 312). And this realization, Kripal argues, holds the key to practicing "a more precise comparative erotics of mysticism" (Kripal 2001: 310).

What has Kripal's "comparative erotics" revealed about our historical and contemporary understanding of the mystical? For one thing, Kripal's "comparative erotics" demonstrates that our hermeneutical encounters with the mystical are drawn from actual experiences that are both metaphorically *and* literally sexual. In other words, when a mystic reveals "the secret" of the mystical in his or her text, this secret is often encoded in erotic terms. Kripal's "comparative erotics" highlights the fact that this erotic disclosure of the secret is often derived from actual physical, sexual experiences. Kripal points out that one of the most influential Christian theologians, Bonaventure, "was quite

clear that the ecstasies of male mystics often produce real sexual fluids: ‘ In spiritualibus affectionibus carnalis fluxus liquore maculantur’”(Kripal 2001: 72).¹⁰⁹ Kripal is convinced that, “homoerotic or heteroerotic, the spiritual affections are also sexual sensations with real, physiological, fluid analogues. The term ‘metaphor,’ I would suggest, does not even begin to suggest what is actually at work here”¹¹⁰ (Kripal 2001: 72).

Furthermore, Kripal’s “comparative erotics” also reveals that masculine subjectivity plays a hegemonic role in dictating the experiential, interpretative, and representational meaning of both traditional and contemporary mystical discourse. Kripal turns to the work of Lacan, as articulated by Kaja Silverman, in order to elucidate the various ways erotic desire impacts the construction of masculine subjectivity in its relation to the symbolic order. Following Lacan, Silverman argues that the symbolic order is itself a patriarchal structure (the name-of-the father) that derives its authority from its performative privileging of male subjectivity (Kripal 2001: 313). Drawing on Silverman’s analysis, Kripal claims that, “masculinity is thus a ‘crucial site’ for not only creating but also renegotiating our own dominant fictions, our *vraisemblance*. Accordingly, any attempt to reconfigure male subjectivity in order to make room for a more justly structured gender order must also effectively ‘render null and void virtually everything else that commands general belief’” (Kripal 2001: 313). In other words, to call into question the constructed nature of masculine subjectivity is tantamount to

¹⁰⁹ Kripal’s translation is: “Within the spiritual affections, they are stained with the liquid of the carnal flow” (Kripal 2001: 72).

¹¹⁰ Kripal states: “Surely, then, it is not unreasonable to suggest that these textual sexualities bear some psychological relationship to the actual sexualities of the texts’ authors” (Kripal 2001: 72).

denying the veracity of our symbolic reality. But this, Kripal argues, is what mystical experience invariably does; namely, it seeks to transgressively expose the constructed nature of our “dominant fictions” and their effects on the social construction of gender, sexuality and identity in general (Kripal 2001: 314). Once again, drawing on Silverman, Kripal suggests that,

Mystical masculinities, equally ‘perverse’ in their rejection of socialized heterosexuality, call into question not only conventional heterosexual male subjectivity, but ‘reality’ itself, for this ‘reality’ is always defined, preserved, and sacralized by the social construction of this same sexual identity. Conversely (and rather ironically), heterosexual masculinities do the same once they are placed in the many homoerotic subcultures of these same traditions, for there they can only call into serious question the patriarchal maleness of God as they seek a more feminine divine Presence (Kripal 2001: 314).

From this perspective, the erotic for Kripal is not only a methodological tool, it also serves as a psychic “probe” that can potentially expose the constructed nature of (sexual) identity and by extension, the constructed nature of (symbolic) reality (Kripal 2001: 315).¹¹¹ This potentially destabilizing quality of the erotic speaks to the idiosyncratic and often ambivalent ways in which Ramakrishna, Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati, Wolfson, and Kripal himself, value the relationship between the sexual and the mystical. In a very real sense, the stability of their whole (symbolic) world is at stake. Borrowing from Lacan, Kripal states:

It is in this temporary dissolution of male sexual identities and their attending subjectivities and reality-fiction in the mystical and maternal realm of the imaginary that constitutes our fourth glimpsed palace of wisdom, the palace of the erotic, of the sexual collapsed back on itself in a kind of psychic implosion or nondual pleasure, in what Lacan might call ‘a jouissance that is beyond,’ that is, a jouissance of the whole body and of being that is beyond the phallus and its less-than-polymorphous concentration on itself.

¹¹¹ In other words, by destabilizing a subject’s relation to the *symbolic*, mystical experience creates a unique transitional space that provides a subject with the opportunity, however brief, to reassess his or her position within the *symbolic*.

Handled properly, the erotic as *jouissance* can become a place of masculine transfiguration anew in a form that remains more porous and open to other modes of sexual subjectivity, including and especially those that we normally label ‘mystical’ (Kripal 2001: 315).

Kripal’s fifth palace of wisdom is “ethical criticism.” Kripal’s understanding of the relationship between ethics and mysticism is quite complex. On the one hand, he refuses to accept the traditional assumption that an authentic mystical experience is contingent on any kind of moral imperative. Yet, on the other hand, Kripal recognizes that scholars of mysticism are often confronted with profound ethical problems when studying the mystical comparatively. Moreover, Kripal’s own model presents an ethical challenge in itself in that it aims to “reconfigure” our conventional understanding of masculine subjectivity (Kripal 2001: 316). Although each of these ethical aspects of Kripal’s work is interrelated at some level, for the sake of clarity I will tackle each issue separately.

First, in contrast to the views upheld by Underhill, Massignon, and Zaehner, Kripal is convinced that “the mystical is *not* the ethical” (Kripal 2001: 318). Similar to Bharati, Kripal believes that ethics is a category of human experience that requires a difference, that is, an “other” from which to relate, whereas mysticism is concerned with unity and the obliteration of difference (Kripal 2001: 316).¹¹² Kripal states, “the mystical cannot lead to the ethical without considerable help from outside and elsewhere, that is,

¹¹² Further evidence of his claim that the “mystical is not the ethical” is offered by the psychological mechanisms that he identifies as catalysts of mystical experience. According to Kripal, “it is often the case that certain types of altered states of consciousness are psychologically accessible only because of clearly and decisively tragic events, few of which we would want to call ‘moral.’ As I have argued elsewhere, the house of the mystical cannot be reduced to its various doors. How one got in and what is inside are two very different issues” (Kripal 2001: 319).

from reason, political theory, moral debate, and a love of human beings, not as ciphers for grand metaphysical realities ('Christ,' 'Brahman,' 'emptiness,' or whatever), but as human beings in all their mundane and messy glory" (Kripal 2001: 318). In other words, mystical subjectivity may help to illuminate the injustices of our social world by calling into question our "dominant fictions" however, to make any lasting change of an ethical order requires something much more than ecstasy, namely, it requires a critical social engagement with the reality of human suffering. Thus, Kripal maintains that "near the end of my own road of excess lies the palace not of divinization or divine love or transcendence from this world, but of a mystically enriched humanism and a passion for social and sexual justice within *this* world" (Kripal 2001: 319).

With regard to the ethical challenges scholars encounter through his or her comparative study of mysticism, Kripal's model appears to privilege a method of participant-observation that can simultaneously engage with the object of study without losing sight of his or her "objective" aims. This process entails a serious ethical challenge for the scholar because he or she must ultimately determine the parameters of what constitutes being an "insider" or an "outsider" in relation to his or her object of study. Negotiating this line between the emic and the etic can be morally troubling because the scholar "must imaginatively relive or even replicate the symbolic world of the texts or community being studied, *and* he must step back and outside this world to analyze it with the critical tools of the modern study of religion. She must be both an aspiring Gnostic *and* a radical skeptic" (Kripal 2001: 320). The ethical challenge of course lies in how to decide when to be a "Gnostic" and when to be a "radical skeptic."

Kripal's desire to "transfigure male subjectivity" poses another compelling ethical challenge for both mystics and scholars of mysticism. Kripal maintains that a male mystic's erotic encounter with the mystical is often conditioned by the "socially defining character of masculinity" (Kripal 2001: 315). In a Lacanian register, what this means is that male mystical subjectivity is a construction of the phallic economy of the symbolic. While it is true that certain male mystics can identify with the "not-all" of female *jouissance*, generally speaking, the erotic subjectivity of most male mystics is phallic in structure. We see this clearly in the writings of Massignon and Zaehner, who attempt to master their homoerotic desire through a phallic engagement with a male Presence, which ultimately results in an imaginary propagation of the symbolic androcentrism and subsequent misogyny that defines the sexual ethos of the mystical traditions with which they identify.

In a clearly ethical tone, Kripal argues that if we ever hope to construct an understanding of mystical subjectivity that can sincerely contest rather than conform to the sexual and social inequalities of the real world, a radical reconfiguration of male mystical subjectivity is required (Kripal 2001: 316). Kripal's understanding of male subjectivity mirrors Lacan's distinction between male *jouissance* and female *jouissance*, the former defined by the desire to "be-all" and conforms to the symbolic and the latter referring to a desire to be "not-all" and transcend the symbolic. However, in this instance the main difference between Kripal and Lacan is that Kripal explicitly recognizes that any reconfiguration of male mystical subjectivity requires a willed engagement in the social

world and the nerve to openly criticize the various ideological apparatuses that instigate and benefit from the privileging of male subjectivity. Accordingly, Kripal states:

Such a masculine transfiguration ultimately demands and relies upon not the delight of mystical union, but the always agonistic process of ethical criticism. Mystical merger, however profound, however blissful, is never sufficient, is never enough, for the social world in which we live are defined and determined not by union, but by *difference*, and difference is the realm, the only realm, of ethics. Hence the need to submit both the mystical traditions themselves and our own hermeneutical interaction with them to a serious and prolonged ethical critique. This willingness, I would suggest, is our fifth palace of wisdom (Kripal 2001: 316).

“Paradox” is Kripal’s sixth palace of wisdom. At the heart of Kripal’s understanding of paradox is the *coincidentia oppositorum* that defines both his personal and public approach to studying the mystical. I believe that Kripal’s whole model is essentially grounded in this *coincidentia oppositorum*. For example, the centerpiece of Kripal’s model, the erotic, signifies a paradoxical fusion between sex and spirit, body and mind, immanence and transcendence. Hence, the study of mysticism for Kripal requires one to continually tarry with paradox.¹¹³ Kripal himself attempts to negotiate this epistemological quagmire by adopting a dialectic understanding of the mystical that can seemingly accommodate paradox. This is possible because Kripal’s dialecticism exchanges the conventional binary type of either/or logic for a nondual, both/and type of

¹¹³ Kripal states: “I am proposing a whole series of seemingly paradoxical positions: that we not fear to see the truly sexual in the genuinely spiritual, with all this implies about the roles that gender, sexual orientation, and human physiology play in religious experience; that we not assume that ‘enlightened’ states of consciousness and psychopathology are mutually exclusive; that we not lock mystical experiences away in some airtight categorical safe (like “purity” or “perfection”) to protect them (and ourselves) from the moral, cross-cultural, and political issues of antinomianism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and censorship that appear in these mystical traditions with such troubling consistency; and that, finally and most important, we challenge the dichotomy between insider and outsider and not assume either that the historian, psychologist, or anthropologist who seems to be on the outside – and in many senses truly is – does not also know and appreciate something of the shimmering truths of which the insider so passionately speaks or that the insider, however devoted to an ideal, cannot also see clearly and bravely something of the actual of which the scholar tries to speak. Scholars are not always religiously inept, and disciples are seldom stupid” (Kripal 2001: 323).

logic. From this nondualistic perspective, it is logically consistent to accept the premise that an experience can be both sexual and spiritual, or that God is both “One” and “All.” In terms of Kripal’s approach, the net result of this paradoxical nondualism is a complex “spiral” model of the mystical that openly accepts the possibility that there is no end or final “truth” to be revealed, only new ways of conceptualizing the ultimate mystical paradox of how it is even possible for a finite being to experience, let alone express the infinite (Kripal 2001: 204).

Kripal’s seventh and final palace of wisdom is “hermeneutical union.” To fully appreciate the profundity of this palace of wisdom requires the exchange of our modern conception of self-identity for a new, postmodern understanding of self-identity. Following the work of Don Kulick and Donna Haraway, Kripal believes that the modern idea of a stable “self,” which contains a “clear inside and outside,” must be reconsidered in light of postmodern theory, which generally contests any modernist notion of self-autonomy. From this postmodern perspective, self-identity ought to be viewed as an “evolving site of incomplete narratives that promiscuously interact and combine with other narratives” (Kripal 2001: 324). When self-identity is seen in this light it becomes easier to understand how mystics and scholars of mysticism can be so profoundly transformed by reading texts: “Texts can transform us *because we ourselves our texts*” (Kripal 2001: 324). In other words, our self-identity is a product of our narrative identifications. If the notion of “self” is contingent on our narrative identifications, then it follows that different narratives can be written in, so to speak, and new “selves” can be established through our hermeneutical encounter with other self-narratives. Of course, we

have seen this exact process operating in the lives and works of the various scholars Kripal has examined, a process he dubs “mystical hermeneutics.”

Most significantly for the present study, Kripal believes that our self-narratives are always already embodied. This is an important point because Kripal argues that scholars/mystics are personally able to relate to and identify with the experiences of other scholars/mystics because that we all participate “in the shared realities of our sexualized bodies and in the hermeneutical process through which we all create meaning. It is not that we create the same symbolic worlds but, rather, that we all create symbolic worlds. It is the process, not the product, that we share” (Kripal 2001: 302). In other words, regardless of space or time, we can hermeneutically identify with “the other” because all human beings produce meaning through the body, that is, all human meaning is embodied. Kripal concludes that the palace of hermeneutical union consists of “a self-reflexive, textually mediated, human communion:”

Here we need only accept three premises, namely, (1) that we share, by virtue of our shared genetic makeup and common biocosmic environment, a great deal, even across times and cultures; (2) that the religious experiences (which are, in the end, always psychophysical experiences) we encode in our texts have the power to awaken similar experiences in the bodies and minds of those who engage these texts deeply; and (3) that these historical experiences are in turn radicalized and deepened further by the future horizons of meaning of their readers. It is in this kind of union, a hermeneutical union across space and time between human beings within an always renewable and developing form of critical consciousness, that our road of excess finally ends. If we have reached anything worthy of the names ‘palace’ and ‘wisdom,’ it is here (Kripal 2001: 327).

In this chapter I traced the evolution of Kripal’s understanding of the erotic as it manifests in his first two major works, *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Excess*. My discussion of *Kali’s Child* showed how Kripal’s thesis about the erotic helped him to understand the

life and teachings of Ramakrishna's "secret" in the light of both Western psychoanalytic theory and East Asian Tantra. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Kripal claims that Ramakrishna's unconscious homoerotic desires played a formative role in the construction, interpretation, and representation of his mysticism. Ramakrishna's "anxious desire," his cross-dressing, the maternal way in which he engaged with his young male disciples, the symbolism surrounding his ecstasies and visions, and the general rhetoric of his teachings, suggest that Ramakrishna's mysticism is not only erotic, it is *homoerotic*. Kripal's analysis also suggests that Ramakrishna's alleged madness likely stemmed from a history of sexual abuse, and that his own inability to cope with his homoerotic desire, that is, his scandalous and at times, pathological behavior, can be read as a product of an unconscious sexual crisis. Ultimately, Kripal believes that Ramakrishna was able to sublimate his unconscious turmoil and indirectly realize his homoerotic desire through various techniques of mystical ecstasy, which, in turn, are traditionally interpreted by his followers as validating his incarnational status as a god.

Kripal maintains that psychoanalytic theory can shed much insight into the sexual etiology of Ramakrishna's mysticism. However, at the same time, Kripal also believes that "classical" psychoanalytic theory is limited by his inability to explain the ontological significance of Ramakrishna's mysticism. Kripal argues that while Ramakrishna's behavior displays clear signs of trauma, the full meaning of his mysticism cannot be reduced, in the words of Lacan, "to questions of fucking" (Lacan 1982: 147). Yes, Ramakrishna's mysticism is intimately tied to his sexual desire. However, Kripal is adamant that there is also "something more" to his mysticism than just sexual repression.

In other words, Ramakrishna's mysticism is not reducible to a defensive tactic aimed at shielding his ego from the reality of his sexual desires. His mystical ecstasies and visions were erotic, but they were also therapeutic, empowering, and possibly even transformative, for both himself and his followers. Kripal links this transformative quality of Ramakrishna's mysticism to his identification with Tantric ontology, which posits a nondualistic, dialectic understanding of the relationship between the body (immanence) and soul (transcendence).

Rather than reducing the whole meaning of Ramakrishna's mysticism to sexual desire, Kripal's study demonstrates how Ramakrishna was able to internalize, albeit ambivalently, certain public symbols, such as the iconography and mythology associated with the Tantric goddess Kali, to create a personal (homoerotic) symbolism that fuses the sexual and the mystical. The mutual imbrications of the sexual and the mystical conditioned the symbolic contours of Ramakrishna's mysticism. Kripal refers to the nexus between the sexual and the mystical as the erotic. I argue that it is Kripal's unique employment of the erotic that defines his psychoanalytic approach as "transformational." Whereas the "classical" approach tends to reduce the mystical to the sexual, Kripal's concept of the erotic permits him to address the sexual and the mystical as interdependent categories: the mystical *is* sexual and the sexual *is* mystical. Thus, the theoretical and methodological core of Kripal's "transformational" approach hinges on a paradoxical *coincidentia oppositorum* of the sexual and the mystical, which is signified as the erotic. Stated simply, I argue that the erotic is the hermeneutical key to understanding both the

evolution and application of Kripal's "transformational" study of Ramakrishna's mysticism.

In my discussion of Kripal's second work, *Roads of Excess*, I argued that this work ought to be read as an extension of *Kali's Child*. In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal utilizes the erotic as a comparative lens from which to read the various ways the relationship between the sexual and the mystical operates in different religious and historical contexts, a method he describes as "comparative erotics." Kripal's "comparative erotics" focuses primarily on the way the modern study of mysticism, as represented by the writings of Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati, and Wolfson, actively participate in the construction of an academic mystical discourse that mirrors traditional mystical discourse.¹¹⁴ In particular, Kripal claims that in both traditional mystical discourse and academic mystical discourse, the reading of mystical texts is viewed as a transformative practice. The reading of mystical texts is believed to be potentially transformative because they are often encoded with the personal experiences or "meaning events" of the author/mystic. Under the right conditions, the act of reading (and writing about) these texts can facilitate a reader's identification with the text's encoded "meaning events," which, in turn, can elicit an experiential encounter with the mystical. Kripal refers to this process as "mystical hermeneutics."

¹¹⁴ However, although this scholarly mysticism tends to resemble traditional "religious" mysticism in many ways, it is important to highlight the fact that Kripal identifies some very serious difference between the two. For example, in contrast to traditional "religious" mysticism, "this mysticism of scholars of mysticism represents something new in the history of mysticism, that is, a kind of culturally aware, psychologically reflexive, and theoretically rigorous religious positioning that struggles openly, if antagonistically, with issues of reductionism, relativism, and religious pluralism, and this in a liberal cultural milieu that, for all its faults, nurtures and protects freedom of thought and expression, even – and especially – when it calls into question time-honoured authorities, be they human or divine" (Kripal 2001: 27).

In *Roads of Excess*, Kripal calls attention to the various, often secret, ways this mystical hermeneutics of the scholars of mysticism constructs, interprets and represents the erotic. What Kripal discovers is that erotic issues relating to sexual orientation, gender, and the politics of embodiment play a central role in determining how and in what ways the mystical is valued. Regarding the issue of sexual orientation, Kripal suggests that the symbolism and rhetoric that typically defines most male mystical traditions tends to be structured along homoerotic lines. Whether it is recognized as such or not, when a god-image is framed as a male, as in the case of the monotheistic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and a male mystic seeks to unite, often in highly erotic terms, with the presence of this male god-image, he is participating in a clear homoerotic structuring of mystical experience.

The theme of a male homoerotic mysticism is explicitly present in Underhill's text, yet she fails to acknowledge it. It is central to the personal mystic-erotic experiences of both Massignon and Zaehner. However, they also fail to acknowledge its significance in their texts. Wolfson, in contrast, exposes the homoerotic symbolism underlining kabbalistic mysticism and truly recognizes it as such. At the opposite end of the spectrum of this male homoerotic mysticism is Bharati, whose sexual orientation finds a clear mode of expression through his identification with the heteroerotic symbolism of left-handed Tantra. And then there is Kripal himself, who felt "exiled" from his own tradition, Catholicism, precisely because of his sexual orientation. His heterosexuality prohibited him from identifying with the homoerotic symbolism of the Catholic mystical tradition.

Why is it so important to recognize the crucial role sexual orientation plays in constructing our understanding of the mystical? It is important because the privileging of a homoerotic structuring of the mystical effectively excludes the experience of heterosexually oriented mystics; moreover, its capacity to dictate the terms of engagement between a mystic and god often comes at the expense of women (Jantzen 1995: 92). In other words, there is no room for women (or heterosexually oriented males) in any mystical tradition dominated by a homoerotic fraternity between male mystics and a male God. Most significantly, even when women are allotted a privileged symbolic place within this male system, such as the case of Kabbalah or Tantra, it is often only to augment the prestige of the male. But this is not to say that women are disbarred from participating in and experiencing the mystical. On the contrary, there have been many influential women mystics from various mystical traditions throughout the ages. However, more often than not, the experiences and teachings of female mystics tend to be marginalized if not entirely muted by the patriarchal economy privileged by most monotheistic religious traditions. By highlighting this androcentric bias and subsequent misogynistic attitude typical of most monotheistic religious traditions, Kripal's study demonstrates that our hermeneutical understanding of the mystical is intimately tied to questions of gender.¹¹⁵

It is commonplace in most monotheistic mystical traditions to identify men with spirit and women with body (Jantzen 1995: 54). In these same monotheistic mystical traditions, the desires of the body, that is, carnal sexual desire, is viewed as an obstacle

¹¹⁵ Kripal's views appear to mirror Grace Jantzen's thesis that "the power involved in the social construction of mysticism has consistently been a gendered power" (Jantzen 1995: 327).

that impinges a mystic's capacity to encounter God. Because women are identified with the body, and by extension, human sexuality, it follows then that women signify a threat "to be shunned or overcome by spiritual men" (Jantzen 1995: 91). But why are women so often identified with the body and sexuality? In her groundbreaking text *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976), Dorothy Dinnerstein examines the effects that child-rearing practices have in influencing our psychological and cultural conceptions of women. Dinnerstein claims that human angst is largely directed toward women because they are the primary caregivers, that is, because the relationship with the mother is the infant's first encounter with the natural world, the mother becomes "representative of the flesh" and all that it implies. (Dinnerstein 1976:28).

The mother's body parts, in particular, her breasts, are an infant's first source of pleasure. However, at the same time, when the mother's breast are unavailable to the infant and his or her pleasure is denied, then the mother's body becomes a source of pain and frustration for the infant. This pain and frustration associated with the absence of the mother's body serves as the infant's first encounter with the harsh realities of the flesh, namely, impermanence and, by extension, death. Consequently, the mother's body "becomes an object of deeply conflicting feelings toward existence itself"(Dinnerstien 1976:94).¹¹⁶ Most significantly, the mother's body becomes the symbolic template for all future object-relations. This of course includes the male mystic's relationship with God,

¹¹⁶ Ramakrishna's misogynist attitude toward certain women provides a striking example of this ambivalence toward the mother's body. According to Kripal, "it was flesh and blood woman that he could not touch. It was the gory contents of their physical bodies - blood, intestinal worms, fat, phlegm, piss, guts and bad smells - that disgusted him (Kripal 1998: 281). Essentially, Ramakrishna did not hate women, but rather he feared their bodies (Kripal 1998: 286).

which is often marked by “unreconciled feelings of the flesh.” Kripal’s analysis calls attention to the fact that these unreconciled feelings are more often than not projected onto women’s bodies (Dinnerstein 1976:120). Stated simply, in most monotheistic mystical traditions, male ecstasy often comes at the expense of women’s bodies.

According to Kripal, the question of how sexual orientation and gender affect our understanding of the mystical is directly tied to larger issues concerning the politics of embodiment. In other words, a mystic’s understanding of sexual desire is often tied to the value he or she places on the body. Likewise, a mystic’s value of the body is largely based on his or her ideological commitments. Thus, if a particular religious ideology dictates that body is evil, as is the case in most monotheistic traditions, then this has serious ramifications for how a mystic relates to certain bodily issues such as the value of sexual desire, sexual identity, and gender. However, Kripal’s “comparative erotics” demonstrates that there are alternative ways to understand the mystical that do not forsake the body. For example, in certain Tantric traditions the sexualized body is conceptualized as a sacred conduit of the mystical. Drawing on Tantric ontology, Kripal’s nondualistic approach aims to reconcile the traditional division between the body and the mystical. By calling attention to the ontological advantages of this nondualistic approach, Kripal’s “comparative erotics” can be interpreted as an implicit critique of monotheistic ideology (Kripal 2001: 326). In other words, I believe that Kripal’s Tantric move to place the mystical “in” the body can be read as a political statement that openly challenges the conventional monotheistic distinction between body and soul.

When viewed as a whole, *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* mark a significant advancement in the both the psychological and hermeneutical study of mysticism. These advancements can in large part be attributed to Kripal's innovative application of postmodern theory. Kripal's hermeneutical approach can be considered postmodern in the sense that in both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*, he draws on his own mystico-erotic experiences as a source of knowledge to help him read mystical texts. This self-reflexivity is implicit in *Kali's Child* and explicit in *Roads of Excess*, particularly in Kripal's "secret talk." Rather than pitting "subjectivity" against "objectivity," which is typical of most modern approaches, Kripal instead frames the relationship between subject and object, and text and reader, as a "fusion of horizons" (Kripal 2001: 326). Kripal's hermeneutical approach, then, is postmodern because it constructs a mutually beneficial dialogue between "I" and "other" that does not aim to master the meaning of their fusion, but rather to radiate it.

In terms of Kripal's understanding of psychology, I believe there are at least three dimensions to Kripal's "transformational" psychoanalytic approach that can be seen as postmodern. First, similar to certain schools of "critical psychology," Kripal's "transformational" psychoanalytic approach calls into question the epistemological efficacy of binary logic. According to Jeremy Carrette, critical psychology tends to counter binary logic on two interrelated levels: 1) "the separation between the individual and the social"; and 2) "the Cartesian division between body and mind" (Carrette 2001: 118). In both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*, Kripal demonstrates that a mystic's understanding of the mystical is often shaped by the historical, social, and cultural

settings that they inhabit.¹¹⁶ In other words, “mysticism” for Kripal is a social construct. With regard to the division between body and mind, I have amply demonstrated that Kripal’s skillful employment of the erotic in both *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Excess* consistently shows that body and mind/soul are not only inseparable, but that they are co-extensive with one another. In other words, for Kripal, the mind/soul is always already embodied.

The second way in which I believe that Kripal’s “transformational” psychoanalytic approach can be read as a postmodern form of critical psychology is evident in how he addresses the relationship between Western psychology and Eastern mystical traditions. Drawing on the work of Richard King, Carrette argues that, “if the psychology of religion is unable to critically assess Western psychological discourse and fails to appreciate non-Western models of introspection it can only be seen as a hegemonic and imperial reinforcement of Western ideologies of the self”(Carrette 2001: 122). In both *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Excess*, Kripal demonstrates a keen awareness of the problems that arise when Western psychological assumptions are applied to non-Western religious traditions without a careful consideration for the many nuances of cultural and historical context. To combat the potential dangers of hegemony, imperialism and exploitation, Kripal’s method crafts a sympathetic, yet not uncritical,

¹¹⁶ For instance, in his discussion of Ramakrishna’s mystical visions, Kripal states: “The social process, in other words, helped create the visions. But the visions also helped to create the social process. In a very real sense, there was no ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ to the process. As with his Tantric dialectic, the inside of Ramakrishna’s psychic visions and the outside of his social community formed a single dynamic whole. Psyche and culture formed one another” (Kripal 1998: 220).

dialogue between Western psychoanalytic theory and certain Eastern mystical practices that, in the end, appear to privilege “non-Western models of introspection.”

For example, the dialogue Kripal establishes between Western psychoanalytic theory and certain forms of Tantra is mediated by his concept of the erotic. The erotic is a category that draws heavily on psychoanalytic theory. However, it can ultimately be read as a Tantric category in the sense that it radicalizes Freud’s concept of the “sublime” by extending sexuality’s “true range” to include the ontological (Kripal 2001: 22). Following in the footsteps of Tantra, Kripal’s concept of the erotic flips Freud’s notion of the sublime on its head, effectively rendering the traditional division between the sexual and the mystical irrelevant precisely because from this Tantric perspective, the sexual is none other than an embodied realization of the mystical¹¹⁷ (Kripal 1998: 45).

The third and final way in which Kripal’s “transformational” psychoanalytic approach can be read as a postmodern form of critical psychology is evident in how he utilizes the erotic as a means of exposing the sexual, social, and gender injustices that underlie the comparative study of mysticism. Carrette claims “that post-structuralist theory, and its disciplinary formation of critical psychology, are mechanisms and tools for identifying hidden oppressions and power structures in the practices of the discipline” (Carrette 2001: 113). I argue that Kripal’s “comparative erotics” is motivated by this same desire to identify the “hidden oppression and power structures” that operate in various mystical traditions. In particular, both *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Excess*, call

¹¹⁷ Or, as Diane Hume-George puts it: “We are sexual beings and live our sexual lives, think our thoughts, in a sexual context. But intellectual energy was not originally sexual; sexual energy was originally intellectual” (Hume George as quoted by Kripal 2001: 22).

attention to how erotic issues relating to body, sexual orientation, and gender impact the way certain mystics, mystical traditions, and scholars of mysticism understand the mystical. To this end, Kripal's approach can be read as an emancipatory discourse because it offers an alternative way in which to conceptualize the mystical that does not require the sacrifice of our humanity or our sexuality for the sake of God. In other words, we don't need God, or at least, the "father" God of traditional monotheistic religion, so long as we have each other. Kripal thus summarizes his position as follows:

Philosophically, then, what I am left with in the end is a kind of paradoxical, cross-cultural "mystical humanism" that acknowledges, values, and even seeks out the ontological ground (lessness) of human beings, but that also insists on acknowledging, protecting, and nurturing the social, ethical and physical well being of the historical individual, even if this means forestalling, for the moment at least, those mystical truths of personal dissolution and union with the universe that, with the physical deaths of these same individuals, become undeniable and absolute (Kripal 2001: 319).

In closing I want to address one final point that I believe can shed some light on the hidden inspiration of Kripal's first two works, namely, his desire to find a new spiritual "home." Recall that in *Roads of Excess* Kripal outlines the various secret ways in which the personal experiences of certain scholars of mysticism shaped his or her public representation of the mystical. Although each of the scholars Kripal examines – Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati, and Wolfson – are writing from different historical and cultural contexts and are often committed to opposing religious ideologies, their public writings nevertheless exhibit a shared desire to reconcile their personal sense of existential loss or "religious homelessness." For example, Kripal believes that Underhill's *Mysticism* can be read as a product of her personal desire to mitigate the spiritual loss incurred by her failed conversion experience. Moreover, Massignon's

disillusionment with Catholicism fostered his interest in the study of al-Hallaj and Sufism, which, in turn, provided him with a public outlet from which he could secretly realize his homoerotic desires through his writing of the *Passion*.

Similarly, Zaehner's public writings about the mystical stem from his private turmoil, particularly, his inability to find a legitimate means of expressing his homoerotic desire. Although Zaehner remained faithful to his Catholic roots, his "conservative" and "dogmatic" approach to the general study of mysticism and subsequent aversion to non-theistic mystical traditions can be interpreted as his way of overcompensating for what he believed to be the Western world's growing secularism and attraction to Eastern mysticism (Kripal 2001: 163). Furthermore, Bharati's disillusionment with the authoritative structures of his native religious tradition, Catholicism, directly facilitated his turn to Tantra. In a similar fashion, Wolfson's distaste for Jewish orthodoxy and interest in secular philosophy was the main impetus of his academic career. With perhaps the qualified exception of Zaehner, in each of these cases we find a mystic/scholar whose personal mystico-erotic experiences exceeded the parameters of meaning set up by their native religious traditions. Their subsequent disillusionment fostered their desire to find an alternative way to express, sublimate, and potentially realize their personal mystico-erotic desires through a hermeneutically-grounded and publicly engaged, scholarly mysticism.

I suggest that both *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* can be read in a similar manner, that is, psychologically, these works stem from Kripal's personal desire to come to terms with his self-imposed "exile" from Catholicism. Disillusioned with the loss of

his native religious tradition and thus “spiritually homeless,” Kripal sought to invest his mystico-erotic desires in a tradition that could more adequately engage him, namely, Tantra. Drawing on the work of the object-relations theorist Melanie Klein (1986), I believe that in order to allay the anxiety and guilt accompanying his move away from the “home” of his native cultural/religious tradition required Kripal to try and make reparations for both the public and private damages he inflicted on his internalized lost objects, i.e., the Church/mother and Christ/father. In other words, Kripal’s turn to the East and subsequent interest in the comparative study of mysticism can be interpreted as a reparative gesture aimed at healing the losses he endured as a religious exile. From this perspective, both *Kali’s Child* and *Road’s of Excess* are essentially products of personal and “cultural mourning”(Kripal 2001: 321).¹¹⁸

In the end, however, perhaps such a reductive reading is premature. Yes, Kripal’s writings are clearly motivated by a personal desire to “perfect” his mystical dreams (Kripal 2001: 290). And yes, Kripal reads these mystical dreams as a means to repair the divisions he internalized from his native religious tradition, especially Catholicism’s dualistic view of the relationship between body and soul, sex and God, and immanence and transcendence. Yet, under closer scrutiny I believe that Kripal’s erotic model of the mystical is about something more than just repairing lost objects; it is also about creating new ones. This I believe is presented most clearly by Kripal’s desire to construct a

¹¹⁸ Note that the trajectory of Kripal’s career appears to exhibit “the threefold process of de-idealization, introspective probes, and creative response at work” that tends to characterize Peter Homans’ expanded understanding of mourning (Parsons 2008: 107).

mystical humanism that draws equally on both the rationalism of the West and the mystical intuitions of the East.

Much like Bharati before him, Kripal basis his mystical humanism on a liberating hope, in particular, the hope that a critical engagement with the injustices of this world can breed the clarity of vision and comparative insight required to recognize the observable fact that how we imagine “God,” “heaven,” and “Ultimate Reality” are, in the final analysis, a reflection of how we imagine our relationship to other human beings. Most significantly, Kripal believes that our relationship to other human beings can be greatly enhanced by an erotic awareness of the many hidden ways our unconscious desires contribute to the way we construct the meaning(s) of the mystical. If *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Exces* are any indication, the meaning of the mystical for Kripal is ultimately contingent on humanity’s capacity to contest the supremacy of religious literalism and locate a sacred place in both our texts and in our lives for a radical restoration of the body.

Chapter Two: Rational Mysticism

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.
We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

Teilhard de Chardin

In 1902 the American psychologist William James published his classic work in the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. *The Varieties* has played an influential role in shaping the general direction of the contemporary study of mysticism (Hollenback 1996: 2). Perhaps one of James' most lasting contributions to the contemporary study of mysticism lies in his naturalistic approach. In contrast to the traditional "religious" study of mysticism, which tends to focus on certain theological or metaphysical claims, James approaches mysticism as a facet of human psychology. From a psychological perspective, James suggests that certain mystical states of consciousness appear to alter radically an individual's self-identity and his or her worldview. In other words, James believes that certain mystical states of consciousness can be profoundly transformative (Barnard 1997: 231).

According to James's psychological model, human consciousness is multidimensional, exhibiting a spectrum of varying heights, depths, and degrees of awareness (Barnard 1997: 32). Normal, "everyday," rational consciousness is but one mode of awareness. Under the right conditions and given the proper stimuli, certain states of consciousness can arise that appear to be "discontinuous" with ordinary consciousness (James 1958: 325). James claims that these altered states of consciousness emerge from a "subliminal" or "subconscious" region of the mind that is usually foreclosed to rational consciousness (James 1958: 325). Most significantly, James suggests that certain mystical states of consciousness appear to exhibit an extraordinary capacity to access the deepest layers of the subconscious mind (Barnard 1997: 62).

In *The Varieties* James outlines four defining characteristics of mystical consciousness: transiency, passivity, ineffability, and a noetic quality.¹¹⁹ James claims that “these four characteristics are sufficient to mark out a group of states of consciousness peculiar enough to deserve a special name and to call for careful study. Let it then be called the mystical group” (James 1958: 320). Of the four characteristics that James describes there is one that is particularly important to his overall understanding of the psychology of mystical experience, namely, the noetic quality. The noetic quality refers to an intuitive sense of knowledge or “illumination” engendered by certain mystical states of consciousness (James 1958: 319). James is convinced that “consciousness of illumination is for us the essential mark of ‘mystical’ states” (James 1958: 341). In psychological terms, James’ understanding of illumination refers to a “highly specialized type of perception” (Barnard 1997: 216). This specialized type of perception is marked by a sense of “enlargement, union, and emancipation” (Barnard 1997: 217). Essentially, James’ view of the mystical suggests that mystical states of consciousness are valuable because they can produce a unique state of awareness (illumination) that is both transformative and potentially liberating.

Like James, Kripal also believes that certain mystical states of consciousness can generate a unique state of awareness that is both transformative and potentially liberating.

¹¹⁹ Briefly, ineffability refers to the incommunicability of mystical experience. The noetic quality refers to an intuitive knowledge engendered by mystical experience. According to James, these mystical insights “are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime” (James 1958: 319). Transiency refers to the impermanence of mystical experience, that is, it does not last indefinitely (James 1958: 319). Passivity refers to a mystic’s lack of personal control; he or she is swept away by the profundity of the experience (James 1958: 319).

Kripal refers to this illuminative quality of mystical consciousness as “gnosis.” However, unlike James, Kripal’s understanding of mystical illumination or “gnosis” is intimately tied to the erotic. In other words, for Kripal the knowledge revealed by mystical consciousness is first and foremost an erotic knowledge, a sort of intelligence of the heart that transcends discursive reasoning and conventional modes of knowledge. Inspired by the medieval Christian notion of “*amor ipse intellectus est*” (love itself is knowledge), Kripal’s conception of “gnosis” is to a large extent predicated on the assumption that “erotic subjectivity *does things*” (Kripal 2001: 12). In particular, erotic subjectivity “*does things*” to both the body *and* the mind. What this means is that the erotic subjectivity that defines mystical consciousness is not only pleasurable as a bodily state of being, but as a state of mind it is also profoundly revelatory. What then is the secret knowledge (gnosis) revealed by mystical consciousness? This chapter examines some of the possible answers to this question by examining the various ways Kripal addresses the relationship between mystical “gnosis” and *human potential*.

In the last chapter I claimed that Kripal’s first two books – *Kali’s Child* and *Roads of Excess* – ought to be read in tandem as a comprehensive exploration of the various ways the erotic manifests in the lives and teaching of certain mystics and scholars of mysticism. I suggest that the erotic is both the psychoanalytic and hermeneutical key to understanding Kripal’s innovative approach to the contemporary study of mysticism. This chapter continues the discussion by examining the various ways Kripal’s erotic thesis operates in his next two major works, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections On The Study Of Mysticism* (2006) and *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*

(2007). I argue that these two works signal another expansion of Kripal's "comparative erotics." In more specific terms, both *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* examine the way certain erotic issues, such as sexual orientation, gender, and embodiment, both help to construct *and* deconstruct our historical and contemporary understanding of mystical consciousness.

Following the observations of Wouter J. Hanegraaff, I believe that like Kripal's first two texts, *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*, Kripal's latest texts, *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen*, should also be read in tandem (Hanegraaff 2008: 260). *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* ought to be read together because, first, they compliment each other from a methodological standpoint; and second, the central theoretical arguments of each text are coextensively linked as a whole. By drawing on an array of different materials, ranging from the sexuality of Jesus and the mythology of the super-hero, to psychedelics, evolution, and the paranormal, the combined findings of *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* lend support to Kripal's erotic thesis, which posits an embodied link between the sexual and the mystical. Whereas *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess* focus largely on establishing the psychoanalytic and hermeneutical reality of the erotic, *The Serpent's Gift* and *Esalen* calls attention to how the erotic informs our general understanding of the integral relationship between consciousness, culture, and cosmos. Like James before him, but in a much more erotic key, Kripal is convinced that certain mystical states of consciousness produce an extraordinary kind of knowledge and that this mystical knowledge or "gnosis" is both personally and politically liberating.

A Gnostic Revolt

Kripal's third major text, *The Serpent's Gift: Gnostic Reflections On The Study Of Religion* (2006), serves as both a critique of the contemporary study of religion and a provisional template of what Kripal believes the future study of mysticism may someday look like. I argue that Kripal's general critique of the contemporary study of religion and the future model of religious scholarship that he outlines in *The Serpent's Gift* can in large part be read as a product of his overarching aim to establish a more thorough understanding of mystical humanism. For Kripal, this means that both the current failures and future hopes of the contemporary study of religion are intimately tied to humanity's capacity to realize the mystical potential of what it means to be "human." Essentially, I claim that for Kripal, the gnosis revealed by mystical consciousness is mystical humanism. But the question then arises: what exactly is mystical humanism? Kripal provides a brief sketch of what he means by mystical humanism in his first two texts, *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*. According to these two works, mystical humanism generally refers to a unique type of nondualistic mysticism grounded in the universals of the sexualized body, which draws equally on both Eastern and Western sources to posit the existence of an ontological *coincidentia* between consciousness and cosmos. In *The Serpent's Gift*, Kripal aims to elucidate the epistemological potential of this mystical humanism through his concept of gnosis.

The structure of *The Serpent's Gift* consists of four imaginative essays or "meditations" that explore four central themes in the modern study of religion: "eroticism, humanism, comparative mysticism, and esotericism" (Kripal 2006: 24). More

specifically, Kripal's four essays examine the erotic identities of Jesus, the humanist principles of Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religion, the mystical quality of the comparative method, and the esoteric relationship among "religious studies scholarship, American popular culture and possible psychical phenomena" (Kripal 2006: 26).

Although the content of these four essays appear quite diverse, when taken as a whole they highlight the theoretical foundation of Kripal's gnostic methodology.

To appreciate fully the theoretical evolution of Kripal's gnostic methodology requires a brief discussion of Kripal's understanding of the relationship among "premodern," "modern," and "postmodern" modes of consciousness. Drawing on the work of Gilles Quisel, Kripal locates three "major strands of Western culture": faith, reason, and gnosis (Kripal 2006: 4). Briefly stated, "faith" refers to a mode of knowledge that is derived mainly from traditional religious doctrines and the social communities that inspired them. "Reason" refers to a mode of knowledge derived primarily from Greek philosophy that privileges an analytic, linear, and objective view of the world. "Gnosis," in contrast, refers to "a form of intuitive, visionary, or mystical knowledge that privileges the primacy of personal experience and the depths of the self over the claims of both faith and reason, traditionally in order to acquire some form of liberation or salvation from a world seen as corrupt or fallen" (Kripal 2006: 4).

Building on Quisel's observations, Kripal claims that, historically, each of these categories of knowledge – faith, reason, and gnosis – tends to be associated with a particular expression of human consciousness. For example, in the West, the category of faith is commonly associated with a premodern form of consciousness that flourished

before the sixteenth century, which draws on religious “belief to organize the world and – from our modern perspective at least – tends to submerge the ego in communal forms of social life that privilege the community over the individual” (Kripal 2006: 6). Kripal associates reason with modern consciousness. Modern consciousness is defined by the rational method, which generally privileges “the individual over the community, rejects religious appeals to transcendence, and looks to science as the standard of reliable truth and knowledge” (Kripal 2007: 7). Lastly, Kripal associates the gnostic mode of knowledge with a unique kind of postmodern consciousness, which, according to Kripal:

Seeks to move beyond the autonomous reason of modernity and its talk of stable ‘essences,’ ‘laws,’ and ‘structures’ into a different, presumably more helpful or workable human future. This it attempted through a rejection of any talk of metaphysical essences or ontological foundation, claims of the effective death of the stable subject (the ‘individual’ of modernity), a rejection of all metanarratives (those big stories or mythologies – such as Christianity, evolutionary science, or history as social progress – that provided the context for legitimate meaning within modern cultures, and a celebration of plurality, alterity (‘Otherness’), and, above all, *difference* (Kripal 2006: 8).

Kripal admits that the methodological approach he employs in *The Serpent’s Gift* can be easily viewed as postmodern (Kripal 2006: 9). This is clearly evident in Kripal’s reflexive writing style, which contests the typical modernist distinctions between subject and object, and insider and outsider.¹²⁰ Commenting on his methodological position in *The Serpent’s Gift*, Kripal states: “I no longer want to study mystical literature. I now want to write it” (Kripal 2006: 15). Similar to the radical reflexivity he practiced in *Roads of Excess*, once again in *The Serpent’s Gift*, Kripal places himself or, at least his mysticism, squarely inside his object of study. Such a reflexive move to fuse the

¹²⁰ Moreover, Kripal’s method can also be considered “postmodern” in the sense that he engages in “a deliberate mixing and merging of premodern and modern or ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms” (Kripal 2006: 9).

horizons of “subject” and “object” is indicative of a postmodern perspective. In describing the postmodern tone of his text, Kripal readily admits that “these are not traditional academic essays that exhaust the relevant literature, qualify every truth claim out of existence, and advance any rational, linear argument. No, the essays circle around and around a common site of largely intuitive themes. They employ myth, rhetoric, apologetic, and polemic. And, like the meaning of a poem, their message resides as much in their form as it does in their content” (Kripal 2006: 15). Stated simply, the “poetry” of Kripal’s method draws heavily on postmodern theory.

However, at the same time Kripal is hesitant to fully align his understanding of gnosis with postmodern thought. Kripal maintains that the critical insights commonly associated with postmodernity have much to offer in terms of facilitating a more politically engaged understanding of how certain power structures shape our knowledge, be it mystical or otherwise. Nevertheless, Kripal believes that certain forms of postmodern thought, particularly those prone to an unqualified relativism, suffer from certain intellectual limitations that often fail to attend fully to the moral sensibilities of modern human beings (Kripal 2006: 9). Kripal acknowledges that there are elements of postmodern thought that appear to be congruent with certain forms of mysticism, particularly those traditionally labeled apophatic. However, Kripal can not fully commit to “postmodernity” because he believes that it generally lacks “an ontological ground or, if you prefer, a nonground,” which he believes is necessary for the construction of a genuine mystical humanism (Kripal 2006: 9).

Overall, Kripal is appreciative of postmodernity's advancements, but the ethical and ontological vacuum traditionally associated with certain forms of postmodern thought runs counter to the Enlightenment ideals underlining his gnostic understanding of mystical humanism. Kripal clarifies this point as follows: "I want to recover, if you will, some of the mystical depth of our modern Enlightenment and its attending humanism, as well as those of our more recent postmodern turn, itself so deeply indebted to that same Enlightenment. Postmodernity here, then, is not so much a denial or rejection of modernity (or sameness, or form) as its own gnostic radicalization and awakening" (Kripal 2006: 11). In other words, Kripal's gnostic perspective draws on both modern and postmodern forms of knowledge and consciousness. Interestingly, Kripal qualifies his utilization of both modern and postmodern theory by referring to his own gnostic position as "(post)modern" (Kripal 2006: 8).

Most significantly for the purposes of the present study, Kripal's "(post)modern" gnosis is deeply rooted in the erotic processes of the human body. Kripal states:

The form of (post)modern consciousness I am attempting to theorize here...turns to the body, and in particular the erotic body, as a source of wisdom and delight and as the fundamental ground of its comparative theorizing: the human universals of biology, physiology, gender, and sexuality – infinitely permuted through local doctrine, social practice, and language – define the parameters of the *corpus mysticum* here and its constant, universal dialectic of difference *and* sameness. Perhaps most important, however, the form of gnosis I am arguing for here claims to *know* things that other forms of knowledge and experience (like traditional faith or reason) do not and probably cannot know, even as it submits its claims to public review, criticism, and renewal, all of which it listens and responds to as some of its most important ethical acts" (Kripal 2006: 12).

What does this gnosis reveal that other forms of knowledge can not know? In the following pages I demonstrate that for Kripal this mystical gnosis reveals that both

consciousness and body are different expressions of a single mystical energy. Or, put differently, mystical gnosis reveals that mind (consciousness) and matter (body) are different forms of the same substance that comprises the very fabric of our existence. Accordingly, a mystical state of consciousness ultimately signifies the experiential realization of this nondualistic gnosis that mind is matter and matter is mind. And for Kripal, this mystical realization is erotic right to its very core.

Kripal's first essay, "The Apocryphon of the Beloved," compares and contrasts the various ways in which Jesus' sexual orientation has been traditionally construed by the orthodox scriptures of the New Testament gospels and the heterodox scriptures commonly associated with the Nag Hammadi library¹²¹ (Kripal 2006: xi). On the surface this essay suggests that Jesus' teachings and behavior exhibits an ambivalent sexual identity, that is, there is historical evidence to support the claim that Jesus was "straight" *and* that he was "gay." At a deeper level, however, this essay "is a kind of sexualized gnosis, an erotics of the Gospel that can meet and learn from, on a very deep transgressive level, the erotic mysticisms of other climes and times, particularly the Tantric traditions of South Asia, the Himalayas, and China" (Kripal 2006: 30). In other words, in this first essay Kripal attempts to read the Christian Gospels through the lens of Tantra (Kripal 2006: 30).

There are various homoerotic themes surrounding the orthodox reading of Jesus' teachings. One example is Jesus' teaching that one must become a eunuch in order to

¹²¹ In 1945 "thirteen codices of ancient religious texts" were discovered in Egypt (Kripal 2006: xi). These "Coptic" texts "represent the religious speculations of some of the earliest strands of Christianity," and are considered representative of a traditional "gnostic" worldview (Kripal 2006: xi).

enter the kingdom of heaven.¹²² Although many biblical scholars tend to interpret this passage as a call for celibacy, Kripal suggests that it can also be read as a reference to homosexual desire. Kripal points out that historically, for both Greeks and Romans the term eunuch was synonymous with “any male who prefers passive homosexual sex” (Kripal 2006: 40). Moreover, eunuchs “were also well known as male prostitutes, and their sexual prowess was often legendary” (Kripal 2006: 40). When Jesus’ teaching of the eunuchs is seen in this light, it suggests that a homoerotic “sexual orientation determined the hierarchy of Jesus’ kingdom of heaven and it was the gay man, not the heterosexual married man, who was clearly privileged by Jesus” (Kripal 2006: 41).

Another significant example of Jesus’ homoerotic teachings concerns the symbolism surrounding the Christian Passover ritual. Kripal reads the Passover ritual as follows: “what we have here in the ritual sharing of male flesh and fluids is another tradition from early Christianity that suggests a homoerotic mysticism, that is, a secret tradition through which males mystically united with another divinized male, here through the eating of his body and the drinking of his blood” (Kripal 2006: 46). Kripal’s erotic interpretation becomes even more compelling and equally provocative when one considers the esoteric claim that “the bread and wine of the Catholic rite is a symbolic

¹²² “Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it” (Matt. 19: 11-12 as quoted by Kripal 2006: 39).

representation of what was actually shared at the original meal, namely the sperm of Jesus” (Kripal 2006: 47).¹²³

Drawing on certain “gnostic gospels,” Kripal presents another alternative reading of Jesus’ sexuality that emphasizes his heterosexuality. For example, the gospel of Philip suggests that certain members of the early Christian community engaged in “sacral sexual practices as married couples” (DeConick as quoted by Kripal 2006: 53). According to Kripal, “these sexual acts were designed to call down a ‘grace’ that was understood to be a kind of empowering mystical or causal energy ‘descended from above by means of unspeakable and indescribable intercourse’” (Kripal 2006: 53). It is widely believed that this ritualized sexual union gained its inspiration from the erotic relationship Jesus shared with Mary Magdalene (Kripal 2006: 53). From this heteroerotic perspective, Jesus’ most “beloved disciple” is not Peter, John, or James, but a woman, Mary.

Kripal’s meditation on the ambivalent sexuality of Jesus calls attention to the role sexual orientation plays in constructing our understanding of the relationship between the erotic and the mystical. Kripal recognizes the fact that we can probably never know if Jesus “was sexually attracted to men or women, or to both (probably the most reasonable solution) or, much less likely but far more traditionally, to neither” (Kripal 2006: 58). However, what we do know for certain is that the various ways Jesus’ sexuality has been presented through the ages has had a real and lasting effect on how Christianity and its followers address certain erotic issues. For instance, the traditional teachings of Peter,

¹²³ According to Kripal, this interpretation is “familiar to the historian of early Christianity, who could cite remarkably similar claims going back to the first few centuries of the Christian era, when some of the gnostic communities (of course) were accused of actually using sexual fluids, that is, semen and menstrual blood, in place of the bread and wine” (Kripal 2006: 47).

Paul, and James minimize Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus. This silencing of the "heterosexual" Jesus has tended to foster a "sublimated homoeroticism" that implicitly structures the Christian understanding of mystical experience in general (Kripal 2006: 57). Most notably, Kripal claims that historically this homoerotic structuring of the mystical breeds a dangerous form of institutionalized misogyny that systematically marginalizes the experiences of women (Kripal 2006: 57).¹²⁴

Kripal's discussion of Jesus' sexuality also functions as a rhetorical foil from which he attempts to draw a parallel between early Christian gnosticism and Tantra. According to Kripal, both mystical traditions privilege a "mystical form of consciousness that can be accessed only through direct personal experience" (Kripal 2006: 55). Moreover, both of these traditions aim to facilitate this mystical form of consciousness through the cultivation of certain beliefs and rituals that are highly transgressive. For instance, ritualized sex acts are an essential element of each tradition's understanding of how to experience the mystical. This antinomian move to collapse the sexual with the mystical, and the sacred with the profane, runs counter to the established religious laws that operate in their respective cultural settings. In other words, both Christian gnosticism and Tantra are counter-cultural in that their general beliefs and practices tend to contest the religious laws of Orthodox Judaism and Bhramanic Hinduism (Kripal 2006: 56). Most notably, the transgressive quality of each mystical tradition is directly

¹²⁴ Kripal states: "From the early patristic attacks on the Gnostic communities to the *Malleus Maleficarum* and its medieval witches (who were said to gain their magical powers from actual intercourse with the devil), the history of Christian heresy is a coded history of male sexual phobias and fears projected onto the religious other, particularly women" (Kripal 2006: 54).

tied to their radical sexualization of the mystical. Stated simply, these mystical traditions are considered transgressive precisely because they are so erotic.

Kripal's second essay, *Restoring the Adam of Light*, examines Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804-1872) contributions to the modern study of mysticism. According to Kripal, "Feuerbach's insights into the dynamics of religious projection constitute the core insight of the modern study of religion" (Kripal 2006: 61). In general terms, Feuerbach claims that all religious ideas are actually psychological projections of human ideals (Kripal 2006: 63). In the West, the notion that the essence of religion is merely a human projection reaches as far back as ancient Greece.¹²⁵ If it is true that religion is a projection of humanity, then it follows for Feuerbach that a genuine understanding of religion requires us to "reduce all religious language to human language" (Kripal 2006: 87). These two insights – projection and reductionism – constitute the foundation of Feuerbach's critique of religion. They are also two of the main methodological principles guiding the direction of the modern study of religion. Take, for example, the views of two of the most influential contributors to the modern study of religion, Freud and Marx. Freud's interpretation of religion as a projection of infantile helplessness and Marx's move to reduce the ideology of religion to the social dynamics of class-consciousness are deeply indebted to the pioneering work of Feuerbach (Kripal 2006: 61). Most significantly, Feuerbach anticipates the findings of both Freud's and Marx's general

¹²⁵ Specifically, with the work of Xenophanes (570-475 BCE) who famously proclaimed that, "if cattle and horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do, horses like horses and cattle like cattle also would depict the gods' shapes and make their bodies of such a sort as the form they themselves have" (Smith 1967: 7)

critique of religion by recognizing that religion ultimately poses a danger to humanity precisely because it “*sacrifices what is real to what is not*” (Kripal 2006: 69).

Kripal reads Feuerbach’s critique of religion as a unique form of humanism. This means that for Feuerbach religion is not really about the revelations of God or any other theological truth. Rather, religion is ultimately about the divinization of humanity. Feuerbach states: “religion itself, not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally... believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature” (Feuerbach as quoted by Kripal 2006: 73). To support his thesis Feuerbach cites the Christian notion of incarnation, which basically stipulates that God is embodied in the male form of Jesus Christ. Feuerbach states: “The contemplation of God as human, is the mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is nothing else than the practical, material manifestation of the human nature of God” (Feuerbach as quoted by Kripal 2006: 76). Feuerbach thus proposes that all theology ought to be read as anthropology (Kripal 2006: 63). Furthermore, Feuerbach believes that many of the problems caused by religion stems from humanity’s inability to recognize the anthropological fact that “the beginning, middle and end of religion is MAN” (Feuerbach as quoted by Kripal 2006: 82).

Feuerbach claims that one of the greatest problems created by religion is that it alienates humanity from itself. This process of self-alienation is the result of humanity’s tendency to project its most cherished ideals outside of itself, on to god, which, in turn, separates us from our “deeper selves” (Kripal 2006: 68). At the same time, however, Feuerbach does admit that certain aspects of religion are beneficial to the extent that they highlight the value of human love. Feuerbach’s general evaluation of religion, then, rests

on a simple distinction: when religion is taken literally it is dangerous, but when it is understood as a facet of anthropology, particularly, an erotic anthropology, it can offer valuable insight into the unconscious workings of human nature¹²⁶ (Kripal 2006: 67). Significantly, Feuerbach tends to associate the relationship between religion and eroticism with mysticism, which, according to Kripal, he understands as “that strain of religious thought that seeks to unite the divine and the human in the person and body of an individual human being” (Kripal 2006: 76).

Kripal argues that erotic issues play a large role in Feuerbach’s humanist critique of religion. Specifically, Kripal maintains that Feuerbach locates “the deepest meanings of religion in the human body and, more specifically, in the sexual body” (Kripal 2006: 76). For example, Feuerbach writes: “Nature as had been shown and is obvious, is nothing without corporality...The body is the basis, the subject of personality”(Feuerbach as quoted by Kripal 2006: 77). Moreover, “all the glory of Nature, all its power, all its wisdom and profundity, concentrates and individualizes itself in distinction of sex. Why then dost thou shrink from naming the nature of God by its true name?” (Feuerbach as quoted Kripal 2006: 78). For Feuerbach, then, it is not God but love, more specifically, an embodied sexual love, which is humanity’s greatest source of salvation. Religious literalism or “faith” deforms this natural human love by extracting it from the sexualized body and projecting it far beyond the reaches of our lived existence (Kripal 2006: 81). The recognition that God’s love is first and foremost human love is the first step in

¹²⁶ According to Kripal, Feuerbach “believed that religion contained within its symbols and myths some of the most profound truths of the human psyche and body. But these need to be properly interpreted and freed from the illusions of faith and theology (Kripal 2006: 63).

combating and perhaps even reconciling humanity's hostility towards one another, or at least those hostilities that are fought in the name of God. Most importantly, the realization that "love makes God man and man God" forces humanity collectively to confront the possibility that divinity ultimately resides within the human heart (Feuerbach as quoted by Kripal 2006: 76).

Kripal claims that Feuerbach's humanist critique of religion harbors an implicit form of mysticism (Kripal 2006: 88). The humanist quality of Feuerbach's work is clearly evident in his insistence that the human being is "the projecting source of all the gods and...the ultimate ground of all human meaning and love" (Kripal 2006: 76). But where is the mysticism? Drawing on Feuerbach's most influential text, *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), Kripal responds: "its central teaching, after all, is that God is Man and Man is God, that is, that the divine and the human are identical. Is not this the essential structure of much, if not all, of what we have chosen to call mystical literature?" (Kripal 2007: 83). In other words, Feuerbach's rationalist critique reduces religion to humanity. However, according to Kripal, humanity for Feuerbach exhibits a divine dimension, that is, the ontological essence of humanity, which Feuerbach associates with the body and sexuality, is not only profoundly mysterious, it is also unmistakably mystical.

Kripal's third essay, *Comparative Mystics*, explores the mystical potential of comparative scholarship. Kripal states: "My thesis is that cultural differences and local knowledge are socially and politically important but not ontologically ultimate, and that the Gnostic deconstruction or saying-away of cultural and religious 'essences' – which

flourishes especially in the subversive countercultures of the mystical traditions – is the level by which deep communication may be realizable” (Kripal 2006: 94). At one level, Kripal wants to argue that the gnosis of the mystical offers a valuable resource for establishing a meaningful cross-cultural dialogue between different religious traditions. However, at another level, he also wants to claim that the comparative method itself can be understood as a modern form of apophatic mysticism. Kripal states: “the comparative method constitutes a form of apophatic mystical thought in the sense that it both implies a shared human nature or ground (both psychologically and physically construed) across all known cultures and recorded times and simultaneously relativizes the specific cultural and religious expression of this shared humanity as historically constructed and as nonultimate” (Kripal 2006: 122).

Kripal turns to the teachings of the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna as a prime example of the type of “comparative mystics” he is trying to establish, which basically “aims to expose all doctrinal claims as historically and culturally relative expressions of a deeper mystery or ontological ground (the gnostic Pleroma) that nevertheless requires these relative expressions for its self-revelation” (Kripal 2006: 94). Ramakrishna attempted to engage the mystical reality of various religious traditions, including Advaita Vedanta, Tantra, Christianity, and Islam (Kripal 2006: 108). Drawing on the gnosis of his mystical experiences, Ramakrishna concludes that “with sincerity and earnestness one can realize god through all religions” (Ramakrishna as quoted by Gupta 2002: 123). Kripal believes that Ramakrishna’s insight that all religions are commensurable at the level of the mystical is one of the key assumptions guiding the comparative study of

mysticism. However, it must be noted that Kripal is not seeking to merely rehash some kind of naive perennialism that willingly forsakes cultural difference in the name of some kind of mystical unity (Kripal 2006: 174). Kripal's argument is much more sophisticated. Kripal reads Ramakrishna's perennialism as a form of mystical humanism that can accommodate the plurality of meanings associated with various forms of mystical experience and simultaneously assert a common ground of resonance based on the universality of the human body and its desires. Most significantly, Kripal claims that mystical humanism is the "unacknowledged normative aim" of both the comparative study of religion and his own "comparative mystics" (Kripal 2006: 113).

Kripal's understanding of "comparative mystics" assumes that the gnosis of certain mystics and mystical traditions often resonate with each other on various levels – experientially, hermeneutically, and ontologically – to such a large degree that, in the words of William James, it "ought to make the critic stop and think" (James 1958: 350). Most importantly, Kripal calls attention to the observable fact that historically, more often than not, the "gnosis" that defines the teachings and practices of some of the most influential mystics and mystical traditions are similar in the sense that they are all transgressive (Kripal 2006: 113). Kripal writes: "I do not think that mystical traditions bear uncanny resemblances to each other, but I locate these similarities primarily in the methods employed by these traditions to subvert their religion's local knowledge and practices. Many of these mystical traditions are countercultures that have been persecuted, sometimes quite violently, by their own orthodox religious authorities" (Kripal 2006: 95). That is to say, mystical experience often varies in terms of its content,

but from a comparative point of view there is evidence to suggest that mystical experience shares a similar form, which can be generally defined as excessive, transgressive, subversive, and counter-cultural.

But, if this is the case, why is mysticism so often linked with traditional religion? Kripal suggests that to answer this question requires a careful examination of how mystics represent their gnosis in relation to his or her standing in the religious tradition of which they belong. In other words, mystics may almost always be “spiritual” but they are not always “religious” in the sense that, historically, mystics tend to oppose “all forms of institutional mediation” (Kripal 2007: 111). On the surface, the writings of certain mystics appear to affirm certain religious “truths.” However, upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the religious “truths” that mystics write about are often only tenuously committed to the dogma of institutionalized religion.¹²⁷ This point is perhaps made most obvious by the ambivalent manner in which mystics tend to utilize and value language. For example, ineffability is one of the more common characteristics associated with mystical experience, that is, the phenomenological meaning of the experience is beyond words. And yet, after the fact, most mystics continue to speak and write about the significance of his or her experience, often at great lengths. Of course, it appears paradoxical to speak about an experience that is ostensibly unspeakable. Nonetheless, the

¹²⁷ Kripal states: “The religious and implicitly political critiques advanced by mystics, of course, tend to be compromised as their writings are appropriated by the orthodox authorities of their tradition. Censorship, including self-censorship, is a part of any writing practice that describes itself as secret, esoteric, or *mystikos*. But the radicalism remains, as the censorship is usually incomplete or half-hearted, and the secret is often more or less public” (Kripal 2006: 111).

history of “comparative mystics” suggests that this is exactly the case: mystics can’t seem to keep a secret (Kripal 2006: 111).

Don Cupitt offers some valuable insight on the unique way mystics use language and how this relates to the transgressive quality of his or her mystical gnosis. According to Cupitt:

The reason why mystics use language in the strange ways they do is twofold: on the one hand, they are trying to play games with language in such a way as to destabilize structures of religious oppression that are firmly built into language...But on the other hand, they are acutely conscious of being surrounded by enemies who will seize upon a careless word and use it to destroy them...If a mystic’s writing sometimes appears far-fetched or fanciful, the reason is not that he or she is a soulful eccentric with idiosyncratic ideas about heavenly matters, but rather that religious utterance is surrounded by very severe pressure and threats of a political kind (Cupitt as quoted by Kripal 2006: 111).

In light of Cupitt’s observations it makes sense why Kripal tends to align mysticism with heresy (Kripal 2006: 95). Kripal draws on this theme of heresy as the centerpiece of his “comparative mystics.” According to Kripal, mystical heresy can be utilized “as a hidden mode of discourse between civilizations, as a means of cultural transfer” (Kripal 2006: 95). Kripal believes that it is no coincidence that our modern understanding of the comparative study of mysticism gained momentum during the height of the American counterculture in the 1960s, which generally sought to oppose the “establishment” by calling attention to such “heretical” issues as civil rights, feminism, and the gay movement (Kripal 2006: 113). How is this related to the comparative study of mysticism? According to Kripal, both the American counterculture of the 1960s and the modern comparative study of mysticism are based on a similar egalitarian ethos, which is defined by its refusal to “to ground itself in any one tradition, context or regime

of truth” (Kripal 2006: 118). In terms of his own heretical understanding of the comparative study of mysticism, Kripal admits in an apophatic manner that “I finally recognize no ultimate barrier or boundary between the historical traditions. My comparative path thus takes me from tradition to tradition, and my point is to deny the logical and final ontological status of dualism and difference themselves” (Kripal 2006: 96).

Kripal’s “comparative path” is fundamentally grounded in a gnostic worldview. Kripal states: “the study of religion shares in a dual heritage deriving from the enlightenment with its suspicious and rational approach to religion, and from the Romantic movement, with its apotheosis of the imagination, but there is a third epistemology untapped in religious studies, the gnostic” (Kripal 2006: 117). According to Kripal, the comparative study of mysticism offers both scholars and mystics a way to encounter and possibly understand the ecumenical value of a gnostic methodology, which is defined by its capacity to draw on the findings of both human reason *and* human imagination. Most significantly, as both a heretical method *and* a counter-cultural movement, Kripal believes that this gnostic perspective is perhaps one of our best resources for constructing and maintaining a new line of cross-cultural communication, a “comparative mystics” that can simultaneously celebrate “radical criticism and ontological openness” (Kripal 2006: 115). The consequences and future hopes of this “gnostic” perspective is perhaps most eloquently captured by Beverly J. Lanzett, who writes the following:

Often the experiences of mystery cannot be confined to the conceptual categories in which theology barter meaning. In this sense, every mystical act is itself a shift in paradigms and the stuff of ‘heresy’... Those who have been guided into the annihilatory experience know that new theology continually unfolds both within a tradition and as the breakthrough of tradition. The mystical pioneers who have risked their visions of truth in often hostile climates, and who have offered us rare glimpses of a God who not only celebrates new ideas and new revelations, but who births them as well, provide hope for interreligious cooperation (Lanzett as quoted by Kripal 2006: 90).

In broad terms, Kripal’s fourth and final essay, *Mutant Marvels*, examines the relationship between modern mythology and the contemporary study of religion. Or, as Kripal puts it: “I am interested in exploring the relationship between the professional study of religion and American popular and political culture and how, or whether, these cultures can be brought more fruitfully together” (Kripal 2006: 129). Kripal aims to establish a dialogue between American pop culture and the professional study of religion through his discussion of the comic book, which he reads as a modern manifestation of American mythology. Kripal suggests that many of the imaginative themes commonly associated with the “hero” of American comic books, specifically, his or her “super-powers” and their underlining relation to the erotic, can help shed light on some of the more “secret” challenges currently confronting the contemporary study of religion. Stated simply, Kripal argues that a critical understanding of the erotically charged “super-powers” of the classic comic book hero has much to offer the academic study of religion, especially in terms of how it tends to address, or fails to address, the “(post)modern” gnosis of the mystical.

Kripal’s discussion favors one comic book in particular, the “uncanny X-Men.” The X-men are a creation of Stan Lee and were first published by Marvel Comics in 1963

(Kripal 2006: 126). Traditionally, the X-men consisted of a five-member team of superheroes led by the telepathic Professor Francis Xavier.¹²⁸ In comparison to many other comic book heroes of their generation, the X-men are unique because they are “mutants.” Unlike Superman, who is “super” precisely because he is an alien, or Batman, who relies on his physical prowess, quick wit, and superior technology, or even Spiderman, who gained his superpowers from the bite of a radioactive bug, the X-men were born “super,” that is, their unique powers are a product of evolutionary mutation. Their mutations provided the X-men with extraordinary powers. However, these powers come at a great cost because they make the X-men stand out from the rest of society. Thus they are often ostracized and persecuted by the establishment. In essence, the X-men are outcasts, subversives, who, despite being the target of mainstream prejudice, cling to the dream of constructing a more egalitarian world where both mutants and non-mutants alike can share and prosper in the bounty of life.

Kripal reads the modern myth of the X-men as an allegory for the modern study of religion/mysticism. Like many of the myths of antiquity, the tales of the X-men tend to follow a particular pattern that shares a great deal with the narrative structure of the classic hero quest. The hero quest is commonly recognized as consisting of at least four stages: a unique calling, a separation from conventional society, a great struggle, and finally, a return, which is often marked by some kind of transformative revelation (Kripal

¹²⁸ The original members of the X-men are Angel, who “could fly with a set of literal wings. Another, Iceman, was made entirely of ice that he could manipulate to various offensive and defensive effects. A third, Cyclops, possessed eyes that could emit powerful beams of energy. And a fourth, the Beast, possessed remarkable animal-like strength, gymnastic abilities and an acute intellect. The lovely Jean Gray, constantly hit on by her four male admirers, completed the five-member team, now rife with sexual tension” (Kripal 2006: 127).

2006: 132). This motif of the hero quest definitely resonates with the X-men mythology, and is a defining characteristic of how American pop culture presents the super hero (Kripal 2006: 132). Interestingly, Kripal also wants to frame the academic pursuit of studying religion as a kind of hero quest in and of itself.¹²⁹ Moreover, the practices and teachings of many mystical traditions in both the East and the West also share in this hero quest motif. However, what often goes unnoticed in these various hero quests of the comic book hero, the religious scholar, and the mystic, is the fact that the ultimate aim of the quest is often both inspired and shaped by certain erotic issues. The “gnosis” of the hero is immersed in eroticism.

Take the comic book, for example. A casual glance at the bodies of the superheroes of any era is enough for one to be immediately struck by the beauty of their form. The most popular male superheroes tend to be muscular, handsome, and dashing. The most popular female superheroes tend to be slender, pretty, and vivacious. In short, the bodies of the comic book heroes are “sexy.” It is widely known that the target audience of the average comic book is largely pubescent boys. Thus it is no surprise then that the “ideal body types” of the superhero happen to conform to certain “male desires” (Kripal 2006: 133). What is not widely known, however, is that “the earliest superheroes came from eroticized pulp magazines, and the earliest publishers and distributors of the

¹²⁹ Kripal states: “The graduate student, especially in the humanities, is on a kind of modern-day vision quest, and she is likely to suffer the same fate as the traditional initiate, shaman, or hero: a vague sense of calling or vocation, a willed and extended separation from society (often this may involve some rather significant sacrifices involving extreme degrees of solitude, self-reflection, and the suspension of income-generating activities), an eventual vision quest in the form of an original idea or project that will define her, perhaps for the rest of her life, and the relative miscomprehension of her family, friends, and society in general” (Kripal 2006: 132).

genre also dealt in soft porn” (Kripal 2006: 134). Hence, Kripal writes: “The history of the American comic book is also the history of sex” (Kripal 2006: 134).

Furthermore, Kripal claims that the superpowers of the comic book hero can be easily interpreted as a reference to sexual desire.¹³⁰ From this perspective, the myths of the comic books provide a highly dramatized setting from which real human beings can imaginatively engage with the mystery of their (budding) sexuality. Kripal states: “This, I would suggest, is precisely what in real life is x-tra about real X-Men and X-Women and why the myths speak most deeply to adolescents: what simultaneously gifts and curses the young adult is the mysterious x-tra of sexual maturation, understood (quite correctly) here not simply as a biological instinct but also as a potential occult energy or “superpower” (Kripal 2006: 134). In other words, young adolescents capacity to identify with the struggles, triumphs, and extraordinary powers of the superhero stems primarily from their recognition that they too are just beginning to enter upon their own hero quest of sorts, namely, adulthood and its biological counterpart, sexual maturity.

Kripal summarizes his understanding of the relationship between the superhero myth and human sexuality as follows:

In order to understand properly the hero motif in world mythology, and in American mythology in particular, we must be willing to mythologize sexuality as an originary expression of a kind of mystical humanism and recognize that hidden within human sexuality lie real ‘secret identities’ and ‘superpowers’ that continue to sublimate and morph throughout the life cycle into multiple forms of consciousness and energy as wild and various as any superhero team. In other words, instead of simply reducing the mythical to the sexual, I want to imagine *raising* the sexual into the mythical... What is x-tra is the sexual (Kripal 2006: 136).

¹³⁰ Kripal point out that according to the X-men myth, “a child’s mutant power usually manifests at puberty” (Astonishing X-Men # 2 as quoted by Kripal 2006: 136)

In the latter half of his essay Kripal draws on the “sexual allegory of the superhero” as a heuristic device aimed at elucidating the hidden gnosis operating in the contemporary study of religion (Kripal 2006: 136). Kripal claims that similar to the (sexual) powers of the superhero, which can be viewed as both a curse and a gift, there are certain forms of hidden knowledge (gnosis) “commonly found in the academy but seldom discussed, much less understood, in public formats” (Kripal 2006: 136). In a sense, Kripal seeks to “unmask” the secret identity of the contemporary study of religion and thereby help to broaden the horizons of its standard epistemological strategies. Kripal identifies nine secret “forms of theoretical knowledge,” which, for the sake of space I briefly outline below:

1. The Gnosis of the Many: refers to “the scandal of religious pluralism,” that is, every religion operates according to a different and often conflicting world-view and system of value (Kripal 2006: 137).
2. The Gnosis of the Ambivalent Sacred: refers to the historical fact that in almost every religious tradition “the sacred has consistently manifested itself in ways that have been both profoundly positive and horribly negative” (Kripal 2006: 137).
3. The Gnosis of Society: refers to the central role social issues play in constructing religious meaning. Religion, in other words, is ultimately a social construct (Kripal 2006: 138).
4. The Gnosis of Power: because it is a social construct, religion and its attending meanings are always already immersed in the power struggles of human ideology, that is, “religion is never devoid of the political” (Kripal 2006: 138).
5. The Gnosis of the Body: regardless of clime or creed, all religious meaning is a product of human desire. And all human desire is ultimately derived from the body: “The body, its desires, its needs, and its fluids, then, are religious universals precisely because they are also physiological universal, and for all our talk of cultural difference and relativism (all true enough), the interior of the human body, any human body of any race, language or culture, is virtually indistinguishable” (Kripal 2006: 139).

6. The Gnosis of History: “religions are historical phenomena that can be studied, tracked, and understood as any other historical phenomena” (Kripal 2006: 139).
7. The Gnosis of the Outsider: refers to the methodological advantages of examining a religious tradition etically, that is, from the perspective of the outsider: “we know that certain insights into religious systems are generally unavailable to the participants themselves, so determined are their thought processes by religious ideas and practices, part of whose *raison d’être*, as I have already pointed out, is to conceal all sorts of things in order to justify their own ‘obvious’ truths” (Kripal 2006: 139).
8. The Gnosis of the Insider: whereas a certain critical distance is always necessary to gain an objective understanding of any religion, at the same time, “we know that certain insight into religious systems are generally unavailable to outsider who have not fully internalized the linguistic practices and ritual forms of the religion being studied” (Kripal 2006: 140).
9. The Gnosis of Reflexivity: refers to our capacity to recognize that the study of religion is not only about religion: “*it is to study ourselves...* In the end, what we are studying is human beings, and any methods up to that task will have to apply not just to the other but to the self” (Kripal 2006: 140).

I believe that a tenth category can be added to Kripal’s list: “The Gnosis of the Paranormal.” Kripal’s understanding of the paranormal draws heavily on William James’ notion of radical empiricism, which “refused to look away from phenomena simply because they offended commonsense or scientific notions about what is real or possible” (Kripal 2006: 147). Like James, Kripal is open to the possibility that there are secret levels of human experience and meaning that deserve to be studied in greater detail, despite that fact that they often conflict with the accepted paradigms of conventional knowledge. Hence, just like James, Kripal is willing to take the paranormal claims of certain mystics very seriously.

The study of mysticism shares a rich history with the study of the paranormal. For example, in his work *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952), Herbert

Thurston calls attention to the extraordinary levitations of Teresa of Avila and Joseph of Copertino, “whose numerous floats and flights in broad daylight, personal efforts to hide their embarrassing, even terrifying abilities, and convincing external witness make them difficult to ignore”¹³¹ (Kripal 2006: 147). Such paranormal abilities are quite common in the history of mysticism and yet they are often glossed over by modern theorists as fanciful imaginings of the devoted. Why are such paranormal phenomena so often “completely ignored in the contemporary study of religion”? (Kripal 2006: 147). Kripal suggests that this type of paranormal or “mutant” phenomena tend to be strategically ignored by the academy “in order to preserve the illusion that the reigning paradigm of materialism, historicism, constructivism, and reductionism are sufficient” (Kripal 2006: 154). Kripal’s “Gnosis of the Paranormal” openly contests the supremacy of this reigning paradigm.

Although the contemporary study of religion tends to shy away from investigating the paranormal, there are certain influential theorists who have attempted to seriously engage paranormal phenomena as a legitimate area of research. For example, James, Freud, and Jung were all very interested in the psychology of the paranormal.¹³²

However, Kripal’s discussion about the “Gnosis of the Paranormal” focuses primarily on the influential work of three theorists: F. W. Myers, Jess Byron Hollenback, and Michael

¹³¹ According to Kripal, “Joseph’s recorded levitations, for example, number into the hundreds and were allegedly witnessed by thousands” (Kripal 2006: 147).

¹³² According to Kripal, William James “worked closely with a very convincing Boston psychic named Mrs. Piper and wrote extensively on psychical matters” (Kripal 2006: 147). Freud admitted that, “if I had my life to live over again I should devote myself to psychical research than to psychoanalysis” (Freud as quoted by Kripal 2006: 147). And Jung, “wrote his dissertation on the psychology of séance phenomena and pursued related occult themes and even actual experiences throughout his gnostic life” (Kripal 2006: 147).

Murphy. The combined findings of these three theorists suggest that the contemporary study of religion must make a more engaged effort to reconsider how it traditionally addresses paranormal phenomena, particularly how it understands the relationship between the paranormal and the mystical.

F. W. Myers is widely recognized as one of the chief architects of the London Society for Psychical Research, which was founded in 1882 (Kripal 2006: 148). Myers' work with the LSPR played an indirect role in helping to shape the direction of the contemporary study of mysticism. William James was a close friend of Myers, and he was greatly influenced by Myers' research on the paranormal and its implications for the psychological study of mysticism¹³³ (Kripal 2006: 148). According to Kripal, after dedicating the majority of his adult life to the "systematic study of psychical phenomena," Myers became "convinced that the human spirit does indeed survive the disintegration of the body and that, moreover, the phenomena for which he coined the terms *subliminal self* were the secret of genius, dream, hypnotism, automatic writing, ghostly apparitions, telepathic communication with the living and dead, trance, possession, and religious ecstasy. Myers, in other words, left the world the basic elements of an entire gnostic psychology of religion" (Kripal 2006: 149).

In his text, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (1996), Jess Byron Hollenback criticizes the contemporary study of mysticism for failing to "pay sufficient attention to the supernatural or 'miraculous' phenomena that so frequently

¹³³ James was not only a member of the American Society of Psychical Research but he also borrowed the term "subliminal" from Myers (Kripal 2006: 148).

accompany mystical states of consciousness” (Hollenback 1996: 17). Kripal outlines

Hollenback’s understanding of the paranormal as follows:

For Hollenback, psychological and ritual techniques that focus concentration and lead the mind into deeper and deeper states of contemplative concentration somehow catalyze remarkable transformations of psychic functioning, which in turn can lead to the traditional visionary landscapes of the mystic, to noetic insights into the interpretations of scriptural texts or traditional doctrine, and to distinct parapsychological phenomena (precognition, telepathy, out-of-body flights) that appear to grant accurate information about the external world and even the content and states of other minds (Kripal 2006: 151).

Hollenback refers to this connection between mystical consciousness and the “nonordinary forms of energy or power” that it produces as “*empowered imagination*” (Kripal 2006: 151). Hollenback believes that “something special or ‘x-tra’ happens to the human mind when it is intensely focused, and that this concentration, this fascination, somehow literally empowers or energizes the mental processes to perform at greater speed, with more insight, and with greater creativity and cognitive reach. Often, the results are quite literally ecstatic (*ek-stasis*, a ‘standing outside’) and result in supernormal or psychic abilities” (Kripal 2006: 151). However, it must be noted that Hollenback is not claiming that mystics are “a species set above the rest of humanity. They simply appear to exaggerate, temporally compress, and consciously control processes that are always taking place slowly and quietly, in a more attenuated form and more or less unconsciously, whenever human beings are engaged in those activities that create and sustain a cultural or religious tradition” (Hollenback 1996: 296).

Interestingly, Hollenback’s theory of an “empowered imagination” lends support to Kripal’s claim that certain mystical states of consciousness can produce knowledge

(gnosis) that is counter-cultural. For instance, Kripal states: “Empowered mystics...consciously play with the cultural codes that others take for granted and so leave alone. Through their empowered imaginative acts, they dissolve and create new patterns of meaning and so create new culture, only faster” (Kripal 2006: 152). In other words, both mystical and paranormal experiences are similar because they can empower certain individuals with a rare form of knowledge (gnosis) that often contests the given parameters of a particular cultures conventional worldview.

Michael Murphy is a cofounder of the Esalen institute in Big Sur, California. The Esalen institute is dedicated to advancing knowledge about human potential. Murphy’s understanding of human potential draws equally on both Western and Eastern mystical philosophies, practices, and technologies to construct an integrated model of the mind/body that calls attention to the irreducibility and mutual interdependence of each. Or, as Kripal puts it: human potential refers to “the notion that the human being possesses immense untapped potentials that can be accessed, activated, and stabilized, through specific transformative practices, integral philosophies, and enlightened institutions” (Kripal 2006: 150). Most significantly for the discussion at hand, Murphy’s understanding of human potential “includes all sorts of ‘supernormal’ powers, from clairvoyance and telepathy to extraordinary feats of physical prowess, all of which have been framed and exaggerated in religious literature, folklore, and modern fantasy as supernatural but that are better understood as foreshadowings or intuitions of natural potentials of evolution and of our own quantum biology” (Kripal 2006: 150). Murphy’s theories will be addressed in more detail in the next section. For the moment, it will

suffice to note that Murphy's understanding of human potential explores the possibility of moving the "X-men" from the realm of fantasy to the realm of reality.

I argue that the ten "gnostic" categories outlined above can be read as the theoretical and methodological foundation of Kripal's "(post)modern" model for studying religion/mysticism. Furthermore, I suggest that these ten gnostic categories are all linked to Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism. Kripal states: "all of my work has been motivated by what I have called a 'mystical humanism,' in effect a version of Schwab's integral humanism that brings together the worlds of Western critical theory and Asian mystical thought, on the one hand, and those of the Asian philosophical traditions and Western mystical thought, on the other hand" (Kripal 2006: 197). In more broad terms, mystical humanism refers to a critical merging of reductionism and mysticism (Kripal 2006: 150). We have seen this theme of merging reductionism and mysticism manifest throughout Kripal's discussion in the *Serpent's Gift*. From his reading of the sexual identities of Jesus and the critical humanism of Feuerbach, to his "comparative erotics" and X-men allegory, again and again, reductionism and mysticism are placed in constant dialogue with each other throughout Kripal's text. Essentially, I suggest that Kripal's gnostic perspective is a product of this dialectic he constructs between reductionism (rationalism) and mysticism.

From a Hegelian perspective, one might say that Kripal aims to reach a synthesis between reductionism/rationalism and mysticism through his concept of gnosis. Or, to put it a bit differently, rationalism plus mysticism equals gnosis. But what differentiates Kripal's understanding of gnosis from its more "premodern" Christian counterpart? In

contrast to the traditional Christian understanding of gnosis, Kripal's "(post)modern" gnosis "privileges knowledge over belief" (Kripal 2006: 11). In other words, Kripal refuses to let the "heretical" insights of mystical illumination (gnosis) be sanitized by the ideological agenda of institutionalized religion. Stated simply, mystical gnosis for Kripal is not a product of religion; it is a product of humanity.

When framed as a methodology, that is, as a way to approach the study of religion/mysticism, Kripal's gnostic model has the advantage of being able to simultaneously accommodate *both* the critical insights of modern rationalism *and* the intuitive imaginings of mystical consciousness. Kripal states: "Essentially what we have here is a Gnostic hermeneutics, that is, a form of interpretation that embraces reason and all the insight of the constructivist and contextualist paradigms but then moves on from there to a radical empiricism that recognizes that human creativity can become empowered by noetic states of consciousness and energy" (Kripal 2006: 152). This integration of the rational and the mystical that defines Kripal's "(post)modern" gnostic methodology also serves as the core theoretical insight of his mystical humanism. Kripal states:

Through the specifics of any number of rational-critical methods (historical criticism, anthropology, psychoanalysis, sociology, economic, philosophy, evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, etc) such a mystical humanism enthusiastically and efficiently reduces all religious language to the human being, but to human being now conceived as an unfathomable biological, chemical, and quantum depth, an immeasurable, unquantifiable potential, an anciently evolved cosmic body literally composed of exploded stars, an instinctually undetermined, ever-receding horizon, and a radical, irreducible plurality expressed and explored in countless cultural forms and practices" (Kripal 2006: 88).

Kripal's mystical humanism, then, refers to a comparative recognition of humanity's capacity to submit the mystical to the critical lens of reason without foreclosing the possibility that there are certain qualities of the mystical that point to hidden dimensions of human potential, which, for the time being, appear to transcend the limited domain of conventional knowledge. For Kripal, the mystical *is* reducible to the human being. Yet, at the same time, Kripal conceives the meaning of "human being" as inherently mystical. Kripal states: "Human nature constitutes a secret that is immeasurably deeper and more complex than any strictly rational method or language can possibly grasp and that requires for its fuller (never full) explication hermeneutical methods that are best represented in those forms of religious thinking and practice we have come to call, for our own purposes and in our own poetic terms 'mystical' or 'gnostic'" (Kripal 2006: 88).

However, if human nature is so mystically inclined why is it that so many rationalists, scholars, and even mystics, fail to recognize it as such? In other words, what is obstructing the global cultivation of this mystical humanism? Kripal provides a compelling answer to this question in his conclusion that he outlines as follows: "(1) a bimodal model of human consciousness and energy that constitute so many of the origin points of the history of religions, while staying true to the legitimate concerns and ethical commitments of enlightenment reason; (2) an analysis of the role that bodily energies play in empowering the cognitive, moral and imaginal capacities of the intellectual life; and, finally, (3) a specific bimodal empowered logic delivered from 1 and 2 that can be

fruitfully applied to contemporary theoretical debates within the study of religion”

(Kripal 2006: 163).

Kripal’s “bimodal model of human consciousness and energy” is based on a classic *coincidentia oppositorum* common to the literature of many influential mystical teachings that claim a unitive identity between mind (spirit) and matter (body). Kripal’s bimodal model moves this widely held mystical claim from the domain of religion to the domain of human psychology. From a psychological perspective, Kripal’s bimodal model stipulates that, “*each person is simultaneously a conscious, constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifest itself only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious traditions have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as ‘God’ and so on, or introjected inwards into the human being as nirvana, Brahman, and so on*” (Kripal 2006: 164). In other words, drawing on his study of the history of religions, Kripal believes that there are at least two dimensions of human consciousness: rational, “everyday” ego-consciousness, and a more radical, subversive type of mystical consciousness that often operates beyond (or, below) the domain of the ego. If this bimodal model of human consciousness is valid then this means that, “human consciousness cannot be restricted or reduced to the ego and its specific forms of knowledge and experience” (Kripal 2006: 168).

Kripal’s essays provide numerous examples of “this doctrine of the human being as Two or More” (Kripal 2006: 168). Kripal states:

We could easily read the orthodox Christological claims that Christ possessed two real natures, one human and one divine, as a kind of unconscious mystical anthropology or precritical bimodal psychology. I do, anyway. So too in the theology of Feuerbach: each human being is simultaneously a limited social ego and a specific instantiation of an infinite human potential. A similar, if by no means identical, doctrine is quite explicit in the Ramakrishna materials, where we find the ancient Indic claim that the *atman* is the *brahman*, that is, the deepest core of the human being is identical to the cosmic essence of all things, despite the fact that the conscious ego (the *ahamkara* or “I-maker”) is normally completely unconscious of its own deepest field of consciousness. The superheroes, of course, play with a similar pattern through the secret identity trope (Kripal 2006: 168).

Kripal claims that many of the problems confronting the study of religion in general and mysticism in particular stem from both scholars and mystics’ inability to clearly differentiate the two modes of human consciousness. In other instances, one is privileged over the other¹³⁴ (Kripal 2006: 165). Kripal aims to reconcile this conflict by appealing to his concept of the erotic. Kripal states:

Drawing on a wide comparative sweep of sources – from Plato’s philosophical reflections in the *Symposium* on eros as a contemplative technique, through India’s philosophy of Being as *ananda* or orgasmic ‘bliss,’ the *ch’i* of Chinese Daoist sexual yoga, and the Tantric Buddhist notion of orgasm as a form of subtle reason, to William Reich’s cosmic orgone, George Bataille’s *erotisme*, and the Lacanian and feminist *jouissance* – what I have named the erotic is an explicitly dialectical category that embraces all those advances made through the analytical categories of sexuality and gender...but also reaches out to the nonordinary states of intense mystical rapture, religious revelation, charismatic energy, and literary and philosophical creativity (Kripal 2006: 173).

Kripal’s concept of the erotic clearly shows the central role “bodily energies play in empowering” a bidmodal model of human consciousness. Recall that the erotic is first

¹³⁴ For example, Kripal calls attention to how this bidmodal model of consciousness can help to clarify our understanding of the relationship between morality and mysticism. Kripal states: “the debate about whether mysticism is moral or not is generated primarily through an inappropriate restriction of human consciousness either to the socialized self (mysticism as the suspension of the ego is bad) or to the larger field of consciousness (mysticism as the suspension of the ego is good). Only a model that accepts both fields of consciousness and energy, and this without conflating or identifying the two, can adequately explain the data and do justice to our own moral sensibilities as functioning social selves and as complex conscious beings. Once again, precisely because human consciousness is bimodal, only a bimodal psychology and logic can begin to explain the data” (Kripal 2006: 175).

and foremost a dialectical category: on the one hand it refers to body, gender, and human sexuality, and on the other, it refers to spirit, soul, and that transcendent “something more” that traditionally defines the mystical. As a methodological tool, this same dialecticism remains intact, for the erotic both reduces the mystical to the sexual *and* raises the sexual to the mystical. Such a paradoxical position is only tenable if the sexual and the mystical can be read as mutually inclusive categories, that is, they must be exchangeable at some level of human experience or meaning. Kripal believes that this exchange is made possible because both body (matter) and consciousness (mind) are essentially composed of the same energy (Kripal 2006: 171). In other words, once we recognize that both mind and matter are co-extensive products of the same field of energy (the ultimate gnosis of the mystical) then it is possible to engage fully with the many psychological, social, cultural and political ramifications of how a bimodal model of human consciousness can help structure our understanding of how to study religion/mysticism. I argue that this is precisely the aim of Kripal’s “gnostic” approach, namely, to frame humanity as “something more.”¹³⁵

Significantly, Kripal’s gnostic perspective can be read as “a specific bimodal empowered logic...that can be fruitfully applied to contemporary theoretical debates within the study of religion” (Kripal 2006: 163). Drawing on Romain Rolland¹³⁶ as his

¹³⁵ Kripal states: “I am simply asking for a more expansive, imaginative, and attractive vision of what it means to be human, which, or so I am suggesting, looks a lot more like the X-men with their mutant powers than it does the social scientist, pure rationalist and Marxist” (Kripal 2006: 141).

¹³⁶ Inspired by his own nature mystical experiences Rolland attempted to construct a mutually beneficial dialogue between Western psychology and Eastern mysticism (Parsons 1999: 63). The epistemological fruit of this dialogue is Rolland’s concept of the “oceanic feeling.” According to Parsons, the “oceanic feeling” refers to a unique state of “mystical subjectivity” engendered by mystical consciousness that is characterized by both a feeling or “sensation” of the unitive relation of all existence, and a existential

model, Kripal argues that a “gnostic intellectual” recognizes the nondualistic logic of a bimodal understanding of human consciousness, which attempt to balance a rationally-based skepticism with an unflinching desire to theorize openly about the unknown potential of humanity’s innate bond with the cosmos. Kripal states:

The seeking path of the gnostic study of religion, which begins with the socialized ego, with reductionism and constructivism, in order to demonstrate, convincingly, that virtually all of what people assume to be ‘transcendent’ or ‘external’ in religion is nothing of the sort, that ‘religion’ rather is historical, contextual, sexual, and gendered – in a word, that it is *relative*. But a gnostic methodology would proceed from this understandable and necessary disturbance to demonstrate that such a socialized self or constructed religiosity hardly exhausts the full range of human consciousness and energy, that there are indeed, exactly as Rolland wrote Freud, other ways of being religious, ways that leave the little ego far behind and venture further into the more and more complex fields of human consciousness and energy (Kripal 2006: 175).

This is exactly the goal that Kripal has in mind when he speaks of mystical humanism, namely, a genuine gnostic recognition that humanity not only actively constructs, interprets, and represents the mystical, but by virtue of our energized bodies/minds, we participate *in* the mystical. Or, perhaps it might be more accurate to say

knowledge that this unitive relation is purposely unfolding throughout Nature and human consciousness (Parsons 1999: 15). Parsons summarizes Rolland’s views as follows: “Rolland assumed mystical experiences to be an extraordinary kind of perception that bypassed ordinary modes of knowing, required a corresponding faculty (intuition), and resulted in a radically new kind of subjectivity” (Parsons 1999: 112). Drawing on a combination of humanism and mysticism Rolland set about formulating a “universal science-religion” based on an integration of social action and mystical intuition that would someday become the “religion of the future” (Parsons 1999: 67). It was precisely Rolland’s desire to establish a mutual beneficial dialogue between rationalism and mysticism which prompted him to seek-out Freud’s collaboration in the creation of a “mystical psychoanalysis” (Parsons 1999: 67). Hence, Kripal also reads psychoanalytic theory as a precursor to the type of “gnostic” position that he is advancing. According to Kripal, “Freud’s psychoanalysis, even with its stunted materialistic ontology, remains the best rational model we yet have for how a particular knower might get from the pre- or nonrational to the rational and, moreover, how these two realms of human being are in fact intimately related and always informing, influencing, even actually determining one another. Quite despite himself, Freud gives us a way of having it both ways, not as a compromise, but as a bimodal statement of human being, which really *is* both ways” (Kripal 2006: 165).

that the mystical participates *in* us, acting as a secret cradle for the entire warp and woof of our existence.¹³⁷

Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Russell T. McCutcheon offer two of the most important critiques of *The Serpent's Gift*. Both scholars question the efficacy of Kripal's gnostic method on the grounds that it slips dangerously close to glossing over the hegemonic implications of any kind of universalizing humanism. Moreover, both scholars take Kripal to task for failing to address the central role history and cultural context plays in structuring the relationship between a scholar and his or her object of study. Hanegraaff and McCutcheon do not believe that the future study of religion lies with "gnosis;" in fact, they maintain that such a gnostic perspective speaks more to Kripal's personal agenda to come to terms publicly with the shortcomings of his previous works than provides an adequate model of religious scholarship. According to Hanegraaff and McCutcheon, Kripal's gnostic gift to the study of religion is an imaginative fraud.

In his paper, "A Gift with Diminished Returns" (2008), Russell T. McCutcheon calls attention to the difficulty of Kripal's desire "to have it both ways" (McCutcheon 2008: 750). Kripal wants to be both rational and mystical, an insider and an outsider, a contextualist and a perennialist, etc. According to McCutcheon, "having it both ways therefore presupposes that two viewpoints can co-exist in the same head: one from within a system (i.e. applying some logical epistemological grid to make the world knowable)

¹³⁷ Hence, perhaps the reason why the mystical is traditionally such a difficult object of study for human beings is that because it is much like a fish trying to explain the meaning of water: the meaning of water is unfathomable to a fish precisely because water itself dictates the ultimate ceiling of what constitutes "meaning" for a fish. The same rings true for humanity's understanding of the mystical, that is, we cannot fully objectify *It* because *we are It*. Hence the classical Hindu mystical doctrine of *tat tvam asi* (that art thou) (Happold 1963: 71).

and the other from without (i.e. a universal perspective that lets us in on the secret knowledge that there is more than meets our perspective-bound eye), both of which are nicely captured in his double entendre of the term ‘enlightenment’ – scholars of religion, his readers are told, need to cultivate both a European rationalism and an Asian mysticism” (McCutcheon 2008: 752). However, McCutcheon maintains that Kripal’s both/and position is never truly both/and, that is, under closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that Kripal’s gnostic model harbors an implicit type of hegemonic “archrationalism” that masquerades as a populist liberal humanism. This point becomes clearer when one considers what Kripal means by his term “the human.”

According to McCutcheon’s reading, “the human” for Kripal “is comprised of two analytically separable movements: one socialized, empirical, and thus susceptible to systematic observation and study, whereas the other is a ‘complexly conscious field,’ which is rather more elusive, inspirational, libidinal, dynamic, and thus creative” (McCutcheon 2008: 752). The aim of Kripal’s gnostic model is to provide a space in the academy for such a both/and view of “the human.” However, according to McCutcheon, Kripal’s humanist approach is predicated on the assumption that certain religious beliefs and traditions are more gnostic, and thus more “human,” than others. In particular, those traditions that are bound to a “literalist reading of myths” are less apt to recognize the advantages of Kripal’s gnostic approach, which ideally relativizes all culturally specific truth-claims. From this perspective, it is okay to be spiritual but it is not okay to be religious. McCutcheon points out that such a move to theorize about “the human” in any kind of universalizing sense is highly problematic because one then must come up “with

a way of justifying as anything but self-serving the criteria that one uses to distinguish the mature spiritual wheat from the infantile religious chaff. For the trouble, of course, is that others are making the same distinction for yet other purposes” (McCutcheon 2008: 753).

For McCutcheon, one of the biggest problem with Kripal’s gnostic approach is that he presupposes that he knows what is in the best interest for the “other,” which in Kripal’s case appears as “a certain sort of politically liberal and humanistic view on the intertwined nature of critical thought, open sexuality, and human potential” (McCutcheon 2008: 761). In other words, Kripal’s understanding of humanism assumes “that the people under study (whether they know it or not) are saying something quite other than what they themselves think they are saying” (McCutcheon 2008: 759). This assumption may work on the psychoanalyst’s couch; however, as McCutcheon points out, Kripal’s comparative psychoanalytic method lacks the one crucial component necessary for such a treatment to work, namely, “the willing patient” (McCutcheon 2008: 759). Hence, McCutcheon writes:

The critique that I am offering invites scholars who claim to be interested in issues of empowerment and disenfranchisement to assess their own role in power politics – even if they think that their role is simply to uncover timeless meanings and deep experiences. For in looking over some such work, I find an ironic absence of the very agency in the Other that such humanist claims to be trying to recover. And while it may go unnoticed by them, it is a lack that is more than apparent to those readers in parts of the world who, until recently, have had no choice but to accept unsolicited colonial presents (e.g., languages, legal and economic systems, trading relationships, etc.) – so called gifts for which they may have had little or no use (McCutcheon 2008: 762).

Ultimately, McCutcheon’s general critique of *The Serpent’s Gift* rests on a simple question: “whose criteria were used to determine the limits of our common human

potential (i.e. who constitutes the limits of the ‘our’?)” (McCutcheon 2008: 760). What gives Kripal the right to determine the meaning of “the human” as an antagonist of religious faith? By what measure of value is the spiritual, or more accurately, the mystical/gnostic individual assumed to be in a better place for realizing “our” human potential than the religiously-oriented literalist? To understand how Kripal might respond to these questions, we might follow McCutcheon’s lead and recognize that “despite Kripal’s postmodern sympathies, it seems that modernism eventually wins out in his project” (McCutcheon 2008: 757). This is evident in the ethical agenda underlining Kripal’s mystical humanism, which, in many ways seeks to preserve the achievements of the Enlightenment. Kripal states: “The human being, the individual, gender equity, and the notion of human rights may all be Western constructions, cosmic illusions with no objective grounding ‘out there.’ These same convictions may also be in constant danger of morphing into an unthinking and arrogant cultural imperialism. Still, they are also visions of our own Enlightenment, precious moral values without which billions of individuals (most of them women, children, and minorities) will almost certainly continue to suffer gross injustice, deprivation, disease, and violence” (Kripal 2006: 9). Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism, which, it must be noted, draws equally on both Western and Eastern models of what it means to be “human,” can be read as a moral challenge to both mystics and scholar alike to no longer just theorize about the catastrophic pain inflicted on so many living bodies by the ideology of blind faith, but to fight back as it were and take an unequivocal stance “against the demiurge of religion itself” (Kripal 2006: 136).

In his paper, “Leaving the garden (in search of religion): Jeffrey J. Kripal’s vision of a Gnostic study of religion” (2008), Wouter Hanegraaff questions the epistemological weight of Kripal’s gnostic model for studying religion. Hanegraaff’s critique focuses primarily on the problematic nature of Kripal’s dismissive attitude towards “premodern” forms of religious faith (Hanegraaff 2008: 270). Hanegraaff claims that Kripal’s desire to transcend the “premodern,” through his gnostic approach to the study of religion can be read as a postmodern spin on “Hegelian evolutionism” (Hanegraaff 2008: 270). Hanegraaff locates this “Hegelian evolutionism” operating in Kripal’s move to mend the traditional conflict between (modern) science and (premodern) religion through a synthesis of psychology and mysticism, which, according to Hanegraaff, is what essentially defines Kripal’s understanding of gnosis (Hanegraaff 2008: 260).

The problem for Hanegraaff is that many of the assumptions guiding Kripal’s gnostic model, such as his “structural preference for the present and the future over the past” and his “structural preference for the universal over the local” can “easily end up supporting the very dogmatism and intolerance it wishes to overcome” (Hanegraaff 2008: 270). How so? According to Hanegraaff, “Kripal’s ‘Gnostic study of religion’ is not so much a methodology for studying religion(s), but rather a religious and normative (meta) discourse about the nature of religion” (Hanegraaff 2008: 270). In other words, Kripal’s gnostic model for studying religion is not a methodology at all, but rather, it is ideology “posing as scholarship” (Hanegraaff 2008: 270). Hanegraaff believes that regardless of its good intentions, such an ideology “would inevitably degenerate to some kind of totalitarianism” (Hanegraaff 2008: 270).

Notably, Hanegraaff also claims that Kripal's "(meta)discourse about the nature of religion" is symptomatic of the general approach to the study of religion in North America. According to Hanegraaff, "the European traditions tend to emphasize historical and textual research based upon primary sources...in the United States, 'the study of religion' as a separate discipline is often understood primarily as a normative or quasi-normative (meta)discourse about religion as such, with critical study of primary sources and historical research playing an essentially secondary role. *The Serpent's Gift* reflects this latter approach, which is rare in Europe" (Hanegraaff 2008: 275). By failing to properly address the "historiographical" materials that are required for a truly empirical study, Hanegraaff concludes that Kripal's gnostic model of religion may be entertaining as "a highly personal theoretical discourse about the nature of religion and its possible future," but in terms of offering "knowledge in a strictly scholarly or academic sense," it remains an empty gift (Hanegraaff 2008: 275).

Kripal addresses Hanegraaff's critiques in his paper "Gnosissss – A response to Wouter Hanegraaff" (2008). Kripal's response focuses largely on questioning the parameters of meaningful scholarship. Yes, historical, cultural, and political issues are all vital to the contemporary study of religion. But must the study of religion end there? Certainly, most European scholars might think so. However, Kripal's gnostic model suggests that empirical knowledge (the domain of ego-consciousness) can only grasp a limited understanding of the multidimensional nature of human consciousness.¹³⁸ There

¹³⁸ According to Kripal, restricting our study of the religion or mysticism to "the level of the conscious socialized self... is like trying to understand the full spectrum of light by examining only the tiny sliver that the healthy eyeball can detect" (Kripal 2006: 165).

are altered states of human consciousness,¹³⁹ particularly, certain mystical states, which can only be meaningfully engaged by enlarging our understanding of human consciousness to include both rationalism *and* mysticism, the empirical *and* the gnostic.

Kripal summarizes his position as follows:

Must we never venture beyond historical-criticism and ask the philosophical questions that every sophomore in our classroom is already asking? Does not profound historicism force on us profound questions about the nature of reality, which, amazingly, appear to be experienced very differently in different periods and places? And who can seriously study psychical phenomena and not ask metaphysical questions about mind-matter interaction? Why be bound by the historicism and materialism of our present culture? If our historical method can show us the relativity of all this – and I think they can – why be bound by such artifice? Does not the very power of our thought lead us out of this thought? Hanegraaff would argue that such questions are indeed worth asking, but that any answers must remain fundamentally speculative, hence we cannot possibly write about them as scholars of religion. There is much truth here, but it is absolutely binding only if we define the intellectual life along strict historical and materialistic lines. I am no longer willing to do this (Kripal 2008: 279).

We will see in the next section that Kripal is not alone in his conviction that a comprehensive understanding of the mystical requires scholars to move beyond the petty localisms of religious faith and seek out a new terrain of scholarship that refuses to refrain from asking “the big questions,” despite the fact that such a transgression might garner a rebuke from the guardians of the status quo. In fact, Esalen is a community in America that aims to actually realize the meaning of Kripal’s mystical humanism in all its gnostic glory, *here and now*.

¹³⁹ It is important to point out that like his previous works, Kripal’s understanding of “altered states of consciousness” in *The Serpent’s Gift* is intimately tied to the trauma of “sexual or physical abuse, which sets up psychological conditions (primarily the capacity to dissociate, that is, split consciousness in Two), which in turn can result in profound and profoundly positive altered states of consciousness” (Kripal 2006: 174).

More Human than Human

In 1917 a young German theology student by the name of Frederic Spiegelberg (1897-1994) had a profound mystical experience. On a beautiful spring day he was walking alone through a wheat field when he was suddenly overwhelmed with a deep feeling of mystical bliss. The pleasure of this mystical bliss shook the very foundation of his being. Writing in the third-person, Spiegelberg recounts his experience as follows:

His usual every-day consciousness has vanished, and he feels instead something deep, something holy. He calls it his higher Self. And this, his new, better transmuted Ego, feels in the so-called world nothing but holiness. These waves of the ocean and the blowing of the wind are the voice of God; all these flowers and trees are full of his glory; like Moses he sees each bush burning in sacred fire, and like the mystic shoe-maker Jakob Boehmen, after having looked for a long time at his shoe-maker's globe, he sees the bright glance of some super-cosmic sun shining from the center of every creature around him. This whole reality has become perfect and holy. Secular life has faded away, or it has changed to some better life, more real and bright now that the former things have passed away (Spiegelberg as quoted by Kripal 2007: 50).

Still reeling from his mystical experience, Spiegelberg continued on his walk when he came upon an old stone church. The presence of the Church "shocks" him:

For what on earth is a church doing in this glorified world? What can be behind these stone walls, what means this colored light behind the windows, and what these strange sound of music which reach his ear? All the world around has been holy, has been God's eternal nature, has been His face and His expression. Therefore – and this is what shocks him – if there is really anything else, anything peculiar behind those walls, it could only be a matter outside God, in contrast with, or even in opposition to this eternal bliss of the all-penetrating holiness (Spiegelberg as quoted by Kripal 2007: 50).

Spiegelberg's mystical experience instilled him with a secret knowledge, a gnosis, that was by his own account "in opposition" to the church. In other words, Spiegelberg's description suggests that the revelatory knowledge he acquired from his mystical experience transcends the dogma of institutionalized religion. The mystical for

Spiegelberg thus came to signify “the religion of no religion” (Spiegelberg as quoted by Kripal 2007: 50). According to Kripal, Spiegelberg’s understanding of “the religion of no religion” does not refer to the worship of any kind of “personal God” associated with traditional religion. Rather, “the religion of no religion” refers to a radical state of mystical Being that “leads always to the conception of new names for God” (Spiegelberg as quoted by Kripal 2007: 52). From this perspective all gods and all religions are merely localized manifestations of the “all-penetrating holiness” that defines the mystical. For Spiegelberg, then, the mystical is not a product of religion, but rather a product of the “natural universe”(Kripal 2007: 52). Hence, Kripal argues that Spiegelberg’s “religion of no religion” ought to be read as a “powerful form of nature mysticism” (Kripal 2007: 52). Years after his mystical experience in the wheat fields Spiegelberg’s vision of “the religion of no religion” would evolve to become the theoretical centerpiece of his general approach to the comparative study of religion.

In 1950 Spiegelberg was teaching a course on comparative religion at Stanford University when a young Michael Murphy mistakenly walked into the lecture hall thinking it was a course on social psychology (Kripal 2007: 47). Murphy stayed long enough to become transfixed by Spiegelberg’s teachings about nature mysticism, Eastern religions, and the comparative approach in general. Most significantly, Spiegelberg’s teachings about “the religion of no religion” would inspire Murphy and another student, Richard Price, to collaborate in creating one of the most influential counter-cultural

communities in North America: The Esalen institute.¹⁴⁰ Significantly, Spiegelberg's mystical vision of "the religion of no religion" would come to "function as the theological foundation of Esalen" (Kripal 2007: 51).

Jeffrey Kripal's latest work, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (2007), examines the fascinating history of the Esalen institute, from its turbulent beginnings in the 1960s up to the present day. The Esalen institute is located in Big Sur California and was formally established in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Richard Price (1930-1985). In general terms, Esalen was initially designed as "an alternative educational center devoted to the exploration of human potential" (Kripal 2007: 28). In other words, the Esalen institute provides various workshops and seminars designed to teach various ways of understanding and studying human potential.

The workshops and seminars offer a wide variety of teachings that range from encounter groups, therapeutic massages, Gestalt therapy, and Eastern meditative practices, to the study of psychedelics, metaphysics, quantum physics, and everything in between. Although the content and methods of these workshops and seminars vary quite broadly, the general focus of most of their teachings share a common goal, namely, to

¹⁴⁰ According to Kripal, the "historian Theodore Roszak first brought the expression 'counterculture' into popular consciousness in 1968 in a four-part article in the *Nation*" (Kripal 2007: 109). In the article, Roszak calls attention to the influential role that certain Asian mystical traditions, particularly, the erotic traditions of Tantra, have played in shaping the views of many of the theorists commonly associated with defining the American counterculture. Roszak states: "In fact, nothing is so striking about the new orientalism as its highly sexed flavour. If there was anything Kerouac and his colleagues found especially appealing in the Zen they adopted, it was the wealth of hyperbolic eroticism the religion brought with it rather indiscriminately from the *Kama-sutra* and the tantric tradition" (Roszak as quoted by Kripal 2007: 109). Although the Esalen institute is widely recognized as a "Mecca" of the American counterculture, it is important to note that Esalen "did not arise out of the excess of the counterculture, with which it is always (mistakenly) conflated. Rather, it arose out of the conservatism of the 1950s *before* the counterculture in an attempt to free itself from the stifling conformity – the 'air-conditioned nightmare,' as Henry Miller once put it – of the baby-booming '50s" (Kripal 2007: 448).

elucidate the spiritual, psychological, cultural, and even cosmic merits of human potential. One of the most popular subjects of inquiry for many of Esalen's most influential theorists concerns the relationship between human potential and the mystical. Stated simply, many Esalen theorists, including Kripal, consider mystical experience to be one of the most extraordinary expressions of human potential.

When it first opened in 1962 Esalen's general approach to the study of mysticism was quite ahead of its time (Kripal 2007: 300). Both Murphy and Price were dedicated to establishing a cross-cultural understanding of the mystical that was compatible with the findings of modern science. Many of the leading theorists commonly associated with Esalen tended to frame mysticism as a comparative category and thus would often draw equally on both Eastern and Western mystical traditions as a source of knowledge about human potential. But what is perhaps most striking about Esalen's early approach to the study of mysticism, and what makes its approach so radical, is its tendency to put both Eastern and Western mysticism in dialogue with the findings of modern science. As Kripal puts it, "Esalen has dedicated itself to the fusing or synthesizing of the spiritual and the scientific, of wonder and reason, or what an academic might call the humanities and the sciences. Science, after all, is also an expression of the human, and Esalen is first and foremost about *the integral*, about the whole human being, infinitesimal calculus and all" (Kripal 2007: 13). Mysticism, then, was highly valued at Esalen, not because it offered an experiential validation for any kind of religious "truth" but because it was believed that certain mystical states of consciousness hold the key to unlocking a deeper

and more integral understanding of both the spiritual *and* scientific reality of human potential.

With nearly five hundred pages of text, *Esalen* is Kripal's largest book to date. Space constraints prohibit me from addressing all the material presented by such a comprehensive work.¹⁴¹ I will focus my discussion primarily on analyzing the way Kripal's portrayal of Esalen, particularly, its contributions to the study of mysticism, help to elucidate Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism. In more specific terms, I claim that for Kripal, Esalen represents the closest approximation of a mystical humanism that is put into actual practice in a contemporary context. In other words, Esalen embodies the core values, ideals, and practices that Kripal assumes are necessary for establishing a genuine mystical humanism.

¹⁴¹ Given the sheer size of Kripal's text I am forced to limit my discussion to certain key areas of Esalen's history that I believe can shed the most light on Kripal's understanding of mysticism. With such a precise focus I recognize that I am excluding the contributions of various influential theorists who have played a major role in defining Esalen as a whole. For example, I do not mention much about Richard Price or Fritz Perls who are widely recognized as two major influences on Esalen. Richard Price was a co-founder of Esalen and was responsible for running much of its administration. Moreover, he also contributed a great deal to shaping the vision of Esalen as a therapeutic community that "sought to create a place where people could come and encounter one another in their full humanity, act out their conflicts, express their emotions, and perhaps even come to some sense of healing" (Kripal 2007: 450). Fritz Perls was one of the leading proponents of Gestalt therapy and one of the most influential psychologists at Esalen. Perls defines Gestalt therapy as follows: "To expand the scope of awareness, to bring greater contact with the environment and to end the subject object split are the goals of Gestalt therapy" (Perls as quoted by Kripal 2007: 159). According to Gordon Wheller, "Gestalt, most succinctly stated, is the psychology of Constructivism. That is, the model grows out of the fundamental insight that our experiential world is not and cannot be *given* to us... Perception itself is an act of interpretation, rendering sense data (itself selected and interpreted) into useable whole units or 'gestalts,' of imaginal pictures, narratives, and other sequences" (Wheller as quoted by Kripal 2007: 162). In other words, Gestalt therapy aims to contest the imaginary divide between the subject and object by demonstrating the constructed nature of all reality. This nondualistic quality of Gestalt therapy blends in well with the worldview of many of the East Asian mystical traditions that are popular at Esalen (Kripal 2007: 162). Alongside the contributions of Price and Perls, there are several other areas of Esalen's history that deserve to be acknowledged, such as the following: the "Somantics movement," the "Program in Humanistic Medicine," the "Confluent Education Program," the "Center for Theory and Research" (CTR), and Esalen's pivotal role in facilitating international relations between America and the Soviet Union. The list could go on given the overall breadth of Esalen's interests. However, following Kripal, I have chosen to direct the majority of my discussion about Esalen "toward Murphy's vision of things" (Kripal 2007: 452).

Recall that for Kripal mystical humanism signifies a “heretical” form of mysticism that draws equally on both (Western) rationalism and (Eastern) mysticism to call attention to the mystico-erotic potential of the human body as a source of comparative theorizing. In his last text, *The Serpent’s Gift*, Kripal claims that when viewed through the lens of the erotic the secret knowledge or gnosis revealed by certain forms of mystical consciousness appear to endorse the notion of a divinized humanity or, in Kripal’s terms, a mystical humanism. *Esalen* picks up where the *Serpent’s Gift* left off, that is, it expands Kripal’s discussion about mystical humanism by examining how it can be better understood in relation to the findings of the human potential movement. Essentially, I argue that Kripal interprets Esalen’s “gnosis” as signifying a uniquely American form of mystical humanism.

The structure of Kripal’s text focuses on four main themes: 1) the religion of no religion; 2) the altered states of history; 3) the Tantric transmission; and 4) the enlightenment of the body (Kripal 2007: 24). Kripal suggests that to appreciate fully Esalen’s impact on the study of mysticism in particular, and American culture in general, requires a comprehensive examination of how these four themes manifest in the history of the Esalen institute. If my claim is accurate that Esalen embodies Kripal’s vision of a truly functional mystical humanism, then it follows that the four defining themes he employs to characterize Esalen must also play a pivotal role in his understanding of mystical humanism.

If mystical humanism is interpreted as the ultimate goal of Kripal’s teachings about the mystical, then, in many ways, theoretically, methodologically and even

personally, *Esalen* can be read as a culmination of Kripal's previous works. Most significantly, I suggest that Kripal's notion of "the enlightenment of the body" is *the* central concept linking the various parts of his model of mystical humanism together. In other words, Kripal's understanding of the erotic, the hermeneutical, and even the mystical are all intimately tied to his conception of "the enlightenment of the body," which, in turn, serves as *the* ultimate signifier of human potential. In the following discussion I will address each of Kripal's four defining themes that characterize his understanding of *Esalen* – "the religion of religion," "altered states of history," the "Tantric transmission," and "the enlightenment of the body" – by focusing primarily on how they each relate to the historical and contemporary study of mysticism. However, before proceeding, it is important to provide a brief historical sketch about how the human potential movement emerged at *Esalen*, because it provides the narrative backdrop for much of Kripal's analysis.

The notion of "human potential" was first popularized by the author/scholar Aldous Huxley. In the early 1960s Huxley was using the phrase "human potentialities" to highlight the untapped power of the human mind. Huxley states: "The neurologists have shown us that no human being has ever made use of as much as ten percent of all the neurons in his brain. And perhaps, if we set about it in the right way, we might be able to produce extraordinary things of this strange piece of work that a man is" (Huxley as quoted by Kripal 2007: 85). The American psychologist Abraham Maslow¹⁴² (1908-

¹⁴² Maslow's "humanistic psychology" is commonly recognized as the "third force" in American psychology, following Freud's psychoanalytic theory (first force) and "the behaviourism of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner" (second force) (Kripal 2007: 137). Humanistic psychology is defined by the emphasis it

1970) expanded on Huxley's notion of human potentialities by demonstrating "how human beings self-actualize these potentialities, that is, realize them in their own personal lives" (Kripal 2007: 135). Perhaps one of Maslow's most famous examples of how an individual actualizes his or her human potential is his theory of a "peak-experience."¹⁴³ Significantly, Maslow's concept of a "peak experience" tends to mirror the traditional understanding of mystical experience in the sense that both facilitate an empowered state of consciousness and energy that is transformative and often characterized in terms of wholeness and unity (Maslow 1964: 63).

The actual phrase "human potential movement" was first coined by Michael Murphy and George Leonard in 1965 (Kripal 2007: 208). The inestimable contributions that the human potential movement has made in advancing our knowledge about the contemporary study of mysticism will become clearer as our discussion unfolds. For now it will suffice to refer to Kripal's summary of its historical origins in the personal lives of Murphy and Leonard:

Historically speaking, the term encoded Murphy's abiding commitments to Huxley's human potentialities, psychical research, and meditative experience, as well as Leonard's fierce memories of Martin Luther King, Jr., the desegregation of the schools, and the Berkeley free speech movement's battle with censorship. The phrase coded, in other

places "on human beings in their future-oriented and self-actualizing 'peak-experiences' instead of in their past-oriented neuroses" (Kripal 2007: 137). Maslow's humanistic psychology also played a pivotal role in establishing a "fourth force" in American psychology called "transpersonal psychology," commonly associated with the work of Ken Wilber, which focuses "on 'transpersonal' states of consciousness especially prevalent in mystical literature" (Kripal 2007: 151).

¹⁴³ According to Kripal, "a peak experience for Maslow was an extraordinary altered state of personal history that fundamentally alters the individual's worldview through an overwhelming explosion of meaning, creativity, love, and Being" (Kripal 2007: 149). Interestingly, Kripal calls attention to the fact that "the famous 'peaks' of Maslow's psychological theory often carry a certain orgasmic tone: *peak* and *climax* are very close, and Maslow was not the least bit hesitant about invoking the complete orgasm as an appropriate analogue to the peak experience" (Kripal 2007: 149). This of course fits nicely with Kripal's own erotic thesis about the mystical.

words, a literary influenced, profoundly ethical, socially engaged American mysticism (Kripal 2007: 208).

In the introduction to this section I pointed out that the concept of “the religion of no religion” is derived from the comparative scholar of religion Frederic Spiegelberg. According to Kripal, Spiegelberg’s notion of “the religion of no religion” is essentially a mystical doctrine. Spiegelberg’s own comments appear to confirm this view: “The background of any religion of no-religion, which leads always to the conception of new names for God, can be seen in a pantheistic feeling of mystic all-oneness which is formulated in an abstract and quite neutral way, and which means a psychological inversion of former ideas of some objective reality” (Spiegelberg as quoted by Kripal 2007: 51). Stated simply, a pantheistic form of nature mysticism is foundational to Spiegelberg’s understanding of “the religion of no religion.”

How exactly does “the religion of no religion” differ from traditional religion? First, “the religion of no religion” is different from traditional religion because in comparison to the dogmatic literalism commonly propagated by traditional religion, “the religion of no religion” recognizes the symbolic nature of its truth claims. Second, in contrast to the vast majority of traditional religions, “the religion of no religion” tends to privilege immanence over transcendence, that is, it focuses on the *here and now* rather than the hereafter (Kripal 2007: 51). These two differences that distinguish “the religion of no religion” from traditional religion can be attributed to the mystical roots of Spiegelberg’s own experiences.

As a mystical doctrine, “the religion of no religion” can accommodate traditional religion as viable resource of meaning, but only to that degree in which the religion in question acknowledges the constructed, and thus relative, nature of its truth claims (Kripal 2007: 52). In other words, all religions are “true” to the extent that they recognize the “metaphorical or symbolic understanding of all religious language” (Kripal 2007: 9). The moment a religious tradition denies the symbolic reality of its truth claims for the sake of some kind of literalism it fails to qualify as a genuine “religion of no-religion.”¹⁴⁴ From Spiegelberg’s perspective, institutionalized religion can only acquire a symbolic understanding of the mystical because the mystical is a product of the natural divinity of the cosmos and thus it both encompasses and transcends all particular religious traditions. Or, as Kripal puts it, “once one recognizes that all religious beliefs and practices are approximations of a deeper source of Being (or Nonbeing), it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to essentialize any particular belief or practice as somehow inviolable or ultimate” (Kripal 2007: 403). In essence, then, “the religion of no religion” teaches that the mystical can be expressed *through* religion but it can never be reduced to religion.

Esalen’s understanding of “the religion of no religion” is neatly summarized by two of its earliest mottos: “No one captures the flag” and “We hold our dogmas lightly” (Kripal 2007: 9). The co-founders of Esalen – Michael Murphy and Richard Price – are

¹⁴⁴ According to Kripal, “there are three historical traditions that Spiegelberg singles out as particularly suggestive of the religion of no religion: Zen Buddhism, which he always saw as a prototype of the religion of no religion; Western alchemy, which recognizes that salvation is ultimately a matter of matter and the body; and Indian yoga, which recognizes, particularly in its Tantric forms, that the final temple of the divine is, again, the human body (Kripal 2007: 52).

both white upper middle-class Americans who turned away from the cultural traditions of their upbringing to seek out an alternative form of spirituality, which they found in the mystical traditions of the East.¹⁴⁵ Murphy and Price created Esalen with the democratic intent of providing a place for people to travel their own spiritual path without the fear of being labeled a “heretic” or “blasphemer.” Hence all religious perspectives are welcome at Esalen but no single religion dominates, that is, “No one captures the flag.” Kripal claims that it is precisely this atmosphere of inclusion that contributed to Esalen’s influential role in facilitating a more robust dialogue between Western and Eastern religious traditions that emerged during the American counterculture of the 1960s and early 70s. This “Esalen model” of intercultural dialogue, predicated on the core values that define “the religion of no religion,” would play a pivotal part in shaping the direction of the contemporary study of comparative mysticism¹⁴⁶ (Kripal 2007: 9).

Kripal’s second thematic category, “altered states of history,” refers to various “synchronistic” methods Esalen theorists employ in order to construct “a fusion of reason and faith into a higher gnosis beyond both the orthodoxies of science and the creeds of churches” (Kripal 2007: 13). There are at least four examples of “altered states of

¹⁴⁵ Moreover, Kripal points out that “Murphy and Price were both athletes. Both were Stanford graduates and psychology majors. Both had spent time in the military and had dropped out of graduate school. Both were profoundly shaped by Asian religious thought and influenced by the same professor of Asian and comparative religion. And, perhaps most importantly, both had life-altering ‘breakout’ experiences in 1955-56: Murphy’s trip to Aurobindo’s ashram and Price’s psychotic breakdown as breakthrough” (Kripal 2008: 82).

¹⁴⁶ Hence, Kripal claims that, “it is no accident that a similar move, now more rigidly theorized as an intellectual practice, lies at the heart of the modern comparative study of religion. A basic democratic dynamism advances through a simultaneous embrace of all religious systems as symbolic expressions and a deconstructive urge to deny ultimacy to any one of them. Indeed, so strong are the subversive analogues between the comparative study of religion and the mystical traditions that the modern study of religion can be thought of as a modern mystical tradition in its own right. Mysticism here is not some transcendent abstraction without political or moral content. It is the modern liberal West’s, and certainly the Western academy’s most well-known religion of no religion” (Kripal 2007: 10).

history” that stand out in Kripal’s discussion which are particularly relevant to our understanding of his model of mystical humanism: the study of psychedelics, psychical research, the “new mysticism of science,” and the “Freudian Left.” In 1962, one of the earliest brochures produced by the Esalen institute provides an outline of its general mandate that highlights the centrality of some of these particular “altered states of history”:

A new conception of human nature is emerging in the field of psychology, a conception that is gradually superseding the views of classical psychoanalysis and strict behaviorism, a conception oriented towards health, growth and the exploration of our psychic potentialities. Creativity research, work with the ‘mind-opening’ drugs and the discoveries of parapsychology (psychical research) complement this development, pointing as they do toward a profounder human possibility (Kripal 2007: 101).

One of the most influential theorists in the early history of Esalen to examine the relationship between psychedelics and mysticism in any great detail is Aldoux Huxley.¹⁴⁷ Huxley’s work played a tremendous role in shaping the early vision of Esalen. According to Kripal, “Aldoux Huxley’s writings on the mystical dimension of psychedelics and on what he called the perennial philosophy were foundational. Moreover, his call for an institution that could teach the ‘nonverbal humanities’ and the development of the ‘human potentialities’ functioned as the working mission statement of

¹⁴⁷ Alongside Huxley, Kripal highlights the work of other numerous scholars who have written extensively about the relationship between psychedelics and mysticism. Space constraints prohibit me from exploring their contributions in as much detail as they deserve. To name just a few of some of the most influential theorists: Gerald Heard, Alan Watts, Gordon Wasson, Timothy Leary, Terence McKenna and Huston Smith have all contributed a great deal to expanding our contemporary understanding of the relationship between psychedelics and mysticism. Moreover, in terms of clinical research, it is also important to call attention to the findings of Walter N Pahnke (1964), Walter H Clark (1969), and Jean Houston and R E L Masters (1966). Clark concludes that Pahnke’s experiments provide “the most cogent single piece of evidence that psychedelic chemicals do, under certain circumstances, release profound religious experiences” (Clark 1969: 77).

early Esalen” (Kripal 2007: 86). Huxley’s experience with psychedelics and its implications for the study of mysticism would prove highly influential in shaping the way Esalen addressed the relationship between mind-altering drugs and mystical states of consciousness. Consequently, Esalen’s early research on the mystical potential of psychedelics would help to define the positive value that the American counterculture placed on drug-use as an alternative method of “higher” learning.

In 1953 Huxley ingested mescaline for the first time in order to “explore the mystical potential of the hallucinogen” (Kripal 2007: 118). A year later, Huxley published *The Doors of Perception* in which he claims that after ingesting the drug he was transported to a state of consciousness that closely resembles the traditional religious description of mystical experience. In bald terms, Huxley’s psychedelic experience produced a mystical experience: “I was seeing what Adam had seen on the origin of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence” (Huxley 1954: 7). Huxley’s experiments with mescaline suggest that the extra-sensory effects of a drug induced experience and that of a traditional religious mystical experience generate a similar state of pristine consciousness, one in which “the doors of perception are fully cleansed.” In other words, the phenomenological descriptions commonly associated with a traditional mystical experience bear an uncanny similarity to Huxley’s own drug-induced mystical experience. For example, they both appear to produce a lack of egoism and facilitate the emergence of a transformative state of illumination. According to Huxley, in this state of mystical illumination existence is perceived as a unity: “All is in All” (Huxley 1954: 14).

Huxley concludes from his study on the relationship between psychedelics and mysticism that “what is important is less the reason for the experience than the experience itself” (Huxley 1954: 20). In other words, it does not matter how one attains an experience of the mystical, through drugs or through prayer; what ultimately matters is what it does, namely, expand the human mind to such an extraordinary degree that it can actually make contact with the “Mind at Large” (Huxley 1944: 15). Huxley’s experience with psychedelics would have far reaching effects on the contemporary study of mysticism.¹⁴⁸ Most notably for the history of Esalen, Huxley’s research would lend “chemical” support to the experiential validity of “the religion of no religion” (Kripal 2007: 127).

Psychical research is another popular subject at Esalen. This is no real surprise given that the extraordinary powers commonly associated with psychic phenomena shares a rich history with the mystical traditions of both the East and the West. For example, historically, psychic or “occult” powers have often been associated with the mystical experiences of certain Catholic saints.¹⁴⁹ These powers correspond quite nicely

¹⁴⁸ For example, Jim Fadiman and Willis Harman point out that, “there seems to be no question in anyone’s minds who has experienced it, that the so-called ‘psychedelic’ drugs, such as LSD and mescaline, produce a kind of mystical experience. The question that worries many people is, ‘Is the drug-induced mysticism religion?’ It is altogether possible that drug-induced mystical experiences will force us to study and revise all of our previous definitions of religion” (Fadiman and Harman as quoted by Kripal 2007: 103).

Furthermore, certain forms of drug-induced mysticism appear to generate an alternative form of eroticism that has profound political implications. For instance, according to Timothy Leary, “the sexual impact is, of course, the open but private secret about LSD, which none of us has talked about in the last few years. It’s socially dangerous enough to say that LSD helps you find divinity and helps you discover yourself. You’re already in trouble when you say that. But then if you announce that the psychedelic experience is basically a *sexual* experience, you’re asking to bring the whole middle-aged, middle-class monolith down on your head” (Leary as quoted by Kripal 2007: 131).

¹⁴⁹ Drawing on the work of Herbert Thurston, S. J. (1889-1939), Kripal calls attention to a “number of psychical phenomena, including levitation, stigmata, telekinesis (particularly as manifested by floating or flying eucharistic wafers), luminous bodies...incombustibility or resistance to burning (the ‘human

with the “siddhis” or “supernormal powers” traditionally associated with the experiences of certain East Asian mystics (Kripal 2007: 17). Drawing on the evidence of these traditional religious sources, certain Esalen theorists have attempted to call attention to how both historical and contemporary manifestations of psychic phenomena can be better understood as expressions of human potential.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps no one at Esalen has contributed more to this venture than Michael Murphy.

Murphy’s understanding of the “siddhis” and its relationship to human potential is largely shaped by his reading of Sri Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine* (1949). In *The Life Divine*, Aurobindo claims that the human body is empowered with “psychic” or “supernormal” powers that are the natural result of evolution (Kripal 2007: 66). Mystics often exhibit a unique capacity of tapping this occult energy through certain meditative practices aimed at integrating consciousness and cosmos. According to Kripal, “it is precisely this evolutionary mysticism and this interest in the psychical superpowers that Michael Murphy will pick up and develop in his own Aurobindonian ways” (Kripal 2007: 66). This is made most evident by Murphy’s writings, which draw on Aurobindo’s

salamander’ phenomenon, bodily elongation, the experience of the *incendium amoris* or ‘fire of love,’ the odour of sanctity, incorrupt corpses, blood prodigies (blood that flows for months or even years after death), seeing without eyes, *inedia* (living without eating, and the multiplication of food” (Kripal 2007: 412).

¹⁵⁰ The work of Russell Targ presents some of the most compelling examples of a contemporary manifestation of “supernormal powers.” In the 1970s Targ and his colleagues played an instrumental role in facilitating government-funded programs aimed at researching psychical phenomenon. Specifically, Targ was deeply involved in “something called remote viewing (or ESPionage), which essentially involved the use of gifted psychics to locate and describe targets in the Soviet Union that were otherwise hidden or secret (very much like police departments today allegedly use psychics to help crack particularly difficult cases, locate bodies, etc.)” (Kripal 2007: 342).

notion of “the Superman”¹⁵¹ as a source of theorizing about human potential. Murphy’s work will be discussed in more detail as our discussion advances. For now, I want to call attention to one text in particular, Murphy’s *In the Zone: Transcendent Experience in Sports* (1978).

In the Zone can be read as an extension of Murphy’s first published novel, *Golf in the Kingdom* (1972), in which he draws a parallel between the empowering energies produced by athleticism and those traditionally labeled mystical (Kripal 2007: 283). In his second work, *In the Zone*, Murphy suggests that “sport is an arena with a particular genius for shifting consciousness and energy and spontaneously inducing states that are well known in the history of religions” (Kripal 2007: 283). Both athleticism and mysticism share a similar tendency to fuse the powers of the mind and body together in such a creative way that they can produce extraordinary human feats that appear to defy conventional reality, but which nonetheless highlight the hidden dimensions of our natural human potential.¹⁵² Drawing on Murphy, Kripal points out that perhaps one of the finest examples of this psychic fusion between “athletics” and “mysticism” can be found in various forms of martial arts (Kripal 2007: 283).

Kripal’s understanding of “a new mysticism of science” refers to certain “religious uses of scientific theory that venture well beyond the science for the sake of bold metaphysical speculation” (Kripal 2007: 300). Kripal calls attention to how certain

¹⁵¹ According to Kripal, “the Superman,” refers to Aurobindo’s term “for a divinely gifted race of ‘gnostic beings’ or ‘cosmic individuals’ who consciously embody a full integration of Matter, Mind, and Spirit” (Kripal 2007: 65).

¹⁵² For example, “out-of-body experiences, altered perceptions of space and time, extraordinary elevations of physical and psychical energy, even pre-cognitive dreams and telekinetic-like phenomena appear throughout the amateur and professional sports worlds with a remarkable consistency” (Kripal 2007: 282).

Esalen theorists utilize the findings of modern science as a means of expanding our knowledge about the mystical. Perhaps one of the most prominent fields of scientific theory to engage in this dialogue between science and mysticism is quantum physics.¹⁵³ Kripal argues that Fritjof Capra's influential text *Tao of Physics* (1975) is an exquisite example of this "new mysticism of science."¹⁵⁴ According to Kripal, in the *Tao of Physics*, Capra claims that "there is a strange, even uncanny, parallel between the findings of particle physics and Eastern mysticism, particularly as the latter is displayed in Hindu Tantra, Buddhist Mahayana, Chinese Taoism, and Japanese Zen" and that "the Asian (Tantric) mystics had arrived at the same metaphysical truths through intuition and mystical experience that modern physics had arrived at through more rational and mathematical means" (Kripal 2007: 305).

What is the meaning of this metaphysical truth common to both Asian mysticism and Western physics? Stated much too simply, it is that mind (consciousness) and matter (energy) are inexplicably linked as a whole. Or, in more mystical terms: *All is One* and *One is All*. Kripal claims that the worldview presented by this "new mysticism of science" resonates with Esalen's vision of human potential:

After all, what it implies is that – to redescribe the human potential language of the early Esalen brochures now – reality itself, including the reality of the human being, truly is

¹⁵³ The relationship between mysticism and quantum physics shares a rich history in the West. For in example, in *Quantum Questions* (1984), Ken Wilber calls attention to the mystical writings of Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrodinger, Albert Einstein, Louis De Broglie, James Jeans, Max Planck, Wolfgang Pauli, and Arthur Eddington. Moreover, in *Mysticism and New Paradigm Psychology* (1991), John E. Collins claims that "new paradigm psychology seeks to demonstrate the compatibility of its theories with the conclusions of quantum and relativity theories, and in doing so discovers that certain types of introspection may be acceptable as scientific methodology, and that purely materialistic explanation are not adequate to describe certain phenomenon (Collins 1991: 186).

¹⁵⁴ Kripal also highlights the contributions of Gary Zukav's influential text, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (1979) (Kripal 2008: 302).

potential. Add to this the quantum principles of nonlocality (that the secret of matter transcends space), complementarity (that an electron can be measured as a particle or a wave), and mind-matter parallelism (that consciousness cannot be reduced to anything other than itself, even as it always remains intimately connected to matter) and one begins to see why quantum physics has become one of the privileged mystical languages of Esalen, with or without physicists (Kripal 2007: 314).

The “Freudian Left” is a term coined by Paul Robinson to refer to a movement in the history of psychoanalytic theory that became popular in the 1960s and 1970s through the writings of such theorists as Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), and Norman O. Brown (1913-2002) (Kripal 2007: 143). What generally distinguishes the work of these theorists from classical psychoanalysis is their focus on reinterpreting the “instinctual powers” of the id as “essentially good and wise, even divine” (Kripal 2007: 143). Classical psychoanalytic theory tends to frame the instinctual powers of the id as potentially destructive if they are not properly controlled. In contrast, theorists associated with the Freudian left tend to claim that it is not the instinctual powers of the id that are destructive, but rather how society manipulates these instinctual powers.

Theorists like Reich, Marcuse and Brown believe that our relationships to other human beings and society at large can be positively empowered by cultivating a deeper appreciation for the instinctual powers of the id. From this perspective, the problems confronting the psychological well-being of both the individual and society are not to be mended by constructing mechanisms of power aimed at controlling desire, as classical psychoanalytic theory tends to assume, but rather by constructing mechanisms of power that can radiate desire more freely. Or, as Kripal puts it: “We are not ill because of our

illicit desire, as Freud is often understood to be saying. Rather, we are ill because our societies repress these energies in unhealthy and excessive ways. Sex doesn't make people sick; society does" (Kripal 2007: 147).

Kripal claims that the work of Reich and Brown had a profound impact on how Esalen approached the psychology of mysticism, especially in terms of how it understands the relationship between energy (body) and consciousness (mind) (Kripal 2007: 458). A central concept of Reich's psychology is the "orogone," a neologism he derived from the terms "orgasm" and "organism" (Kripal 2007: 234). According to Kripal, Reich's concept of the orogone refers to "a subtle cosmic energy that links the sentient and nonsentient world and expresses itself through the various mediums of the pulsing rhythms of simple-cell organisms, the intensely pleasurable contractions of the human orgasm, the healing charisma of Christ, and atmospheric weather patterns" (Kripal 2007: 231). What is important to realize about Reich's concept of the orogone is that (like Kripal's concept of the erotic) it not only contests the traditional Cartesian distinction between body and mind, but, also extends Freud's understanding of the libido to include a more mystical dimension that frames the libido as an expression of both bodily and cosmic desire. According to Kripal, "Reich's secularized divinization of erotic energy constitutes *the* central move of the Freudian Left that later sparked and then arched through Esalen" (Kripal 2007: 235). This spark would become a flame that would burn brightly throughout the American counterculture thanks in large part to the writings of Norman O. Brown.

In two of his most influential works, *Life Against Death* (1959) and *Love's Body* (1966), Brown laid the groundwork for a revolution in the way psychoanalytic theory understands the mystical potential of the human body. Brown argues that the energies that constitute mind cannot be understood, let alone appreciated, without first recognizing how they are linked to the energies of body. For Brown, mind and body are mutually interdependent categories. Brown believes that one of most comprehensive models for understanding the radical interdependency of mind and body is offered by some of the more erotic mystical systems of Asia. In *Love's Body* Brown states:

Knowledge is carnal knowledge. A subterranean passage between mind and body underlies all analogy; no word is metaphysical without it first being physical; and the body that is the measure of all things is sexual. All metaphors are sexual; a penis in every convex object and a vagina in every concave one. Symbolism is polymorphous perversity. Orthodox psychoanalysis warns against the resexualization of thought and speech; orthodox psychoanalysis bows down before the reality-principle... Nothing wrong, except the refusal to play: when our eyes are opened to the symbolic meaning, our only refuge is loss of shame, polymorphous perversity, pansexualism; penises everywhere. As in Tantric Yoga, in which any sexual act may become a form of mystic meditation, and any mystic state may be interpreted sexually (Brown as quoted by Kripal 2007: 144).

Brown's last line is quite revealing because it highlights the close affinity between the Freudian Left and certain Eastern mystical traditions which tend to sexualize the mystical and spiritualize the sexual. Kripal argues that many of the defining themes that characterize the Freudian Left, such as its tendency "to embrace and celebrate the id as a mystical force of orgasmic bliss," are a product of Reich's and Brown's desire to fuse psychoanalytic theory with certain forms of Eastern mysticism, particularly, Tantra¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ With regard to Reich, W. Edward Mann suggests that, "the orgone theory may be a Western scientist's rationalistic attempt to capture, unconsciously, certain Eastern insights for Western man" (Mann as quoted by Kripal 2007: 235).

(Kripal 2007: 144). Kripal suggests that “what we have in the Freudian Left, in other words, is a kind of left-handed psychoanalysis that always begins with Freud but often ends with a re-visioned Western Tantra” (Kripal 2007: 144). This “re-visioned Western Tantra” leads directly to Kripal’s third Esalen theme: The Tantric transmission.

Kripal’s third thematic category, the Tantric transmission, refers to his belief that “Asian Tantra provides us with a unique lens into Esalen’s history that can reveal – in a way other lenses cannot – some unusually coherent patterns and meaningful coincidences that deserve our consideration” (Kripal 2007: 17). In particular, Kripal calls attention to the fact that Esalen’s general approach to the study of mysticism is both directly and indirectly indebted to teachings of “the Tantric tradition.”¹⁵⁶ This is perhaps most evident in how both approaches – the Tantric and Esalen’s – tend to “turn to the sexual body as the most potent site of spiritual enlightenment and occult energy” (Kripal 2007: 19). In contrast to many other mystical traditions in both the East and the West, which, tend to place a high measure of value on the transcendent quality of the mystical, “the Tantric traditions tend to insist rather on the essential unity of the transcendent and the immanent order and in fact often privilege the immanent over the transcendent in their rituals and

¹⁵⁶ According to Kripal, “Tantra is an altered category that scholars of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism have forged over the last century (but particularly in the last four decades, that is, since Esalen and the American counterculture) to describe a broad pan-Asian deep worldview that weaves together such local traditions as Hindu Shakta Tantra, some forms of Indian Jainism, Tibetan or vajrayana Buddhism, much of Chinese Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism, as well as various forms of esoteric Japanese Buddhism, including and especially many aspects of Zen. The doctrinal features of this super tradition have been debated endlessly, but I will adopt two classic definitions for my own Tantric readings of Esalen: those of David Gordon White and Andre Padoux. For White, ‘Tantra is the Asian body of belief and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains the universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways. For Padoux, moreover, Tantra is ‘an attempt to place kama, desire, in every sense of the word, in the service of liberation...not to sacrifice this world for liberation’s sake, but to reinstate it, in varying ways, within the perspective of salvation’” (Kripal 2007: 19).

meditations” (Kripal 2007: 19). In other words, from a Tantric perspective, the mystical is both transcendent and immanent, that is, it is nondualistic. The essential meaning of this nondualistic understanding of the mystical is neatly captured by the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna: “There is not the slightest difference between the world and nirvana. There is not the slightest difference between nirvana and the world” (Nagarjuna as quoted by Kripal 2007: 19).

As with “the religion of no religion,” the origins of Kripal’s Tantric transmission thesis can be traced to the teachings of Spiegelberg. Specifically, it can be traced to the teachings of a particular text that helped shape Spiegelberg’s understanding of mysticism, namely, *The Life Divine* by Sri Aurobindo. As mentioned above, Spiegelberg’s teachings about Aurobindo’s *The Life Divine* had a profound impact on Murphy. For instance, according to Kripal “Murphy would describe his reading of *The Life Divine*... as the ‘big climax’ in which ‘it all came together’ for him” (Kripal 2007: 57). In other words, Aurobindo’s vision of the mystical, as embodied in his most influential text, *The Life Divine*, played an instrumental role in defining Murphy’s understanding of the mystical.¹⁵⁷ Most significantly, Murphy would draw on Aurobindo’s vision of the mystical as the driving force of Esalen’s general approach to the study of mysticism.

¹⁵⁷ Kripal suggests that “mystical hermeneutics” can shed light on the profound effect that *The Life Divine* had in shaping Murphy’s views. Recall, that “mystical hermeneutics” refers to a “disciplined practice of reading, writing, and interpreting through which intellectuals actually come to experience the religious dimensions of the texts they study, dimensions that somehow crystallize or linguistically embody the forms of consciousness of their original authors. In effect, a kind of initiatory transmission sometimes occurs between the subject and object of study to the point where terms like ‘subject’ and ‘object’ or ‘reader’ and ‘read’ cease to have much meaning” (Kripal 2007: 61). In other words, reading mystical texts can be a transformative practice. According to Kripal, “we must, I believe, recognize a similar hermeneutical mysticism in Murphy’s life-long interaction with Aurobindo’s text” (Kripal 2007: 61).

Kripal claims that Aurobindo's understanding of the mystical is "deeply indebted to the Tantric traditions of India" (Kripal 2007: 62). Although Aurobindo does not emphasize the term "Tantra" in *The Life Divine*, Kripal suggests that Tantric ideas play a large role in shaping the meaning of his text¹⁵⁸ (Kripal 2007: 63). For instance, the dialectic method Aurobindo employs to explain the "bipolar" nature of reality can be interpreted as a form of nondualism that is similar to the traditional Tantric worldview. (Kripal 2007: 63). Kripal, states: "Aurobindo invokes numerous terms to express this dialectical nature (the One and the Many, the Transcendent and the Immanent, Consciousness and Energy, Spirit and Nature, Being and becoming, Father and Mother, Shiva and Shakti), but his vision is always the same: the ultimate Reality is best understood as a dialectic process within which neither pole can be effaced, denied, or renounced" (Kripal 2007: 64). That is to say, ultimate Reality does not extinguish opposites, but rather, it harmonizes them as a nondualistic whole. This type of nondualistic worldview that Aurobindo invokes to explain the mystical nature of ultimate Reality is a "classic" Tantric move (Kripal 2007: 64).

Furthermore, in *The Life Divine* Aurobindo draws on one of the defining insights of the Tantric tradition – namely, that desire is a divine "manifestation of the evolutionary energy of the cosmos itself" – as one of his most central teachings (Kripal 2007: 64). Even more importantly, desire offers a means of realizing the divine here and now, as

¹⁵⁸ Kripal states that, "there are good historical reasons why Aurobindo avoided any explicit alliance with the Tantras. We must never forget that he was writing in a political context and time period in which the terms 'Tantra' and 'Tantric' carried overwhelmingly pejorative meanings...Simply because we lack the centrality of the terms 'Tantra' in his text, then, does not mean that we cannot or should not use the term in our own precise ways; it simply means that Aurobindo chose not to do the same for his own perfectly sensible and defensible historical and cultural reasons" (Kripal 2007: 63).

both a spiritual *and* bodily reality. Desire for Aurobindo, then, essentially signifies a sacred site of contact between humanity and the divine. Although Aurobindo tends to emphasize the metaphysical meanings of desire in his teachings, at the same time he does not fail to recognize its erotic dimensions.¹⁵⁹ Hence, Kripal points out that similar to the Tantric traditions, eroticism underlines Aurobindo's overall understanding of mystical desire:

He [Aurobindo] was speaking of a kind of (meta)physical pleasure rooted deeply in the human body, itself an ecstatically evolved expression of the cosmos.... This same cosmic bliss became, in the saint's own words now, 'the base' of his practice. Hence he did not hesitate to emphasize (at least in his private diaries) the physical, even sexual, dimensions of his own experiences of this *kamananda* or 'erotic bliss,' 'equal to the first movements of the actual '*maithuna ananda*,' literally, the bliss of sexual intercourse (Kripal 2007: 64)

It is not an overstatement to claim that Aurobindo's Tantric view of the mystical had a profound influence in shaping Murphy's and subsequently Esalen's approach to studying the mystical. But perhaps Kripal's Tantric transmission thesis can be best understood in terms of how certain American theorists associated with the human potential movement turned to traditionally Tantric ideas in order to broaden the counter culture's understanding of the integral relationship between human eroticism and the transformative potential of mystical consciousness. I have already noted how the Freudian Left transmitted certain Tantric ideas to the American counterculture through

¹⁵⁹ Kripal describes Aurobindo's understanding of Tantra as "a right-handed, sublimated vision rooted in his own occult body, its bliss expressed primarily through textuality and spirituality, not a genetically expressed sexuality." (Kripal 2007: 65). According to Kripal, "whereas left-handed Tantric traditions (which almost certainly originated the lineages) are those that insist on the actual performance of the transgressive acts and sexual rituals of the texts and iconographies, right-handed Tantric traditions are those that have sublimated these same acts and rituals into internal contemplative exercises, pure spiritual metaphors, and elaborate metaphysical systems that still bear the stamp of the original erotic union but are now quite removed from any literal act or 'polluting' sexual fluid" (Kripal 2007: 20).

the lens of Western psychoanalysis. Theorists like Reich and Brown utilized certain Tantric ideas, particularly the erotic unity of the body and mind, as a psychological and philosophical foundation for refashioning how both the individual and society can become empowered by seeking a more polymorphously perverse understanding of the mystical potential of desire, sexuality, and body. Similarly, other Western scholars associated with Esalen, such as Aldous Huxley, Alan Watts, Timothy Leary, Allen Ginsberg, Joseph Campbell, Gerald Heard, and Paul Goodman, would also turn to the Tantric traditions in order to expand their erotic knowledge about human potential and its influence on the American counterculture (Kripal 2007: 109).

What is it exactly about Tantra that resonates so profoundly with these Esalen theorists of the American counterculture? On the surface it is quite obvious that “both the American Esalen and the Asian Tantric traditions were ‘counters’ to their respective normative or conservative cultures. This perhaps best explains their various cross-cultural harmonies and echoes” (Kripal 2007: 108). However, there are at least three other areas of resonance between the American Esalen and the Asian Tantric traditions. First, both the Tantric traditions and the majority of Esalen theorists associated with the American counterculture are interested in highlighting the emancipatory value of certain altered states of consciousness, i.e. mystical experience. Second, both the Tantric traditions and the Esalen theorists of the American counterculture recognize that human eroticism is a valuable source of knowledge about how to cultivate a more expansive understanding of how liberating certain mystical states of consciousness can actually be. Third, both the Tantric traditions and the Esalen theorists of the American counterculture

assume that mystico-erotic states of consciousness are liberating because they are potentially transformative. In other words, if self-identity can be altered in such a way that it can become more (erotically) attuned to the divine energies of the cosmos, which, generally speaking, is the ideal aim of mystical consciousness as perceived by both the Tantric traditions and many of the theorists associated with Esalen, then it may actually be possible to construct a more egalitarian socio-political landscape. Once the erotic potential of the mystical is liberated within the individual, so too the rest of society is bound to follow.¹⁶⁰ Thus, perhaps the Tantric traditions' most lasting influence on Esalen in particular and the American counterculture in general is the recognition "that consciousness, not class, had become the new root and generator of social revolution" (Kripal 2007: 109).

The fourth and final thematic category informing Kripal's understanding of Esalen is "the enlightenment of the body." "The enlightenment of the body" refers to a mystical state of being that recognizes the relationship between body (energy) and mind (consciousness) as a nondualistic whole; it signifies an embodied form of mysticism, a sort of "deification of the flesh" (Kripal 2007: 38). Kripal suggests that "the enlightenment of the body" plays a central role in structuring the way Esalen generally approaches the study of mysticism. This is perhaps most evident in the work of two of Esalen's key players, George Leonard and Michael Murphy, who coined the phrase "the human potential movement" in 1965 (Kripal 2007: 207).

¹⁶⁰ Drawing on the work of George Leonard, Kripal states: "society, erotic love, and the body are all related, so to change one is necessarily to change the others" (Kripal 2007: 215).

As a young child growing up in the American South in the 1940s George Leonard was well aware of the horrors of racial inequality (Kripal 2007: 203). Years later, as a journalist in the 1960s Leonard documented the many great strides the civil rights movement made to counter racial inequality in America. Leonard's experiences with racism and the civil rights movement played an influential part in shaping his idea of human potential in terms of a social "movement." Kripal frames the logic of Leonard's idea as follows: "There had been a civil rights movement and a free speech movement. Why not, then, also a human potential movement?" (Kripal 2007: 207). Leonard would subsequently dedicate his life's work to the study of how human potential can help to both spiritually and politically mobilize a more egalitarian view of the world, here and now, that is free from the bondages of social injustice. Leonard states:

We believe that all men somehow possess a divine personality; that ways may be worked out – specific, systematic ways – to help, not the few, but the many toward a vastly expanded capacity to learn, to love, to feel deeply, to create. We reject the tired dualism that seeks God and human potentialities by denying the joys of the senses, the immediacy of unpostponed life (Leonard as quoted by Kripal 2007: 187).

Leonard claims that eroticism is key to understanding how human potential can be utilized to as a force of "actual social and political reform" (Kripal 2007: 218).

Unfortunately, according to Leonard, the American education system has failed to address adequately the various ways in which society's understanding of the relationship between human eroticism and human potential can be broadened in order to challenge and possibly even change the social inequality associated with the status quo. This oversight on part of the American education system has resulted in a (sexually) repressed society that tends to project its discontent on "the other" through various means of

psychological and social oppression. (Kripal 2007: 210). In *Education and Ecstasy* (1968) Leonard seeks to correct this failure by drawing on the human potential movement as an alternative model of education grounded in the social cultivation of mystico-erotic ecstasy (Kripal 2007: 210). According to Kripal, Leonard assumes that only when the findings of the human potential movement are taken more seriously will it then be possible for the education system actually to utilize “the invisible energies of that ‘vast, unknown realm that we call (pending the times we learn to manipulate each of its specifics) the mystical.’ There is, in other words, a future science of mysticism, a technology of ecstasy, that lies at the heart of the evolving human potential, and Leonard was out to propose it as the very heart of the future of American education” (Kripal 2007: 211).

In *The End of Sex* (1983) Leonard continues to draw on the human potential movement as a model for changing the way society traditionally responds to various issues surrounding human sexuality. Specifically, Leonard suggests that certain erotic forms of mysticism can offer valuable insight on how human beings can radically transform his or her relationships so that “your erotic partner is thought of or treated not as an object but as a *person*, a sacred being encompassing the universe” (Leonard as quoted by Kripal 2007: 220). In other words, human eroticism not only leads to the mystical, it *is* mystical. Every individual, every sexual body, is a divine manifestation of the cosmos. Such knowledge has profound implications for how society values sexuality, the body, and human identity in general.

For instance, it becomes much more difficult to oppress another human being because of the color of their skin or who they wish to sleep with once he or she is fully recognized as a genuine manifestation of the divine. This is why a mystically informed eroticism is so vital to furthering the cause of social justice, because it helps us to be able to appreciate the “other” as a (potential) lover. According to Kripal, “what Leonard wants ultimately is a nonrepressive society that is bound together by the sublimated forces of sexuality and that can imagine erotic forms of being beyond the merely genital, a way of living that encourages and nurtures ecstasy and delight and so renders violence and war unnecessary and distracting” (Kripal 2007: 221). Hence, Leonard’s erotic call for the cultivation of more ecstasy is not only a mystical aspiration, but, perhaps even more importantly, also a political statement: To change how we understand love, sex, and body, necessitates a change in how we construct society (Kripal 2007: 215).

As with the Freudian Left, Leonard’s overall understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” can be read as championing a polymorphously perverse conception of sexuality. This means that for Leonard sexuality is multi-dimensional, and thus he ultimately seeks to “raise the sexual to the mystical” (Kripal 2007: 219). Leonard’s mysticism, then, is a fully embodied form of mysticism that celebrates human desire and eroticism as a positive force for change in *this* world. Kripal suggests that Leonard wants to usher in “a kind of transfiguration of the world through a calling up of another kind of human potential and another kind of physical transformation...expressed in the gorging and morphing of the sexual organs and the dramatic, chemical, cellular, and even atomic

transformations of the body during sexual arousal and orgasm. *This* is the enlightenment of the body for Leonard” (Kripal 2007: 220).

Michael Murphy’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” is perhaps summarized most succinctly in his magnum opus, *The Future of the Body* (1992). According to Kripal, *The Future of the Body* is a product of Murphy’s seventeen-year involvement with the Transformational Project. The Transformational Project refers to “a research program to study extraordinary human functioning and the mental and physical strategies that accompany it, in part by compiling, analyzing, and computerizing the relevant literature” (Kripal 2007: 414). The Transformational Project aims to “create a ‘natural history’ of the human potential” (Kripal 2007: 414). According to Kripal, the Transformational Project evolved out of Murphy’s previous works, particularly, the occult novel *Joseph Atabet* (1977), which draws on both the human potential movement and the Tantric traditions to claim that “salvation is a matter of full embodiment and not just spiritual transcendence” (Kripal 2007: 299). *The Future of the Body*, then, can be read as culmination of Murphy’s thoughts about the relationship between mysticism and the human potential as they manifest in both *Joseph Atabet* and The Transformational Project (Kripal 2007: 417).

A central assumption guiding Murphy’s thesis in *The Future of the Body* is that human potential is a natural product of evolution. For Murphy this means that the occult phenomena traditionally associated with the paranormal powers or “siddhis” of certain mystics in the both the East and the West and other more secular manifestations of human potential are “entirely natural expressions of evolution and its latent cosmic forces”

(Kripal 2007: 409). Like his mentor Aurobindo, Murphy is convinced that “a surprising transformation of the human form is possible through the agency of spirit and that in some sense evolution intends this” (Murphy as quoted by Kripal 2007: 417). Hence, in the *Future of the Body* Murphy amasses a wealth of material from the history of “mysticism, psychical research, folklore, hagiography, psychiatry and sport” to document the various ways that the human body/spirit has been transformed by the divine energies that drive evolution (Kripal 2007: 418). From a philosophical perspective, *The Future of the Body* can be read as endorsing a unique kind of evolutionary mysticism, or more specifically, an “*evolutionary panentheism*,” which Kripal defines as “a philosophical system in which God’s transcendence and immanence are simultaneously affirmed (*pan-en-theism*, literally, ‘all-in-god-ism’) and both find expression through the very process of cosmic evolution, randomness and all”¹⁶¹ (Kripal 2007: 419).

In *The Future of the Body* Murphy aims to demonstrate that the human body is naturally mystical. It is not just saints and gurus who have access to the mystical dimensions of the body, but all human beings have the capacity to realize his or her human potential. Drawing on Henry Corbin’s concept of “the imaginal,”¹⁶² the mystical

¹⁶¹ Kripal points out that this notion of an evolutionary mysticism shares a rich history with Western philosophy. For example, the writings of Plotinus, J. B. Fichte, F.W.J. Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel, Henry James Sr., and R. M. Bucke “supports the idea ‘that this world’s unfoldment is based upon the implicit action, descent, or involution of a Supreme Principle or Divinity’” (Murphy as quoted by Kripal 2007: 419).

¹⁶² According to Kripal, Corbin’s concept of the “the imaginal” refers to a “psychical mode of cognition that, under the right circumstances and with the proper training, possess the ability to mediate communication between the divine order and the human mind, mostly through coded symbols, visionary or dream phenomena, mystical literature, and richly paradoxical doctrines” (Kripal 2007: 348).

for Murphy ultimately signifies “the place where spirit and body are one, the place where spirit, taking on a body, becomes the *caro spiritualis*, ‘spiritual corporeity’” (Kripal 2007: 348). In other words, the mystical is what harmonizes the spirit and the body, mind and matter, and consciousness and energy into an integrated whole. The nondualistic recognition of this unity between the body/matter/energy and spirit/mind/consciousness is the essence of Murphy’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body.” Most significantly, Murphy’s vision of “the enlightenment of the body” reflects “what he would like Esalen to be: a place where the human potential can be actualized, a place where the mystical can become real” (Kripal 2007: 273).

Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” draws on both Leonard and Murphy. Echoing Leonard, Kripal suggests that human sexuality holds the key to unlocking the mystical potential of the human body.¹⁶³ Hence, Kripal states that human sexuality is “*the* supernormal power of both biological evolution and the history of mystical experience,” which is “at once spiritual and physical, capable of virtually infinite transmutations, sublimations, repression, pathologies, ecstasies, and – let us never forget – actual births” (Kripal 2007: 422). As with Murphy, Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” explicitly contests the traditional Cartesian dualism

¹⁶³ It is important to note that both Leonard’s and Kripal’s erotic understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” is supported by the work of another influential Esalen theorist, John Heider, who writes the following: “If we have been, as a culture, irrevocably sexualized, perhaps we are offered an opportunity to grow in awareness of ourselves and our part in the whole not by avoiding the difficulties that accompany sexuality but by becoming aware of our sexual natures and transcending the powerful attachments sex involves. In this way, we may possibly see more and more sexual experimentation leading to more and more sexual meditation and finally, as Paul would have it, more and more celibacy on the part of those who have climbed the sexual ladder to the point where everyday life outshines the brightest orgasm” (Heider as quoted by Kripal 2007: 363).

between mind and body. Kripal and Murphy both draw explicitly on the Tantric traditions to show that from a mystical perspective, body (matter/energy/Shakti) and mind (consciousness/spirit/Shiva) are an integrated whole. From this perspective, “enlightenment” does not merely consist of acknowledging the objective reality of this nondualistic whole, but rather it requires an active participation in creating the *meaning* of this whole. Hence, Kripal states that the enlightenment of the body “always and everywhere relies on *interpretation* for its full revelation” (Kripal 2007: 457). “The enlightenment of the body” is not given; it is constructed.

Kripal admits that his basic understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” is largely derived from his concept of the erotic:

In my earlier writings, the fundamental polarity of consciousness and energy within the history of religions is described as the unity of the mystical and the erotic. What I call the enlightenment of the body is a development of that previous work, here extended into modern American religious history – from Bengali to Big sur, as it were – and into the broader but analogous question of the relationship of mind and matter (Kripal 2007: 22).

Similar to his concept of the erotic, Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” draws equally on both East Asian Tantra and Western philosophy and psychology. Tantra provides Kripal with a historically documented mystical tradition that explicitly emphasizes the human potential of the body and “insists in the nondual reality of both spirit and matter, energy and consciousness” (Kripal 2007: 62). Western philosophy and psychology provides Kripal with a historically documented tradition of rational criticism and analytic theory that enables him to wed the traditional mystical meaning of “enlightenment” with the European Enlightenment, which he characterizes in

terms of the democratic pursuit of equality, “individual integrity,” and “liberty” over and against the literalist dogmas of traditional religion (Kripal 2007: 24).

Drawing on the similar “gnostic” strategy that he outlined in his last work, *The Serpent’s Gift*, Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” combines Eastern mysticism (the Tantric traditions) and Western rationalism to offer a nondualistic approach to studying the relationship between consciousness (mind) and energy (body) that is grounded in the findings of the human potential movement. Accordingly, Kripal claims that “the enlightenment of the body” is “a shining forth or making conscious of the matter of the occult flesh that draws deeply from the past of both Tantric Asia and the European Enlightenment but also moves beyond these into something integral, something both ‘beyond belief’ and ‘beyond reason,’ something fundamentally gnostic” (Kripal 2007: 456).

Kripal interprets Esalen’s overall vision of “the enlightenment of the body” along these same gnostic lines. For instance, Kripal claims that Esalen is essentially “about building and nurturing a kind of gnostic community, that is, an intimate group of individuals who are committed to some form of deep and deeply human experiential knowledge that is at once rigorously intellectual, socially and politically engaged, and religiously nuanced. In this way, Esalen has provided real institutional support for an emerging worldview not provided by either the universities, with their *reason*, or the churches, with their *faith*. It is finally a place of *gnosis*” (Kripal 2007: 442). Most importantly for the purposes of the present study, Kripal interprets Esalen’s emerging gnostic worldview as “a kind of mystical humanism for the future” (Kripal 2007: 330).

Kripal's notion of a "mystical humanism for the future" raises two important questions about the contemporary study of mysticism. First, what are the political implications of "the enlightenment of the body"? And second, is it actually possible to construct a more robust comparative dialogue about mysticism based on the universality of the human body and its potentials? In terms of politics, Kripal frames both Esalen's and his own understanding of "the enlightenment of the body" as a product of American democracy. In other words, "the enlightenment of the body" as envisioned by Kripal and Esalen is something that can only flourish in a socio-political environment which not only tolerates "the religion of no religion," but openly embraces it. Kripal states:

Although Esalen's religion of no religion was clearly indebted to any number of previous Asian and Western experiments, this was an experiment whose success depended on (and still depends) most profoundly on a uniquely American political arrangement, the constitutional separation of church and state. It is this "mighty great wall" that in turn nurtures the human potential through an ever greater freedom *for* religion but also, simultaneously and paradoxically, *from* religion, particularly when the latter grows intolerant, bigoted, and exclusive. The result is, if you will, a kind of mystical space that is at once profoundly secular and deeply spiritual (Kripal 2007: 464).

I believe that a "mystical space that is at once profoundly secular and deeply spiritual" is precisely what Kripal has in mind when he speaks of "a mystical humanism of the future." However, if the future goal of mystical humanism is to provide a democratic space for "the enlightenment of the body," the question then becomes "*whose* body can be enlightened. Is this enlightenment just another male privilege, another patriarchal penis, father-god, purity code, or white body posing as absolute truth?" (Kripal 2007: 459). These important questions call attention to the political powers at

stake when the body is universalized as an emancipatory category.¹⁶⁴ Historically, in most religious traditions in both the East and the West, the desires of the male body have tended to determine the ultimate meaning of “enlightenment” (Kripal 2007: 224). The metaphysics underlining this type of chauvinist logic runs as follows: “Consciousness, spirit, and transcendence,” which are associated with male, is considered more divine and thus more valuable than “energy, body, nature, and immanence,” which tend to be associated with females (Kripal 2007: 459). By privileging a male understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” the majority of traditional religions in both the East and the West has contributed to a willful and lasting oppression of “at least half the species” (Kripal 2007: 459).

How has Esalen responded to the question of gender equality? According to Kripal, “early Esalen was no model of gender equity or of female empowerment” (Kripal 2007: 462). Esalen was initially founded on the assumption that it is possible to be spiritual without being religious. Thus many of the early theorists associated with Esalen attempted to distance themselves from the oppressive beliefs and practices of traditional religion. To a certain extent these theorists were successful in the sense that Esalen did provide an alternative to traditional religion. However, at the same time, as Julian Silverman points out, early Esalen was dominated by “male chauvinism,” that is, it was largely males who defined, directed, and shaped Esalen’s vision of human potential (Silverman as quoted by Kripal 2007: 461).

¹⁶⁴ Kripal states: “Freedom is quite literally a bodily state, and if you cannot move your body however you wish, then you are not free” (Kripal 2007: 229).

Fortunately, in contrast to traditional religion, Esalen's "dogma" appears to be much more fluid and "in time, strong female voices, real institutional empowerment, and, above all, more reciprocal child-rearing practices would appear. Men would rear and raise children. Women would lead, teach, and administer. The majority of work shop participants would be women (and still are). Women would sit on the Board (and still do)" (Kripal 2007: 462). Thus, in Kripal's view, whereas early Esalen clearly suffered from the same type of male chauvinism that dominated the religious and cultural landscape of America during the 1950s and early '60s, it eventually demonstrated the political wherewithal to change with the times and come to embrace both female voices and female bodies as an equal source of understanding "the enlightenment of the body."

A similar progressive movement of inclusion can be detected in Esalen's response to the question of sexual, racial, and class equality.¹⁶⁵ Kripal summarizes this movement as follows:

Although it must be admitted that Esalen's general history is predominantly a masculine one and that its clientele is overwhelmingly upper middle class, heterosexual, and white, it is also safe to conclude that Esalen's ideal answer to the question, whose body is to be enlightened? appears to be the same ideal answer it gives to the question, whose body can be massaged? That answer is *every body*. Corporately and ideally speaking, then, the religion or no religion promises a sexual orientation of no sexual orientation, a gender of no gender, that is, a polyamorous eroticism, a culture 'beyond gender' that refuses to be dogmatic about desire. And this is an enlightenment of the body that goes well beyond anything that ever existed in Asia or the West. This is an enlightenment that depends directly on Western history and critical theory, on Freud, Foucault, and feminism, that is, on the enlightenment of reason, liberty and equality (Kripal 2007: 463).

¹⁶⁵ Kripal states: "the grounds have remained friendly to a broad range of sexualities for decades. Indeed, as early as 1972 and 1973, the topics of homosexuality, feminism and gay consciousness, third-world women, masturbation, lesbianism, bisexuality, and child sexuality were all being discussed at Esalen symposia" (Kripal 2007: 462).

How can this uniquely American ideal of “the religion of no religion,” which Kripal identifies as a defining characteristic of Esalen’s egalitarian vision, help foster an understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” that can contribute to the construction of a more robust comparative dialogue about mysticism based on the universality of the human body and its potentials? According to Kripal, the answer lies with the incontrovertible fact that regardless of clime or creed, “both the phenomenology of consciousness as witness of all human experience and the anatomical, hormonal, sexual, molecular, genetic, and subatomic processes of the human body display similar dynamics and structures across all known human cultures and recorded times. This is why human beings in different cultures and times can experience similar, if probably never identical, forms of the enlightenment of the body” (Kripal 2007: 23).

In other words, regardless of where one lives or what one believes, all human experience and meaning is first and foremost embodied. All human beings share the same bodily potential. This is not to say that every “body” is the same. Rather, by virtue of evolution, every human body has access to the same source of human potential.¹⁶⁶ Most significantly, it is this universal bond of embodiment and its attendant capacity to become enlightened that serves as humanity’s greatest resource for generating a more

¹⁶⁶ The following remarks by Kripal clearly support this point: “Here we might point to the fundamental Esalen category of *the human potential* and the ways that it implicitly recognizes universality (human), particularity (potential), and, above all, development. The more sophisticated writers of the human potential realize fully that the supernormal dimensions of consciousness and the body that they seek typically lie dormant or underdeveloped and require specific cultural practices or beliefs (that is, cultural particularity) to be fully actualized and sustained. They also realize that, once stabilized in culture and the body, such practices tend to have permanent and long-lasting effects on future forms of experience. The principle of the human potential, like that of evolution, thus again demands both universalism and contextualism to work at all” (Kripal 2007: 23).

robust and inclusive cross-cultural dialogue that is immune to the spurious and oftentimes oppressive claims made by religious literalists.

Ultimately, for Kripal, many of the issues raised by the human potential movement force us to consider how a mystical humanism based on the findings of “the religion of no religion,” the altered states of history, the Tantric transmission, and especially, “the enlightenment of the body,” can help cultivate an alternative answer to the question of “how to honor and preserve both our fundamental biological sameness and our real cultural differences” without resorting to the tired dogmas provided by traditional religion (Kripal 2007: 403). Kripal states: “In historical terms, it is the ‘universal body’ – my body, their bodies, *your* body – that allows us to compare and understand other human beings across time and climes, even to access something of their altered states of consciousness and energy. It is also the welfare of this same body that allows us, that *calls* us to condemn cultural practices that endanger or harm this *corpus mysticum* in any way” (Kripal 2007: 223). And this I suggest is what Kripal’s mystical humanism is essentially all about; namely, it is a call to action. It is a wake-up call for mystics, scholars and skeptics alike to reassess critically the various ways in which an embodied understanding of the mystical can contribute to a more integral understanding of what it means to be “human.”

Deus sive Natura

In 1901 the Canadian psychiatrist, R. M. Bucke (1837-1902), published his classic work in the study of mysticism, *Cosmic Consciousness*. Bucke refers to Cosmic Consciousness as “the identification of the person with the universe and everything in the universe” (Bucke 1973: 12). Bucke’s understanding of Cosmic Consciousness is largely informed by his own personal encounter with the mystical that occurred in 1872. After reading the poetry of Walt Whitman and other Romantic poets late into the evening, Bucke was proceeding home when suddenly he felt immersed in a flame-colored cloud:

For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an after taste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could have ever taught. The illumination itself continued not more than a few moments, but its affect proved ineffaceable; it was impossible for him to forget what he at the time saw and knew, neither did he, or could he, ever doubt the truth of what was then presented in his mind (Bucke 1973: 8).

Like the “evolutionary mysticism” espoused by Aurobindo and Murphy, Bucke frames Cosmic Consciousness as a natural product of human evolution. Bucke suggests that the capacity to experience Cosmic Consciousness is an evolved faculty of the human mind that foreshadows the future potential of human consciousness. Bucke believes that someday all of humanity will have access to Cosmic Consciousness (Bucke 1973: 318).

Bucke likely borrowed the term Cosmic Consciousness from his colleague Edward Carpenter (Marshall 2008: 123). Carpenter's general understanding of Cosmic Consciousness is largely informed by his own "liberating" encounter with the mystical that occurred in 1881 (Marshall 2008: 118). Drawing on his personal experience, Carpenter set about articulating his own vision of Cosmic Consciousness in his classic work *Towards Democracy* (1883). Carpenter links the emergence of Cosmic Consciousness to the natural processes of human evolution (Marshall 2008: 113). However, Bucke and Carpenter's understanding of Cosmic Consciousness differs, especially in the way each theorist addresses its cultural importance. According to Paul Marshall, "Bucke's Cosmic Consciousness is a psychological faculty that apprehends the unity of the universe; Carpenter's Cosmic Consciousness is the experiential state of non-differentiation characterized by unity *with* other selves and the world" (Marshall 2008: 123). In other words, unlike Bucke, Carpenter's position places more emphasis on the various ways Cosmic Consciousness can be utilized as a source of "social concern and action, and he was hopeful that recognition of the close connection between selves would eventually lead to far-reaching moral, religious, scientific, economic, political, and social changes" (Marshall 2008: 128).¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Marshall even suggests that Carpenter's understanding of Cosmic Consciousness as a sense "unity with other selves" helped foster his innovative views about sexual freedom and gender equality (Marshall 2008: 127). For example, Carpenter's describes his experience of Cosmic Consciousness as follows: "I immediately saw, or rather *felt*, that this region of self existing in me existed equally (though not always equally *consciously*) in others. In regard to it the mere diversities of temperament which ordinarily distinguish and divide people dropped away and became indifferent, and a field was opened in which all might meet, in which all were truly equal. Thus the two words which controlled my thought and expression at the time became Freedom and Equality" (Carpenter as quoted by Marshall: 128).

There are certain aspects of Bucke and Carpenter's understanding of Cosmic Consciousness that are very similar to Esalen's understanding of the mystical, particularly as it relates to the "religion of no religion." For instance, although Bucke admits that many of the founders of some of the most influential religious traditions were endowed with the capacity to experience Cosmic Consciousness, he concludes that Cosmic Consciousness is ultimately "incompatible" with traditional religion (Bucke 1973: 268). Carpenter held a similar view. Paul Marshall explains that "Carpenter is not dogmatic about the form that religion will take when Cosmic Consciousness is in the ascending, but it will have at its center the mystical recognition of non-differentiation of self and other. Morality based on empty taboos will fade; the sense of kinship with animals will return, and kinship between races will grow; no longer degraded and despised, sex and the body will be held sacred" (Marshall 2008: 123). Both Bucke and Carpenter tend to frame Cosmic Consciousness in terms that oppose the dogmatic claims of organized religion. Esalen's understanding of "the religion of no religion" is grounded in a similar critique of religious dogma. But perhaps the most revealing overlap between Bucke and Carpenter's understanding of Cosmic Consciousness and Esalen's understanding of the mystical lies with the influential writings of the American poet Walt Whitman.

Whitman's poetry had a profound influence on both Bucke and Carpenter. They both acknowledge that their particular views about Cosmic Consciousness are indebted to Whitman's poetry. However, Whitman's poetry was much more than just a source of inspiration for Bucke and Carpenter. According to Marshall, they "found Walt

Whitman's poetry transformative" (Marshall 2008: 92). In other words, both Bucke and Carpenter experienced the mystical by reading Whitman's poetry.¹⁶⁸ How has Whitman influenced Esalen? Kripal describes Whitman as the "closest in spirit, place, and time to what will become Esalen" (Kripal 2007: 8). Moreover, Kripal writes, "Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* stands as one of the unquestioned classics of American literature on its own terms. It also happens to be a central celebratory scripture of what the literary critic Harold Bloom has called the American Religion, a religion whose fundamental gnosticism and individualism look very much like those of Esalen. And indeed, the poets greatest work often sounds like so many prefigurations of the Esalen gnosis" (Kripal 2008: 466).

Take for example the following passages of the poem "Song of Myself" from Whitman's masterpiece *Leaves of Grass* (1855):

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
That pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
Women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love (Whitman 2004: 27).

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men (Whitman 2004: 40).

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

¹⁶⁸ This of course is another classic example of Kripal's thesis about "mystical hermeneutics."

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch
 Or am touch'd from,
 The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
 This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds (Whitman 2004: 45).

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
 And I have said the body is not more than the soul,
 And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is (Whitman 2004: 73).

These short passages speak to the similarities between Whitman and Esalen's mystical gnosis. In particular, Kripal suggests that Esalen's understanding of "the enlightenment of the body" can be read as a contemporary manifestation of Whitman's "Body Electric" (Kripal 2007: 467). In other words, both Whitman and Esalen value the body as a divine conduit of energy, consciousness, and human potential. Furthermore, both Whitman and Esalen's understanding of "the enlightenment of the body" is nondualistic and heavily eroticized. Most significantly, I suggest that the parallel that Kripal draws between Whitman and Esalen's understanding of "the enlightenment of the body" calls attention to the pivotal role that "nature mysticism" has played in Kripal's own understanding of the mystical.

In the last section I claimed that mystical humanism is central to Kripal's understanding of the mystical. I also suggested that Esalen embodies Kripal's model of a contemporary form of mystical humanism. If Esalen's general understanding of the mystical is rooted in nature mysticism, and Kripal draws on this same understanding to help shape his vision of mystical humanism, then it is possible that Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism is also rooted in nature mysticism. Recall that the inspiration for Esalen's earliest approach to the study of mysticism is "the religion of no

religion,” which is derived from Murphy’s encounter with Spiegelberg’s teachings at Stanford University. According to Kripal, “the experiences that Murphy would later have with Spiegelberg in that lecture hall had everything to do with nature, or more precisely, with a powerful form of nature mysticism that had erupted in a young Spiegelberg in 1917 when he had been a theology student 33 years earlier” (Kripal: 2007: 48).

Alongside Spiegelberg, both Aurobindo and Myers also had a profound influence on shaping Murphy’s, and subsequently, Esalen’s earliest understanding of the mystical. According to Kripal, both Aurobindo and Myers express certain views about the mystical that can be described as conforming to a unique form of nature mysticism or “super naturalism, which we might also frame as a kind of cosmic humanism” (Kripal 2007: 409). Taking all of these influences into careful consideration, Kripal concludes that “this is the final philosophy of Esalen – a learned pantheism or nature mysticism” (Kripal 2008: 416). If a “learned pantheism or nature mysticism” signals the “final philosophy of Esalen” and Kripal draws on this same philosophy as a model for his own understanding of mystical humanism, then it follows that Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism is grounded in nature mysticism. However, referring to the mystical component of Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism in terms of “nature mysticism” is slightly misleading.

Nature mysticism has been defined in various ways in the West, but perhaps “the key characteristic of natural mystical experience is a sense of union or identity with the

natural world”¹⁶⁹ (Marshall 2008: 57). According to Marshall, the traditional meaning of nature mysticism can be “restrictive” in the sense that “nature mystics are portrayed as those who remove themselves to unspoiled places and lose themselves in the beauties of nature” (Marshall 2008: 30). In other words, the term “nature mysticism” brings to mind a specific type of mysticism that is often associated with the scenery of the “wilderness and countryside, in contradistinction to the human spheres of town, society, and culture” (Marshall 2008: 30). From this perspective, labeling Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism as a form of nature mysticism is an inaccurate characterization because he rarely discusses “nature,” and his writings tend to focus more on how certain states of mystical consciousness interact with human culture.

However, if nature mysticism is defined in more general terms to include Bucke and Carpenter’s Cosmic Consciousness or Aurobindo and Murphy’s “evolutionary mysticism,” then perhaps Kripal’s understanding of the mystical can be read as a “revised version of nature mysticism” (Parsons 1999: 141). I suggest that Romain Rolland’s understanding of the mystical provides an excellent example of a “revised version of nature mysticism” that is comparable to Kripal’s understanding of mystical. According to Parsons, Rolland’s mysticism can be best described as a “nonconfessional,” “unchurched” form of mysticism “that excluded any dependence on a traditionally conceived transcendent Other” (Parsons 1999: 143). Similar to Bucke and Carpenter’s Cosmic Consciousness and Esalen’s “religion of no religion,” “unchurched” mysticism is defined in opposition to organized religion. In addition, Parsons claims that

¹⁶⁹ According to Happold, “nature mysticism is characterized by a sense of the immanence of God or soul in Nature (Happold 1967: 43).

“unchurched” mystics often draw upon their natural mystical experiences as “the basis for a new theory of mind” (Parson 1999: 144). This is clearly the case for Rolland who sought to wed mystical intuition and rational psychology in the hope of creating a “mystical psychoanalysis” (Parsons 1999: 38).

Rolland’s understanding of “mystical psychoanalysis” has much in common with Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism. For instance, both systems aim to establish a “rational mysticism” based on both Eastern mysticism and Western psychology to study comparatively the emancipatory potential of certain mystical states of consciousness. From this perspective, Kripal’s understanding of the mystical can certainly be described as “unchurched.” However, at the same time, I believe that the label “unchurched” is too narrow of a category to accurately describe Kripal’s understanding of the mystical because it is semantically embedded in a Western, Christian heritage that is ultimately antithetical to Kripal’s approach, which owes much more to Eastern Tantra than it does to Western Christianity.

Perhaps the mystical component of Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism can be best expressed as a form of “free-lance” mysticism (Zaehner 1957 xi.) Zaehner tends to refer to “free-lance” mystics as those mystics, such as Huxley, Proust, and Rimbaud, who appear to exhibit a capacity to experience mystical states of consciousness without any connection to organized religion. Like the nature mystic, the “free-lance mystic” opposes organized religion. However, unlike the nature mystic who seeks to identify his or her “self” with Nature, the “free-lance” mystic exhibits “no enlargement of personality, no merging onto nature, only a realization of self” (Zaehner 1957: 59). I

suggest that Zaehner's general tendency to associate "free-lance" mysticism with nature mysticism can be read a defensive ploy aimed at distancing traditional "religious" or "theistic" mysticism from what he believes are less developed or unauthentic forms of mysticism. Thus, like nature mysticism, "free-lance" mysticism is ultimately a derisive category in Zaehner's model, potentially signifying a form of "lunacy" (Zaehner 1957: 53).

The mystical component of Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism can be accurately labeled "free-lance" in the sense that he believes that certain mystical states of consciousness do appear to empower the "self." Furthermore, as with "free-lance" mysticism, Kripal's understanding of the mystical is only loosely tied to organized religion. More specifically, with the exception of the Tantric traditions, when Kripal does discuss the mystical in any kind of traditional religious context, it is usually tied to some kind of critique of organized religion. For example, Kripal's gnostic methodology, which I argue is a direct product of his mystical humanism, can be read as a response to the ill effects that Kripal believes organized religion has inflicted on both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism. From this gnostic perspective, Kripal's understanding of the mystical can be easily considered a form of "free-lance" mysticism.

However, in light of the negative connotations that Zaehner has associated with "free-lance" mysticism, I believe a new category is needed that can address the various meanings of "free-lance" mysticism but in a less pejorative fashion. I suggest the term "unbound mysticism." As the name implies, "unbound mysticism," refers to a "mysticism of unending meaning" that is unbound by the dogmatic claims of organized

religion (Vergote 2003: 86). Rather than seeking to validate the doctrinal or theological claims of any specific religious tradition, an “unbound mystic” is one who recognizes the energies of the cosmos as the ultimate source of “self” and social empowerment. In contrast to the traditional “religious” mystic, most “unbound mystics” such as Walt Whitman, Rainer Rilke, and George Bataille, tend to view the mystical in nondualistic terms. Their understanding of mystical makes no clear distinction between transcendence and immanence, body and soul, or energy and matter. Moreover, in contrast to nature mystics, “unbound mystics” are comfortable with both the countryside *and* the city.

Furthermore, similar to Esalen’s integral vision of the mystical, “unbound mysticism” refers to an inclusive type of mysticism that can accommodate the claims of both science and religion, so long as each recognizes the provisional nature of their truth claims. Essentially, the type of mysticism I have in mind by the term “unbound mysticism” is the type of mysticism found in Kripal’s work. It is a mysticism that is embodied, sexualized, politicized, and potentially emancipatory at both the individual and social level. Perhaps the best way to explain what I mean by the category “unbound mysticism” is to offer the following thought experiment: if a traditional “religious” mystic were to be asked “what is the source of the mystical?” he or she would likely respond “God.” If the same question were to be asked of a nature mystic, he or she would likely respond “Nature.” Now if an “unbound mystic” were to be asked, “what is the source of the mystical?” how might he or she respond? I believe an “unbound mystic” would respond the same way Kripal or Baruch Spinoza would likely respond, namely, “the source of the mystical is Deus sive Nature, that is, *God or Nature.*” If *The*

Serpent's Gift and *Esalen* are any indication, it is precisely this type of nondualistic, “unbound mysticism” which lies at the heart of Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism.

Conclusion

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words.
They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

In *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and The End of Traditional Religions* (1979), Naomi R. Goldenberg offers a vision of what she believes the mysticism of the future might look like in the West. Goldenberg writes, “the new mysticism of the West will largely be defined by women and men who will have an increasing awareness of their own physical presence within the philosophies they create. These women and men will not want to deny the value of their literal, bodily selves. Their theories will affirm materiality and will acknowledge that images are flesh as well. It is difficult to say more about the mysticism we will know in the new age of new gods. Only one thing seems certain – it will be a mysticism with guts!” (Goldenberg 1979: 127). I believe Goldenberg is exactly right. I also believe that Kripal’s work will play a large role in shaping the direction of how we understand “the new mysticism of the West.”

Essentially, my entire thesis can be read as a comprehensive attempt to show that Kripal’s understanding of the mystical is “a mysticism with guts.” By this I mean that Kripal’s understanding of the mystical is both embodied and courageous. Two of his central concepts – the erotic and “the enlightenment of the body” – are explicitly grounded in the body. Yet, it must be noted that Kripal’s understanding of body is not reducible to any type of crude materialism. Very much like Whitman, Kripal’s understanding of the body is energetic, spiritualized, and at times, even cosmic. In other words, Kripal’s understanding of the mystical is embodied but it is also nondualistic.

By advocating a nondualistic view of the mystical, Kripal is acutely aware that his model signals both a personal and political challenge to what is perhaps Western culture’s

central conceit, namely, that mind and matter are two distinct realms of reality.¹⁷⁰

Following in the footsteps of the Tantric traditions, Kripal's nondualistic model of the mystical demonstrates that there are alternative ways to conceptualize the relationship between mind and matter that are not mutually exclusive or that privilege one over the other. Rather, according to Kripal's model, certain nondualistic types of mysticism show that transcendence and immanence, mind and matter, consciousness and energy, and soul and body, are two sides of the same coin. Such a nondualistic viewpoint runs counter to the materialistic worldview that dominates the agenda of modern science, which, ever since Descartes, has attempted to maintain a distinction between the domain of the mind and the domain of the body. Hence I claim that Kripal's position is courageous because it takes guts to question the authority of the status quo. And this I believe is what Kripal's understanding of the mystical is ultimately all about, namely, it is about transgression, resistance, and giving a voice to those "heretical" mystics and scholars of mysticism who have been unjustly silenced by the ideological powers of the established order.

Regardless of whether or not the "established order" is conceptualized in terms of the family, the university, the church, or the government, Kripal's work explicitly contests the legitimacy of any institutionalized power that profits from a strict separation of the mind and body. By calling attention to the various sexual, psychological, cultural, social, economic, and political issues at stake by endorsing such a dualistic worldview,

¹⁷⁰ According to Alan Watts, "one of the greatest of all superstitions is the separation of the mind from the body" (Watts as quoted by Kripal 2007: 123). Goldenberg claims that, "separating the 'mind' or 'soul' from body is certainly a well-established practice in Western thought in general and in Western religious philosophy in particular. Whichever way the dichotomy is worded, body comes out as the thing less valued, while mind or soul is seen as more permanent, more noble, and closer to the sphere of divinity" (Goldenberg 1990: 75).

Kripal's model of the mystical serves as a critique of our conventional understanding of reality.

I will summarize Kripal's most valuable contributions to the contemporary study of mysticism by briefly discussing four core points that I believe constitute the theoretical focus of his mystical corpus. These four points are: 1) human sexuality and the mystical are linked; 2) the link between human sexuality and the mystical informs both the comparative and hermeneutical study of mysticism; 3) certain mystical states of consciousness can help to expand our understanding of what it means to be human; and 4) certain mystical states of consciousness present a valuable source of social critique. I am not claiming that these four points exhaust the full meaning or intent of Kripal's work. Rather, I suggest that when taken together, these four points provide us with a provisional assessment of Kripal's importance in the field of mysticism.

Kripal refers to the link between the sexual and the mystical as the erotic. Drawing on a long history of Western theory, from Plato to Freud, Kripal assumes that sexual energies play a large role in shaping the various ways human beings interact with reality. The problem for Kripal is that Western culture has tended to construct theories about this erotic energy in dualistic terms that either demonize the body (Plato) or downplay the mystical (Freud). Drawing on the mystical traditions of Tantra, which tends to frame the relationship between the sexual and the mystical in nondualistic terms, Kripal attempts to enlarge the meaning of eros in such a way that it can encompass the values that we traditionally attribute to the body and the soul.

In *Kali's Child*, Kripal utilizes his concept of the erotic to demonstrate how Ramakrishna's homosexual desires helped shape the "symbolic contours" of his mysticism. The nondualistic structure of the erotic permits Kripal to theorize about the various meanings of Ramakrishna's mysticism from both a psychosexual (psychoanalytic) and a socio-cultural (Tantric) framework that is neither reductive nor apologetic. According to Kripal's erotic thesis, a combination of factors relating to *both* consciousness *and* culture laid the foundation of Ramakrishna's mysticism. When viewed through the lens of the erotic, Ramakrishna's mysticism can be understood as a product of a particular dialectical process involving certain psychological/culture determinants and certain nonordinary states of consciousness and energy. Ramakrishna interpreted these nonordinary states of consciousness and energy in erotic terms, which Kripal suggests, points to the (secret) fact that Ramakrishna was a Tantrika at heart.

By refusing to reduce these nonordinary states of consciousness and energy to psychology or culture, Kripal's model can be read as championing a "transformational" approach to the study of mysticism (Parsons 1999: 135). Recall that for Parsons, a "transformational" approach is defined by "a marked sympathy with the transcendent, religious claims of mystics" (Parsons 1999: 11). Kripal's sympathy with the religious claims of Ramakrishna is evident in his defense of the ontological value of Ramakrishna's mystical experiences. Kripal admits that certain developmental factors played a large role in determining the shape of Ramakrishna's mysticism. For example, the early loss of Ramakrishna's father and older brother no doubt contributed to his desire to formulate a parental bond with an immortal mother. This perhaps helps to explain his

identification with the Tantric goddess Kali. Moreover, his attraction to young males may help to explain why so many of his mystical visions involved homoerotic imagery. However, at the same time, Kripal also claims that developmental factors alone can not explain the ontological value of Ramakrishna's mysticism. The ontological ground of Ramakrishna's mysticism is rooted in something much more deeper than human psychology. And this is what Kripal's "ontological critique" of "classical" psychoanalytic theory boils down to, namely, that the reductive materialism often associated with "classical" psychoanalytic interpretations of the mystical fail to recognize that the ontological meaning of the mystical "cannot be reduced to questions of fucking" (Lacan 1982: 147).

The central concept informing Kripal's "ontological critique" is the erotic. According to Parsons, "Kripal argues that Ramakrishna's mystical experiences engaged both divine ground and sexual conflict" (Parsons 1999: 137). In other words, Kripal claims that Ramakrishna's mystical experiences are both sexually motivated *and* spiritually meaningful. Such a move to integrate the sexual and the mystical without reducing one to the other is the essence of Kripal's understanding of the erotic and indicative of a "transformational" approach. From this perspective, I suggest that alongside Kripal's "ontological critique" of "classical" psychoanalytic theory, one of his primary contributions to the contemporary study of mysticism, as represented by his first work, *Kali's Child*, is to demonstrate the theoretical and methodological advantages of a "transformational" approach.

In *Roads of Excess* Kripal expands the scope of his erotic thesis by exploring the various ways certain erotic issues relating to the body, gender, and sexual orientation have secretly inspired, shaped, and directed both the hermeneutical and comparative study of mysticism. Kripal refers to this project as “comparative erotics.” Through a comprehensive discussion of the influential writings of Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati, and Wolfson, Kripal claims that the erotic has played a crucial role in determining how these various theorists understand and study the mystical, and subsequently, how their views have influenced both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism.

Perhaps one of the most compelling observations that Kripal uncovers through his method of “comparative erotics” is the tendency of monotheistic religious traditions to privilege a homoerotic structuring of mystical experience. According to Kripal, this is clearly the case in the Christian tradition of bridal mysticism, where mystical experience is often framed in terms of a male mystic seeking union with a male God. Kripal claims that a similar homoerotic dynamic of a male mystic seeking union with a male God plays out in the monotheistic mystical traditions of Islamic Sufism and Judaic Kabbalah. It is a mistake to assume that Kripal is in anyway denouncing a homoerotic structuring of the mystical. Rather, by calling attention to the unacknowledged role that homoeroticism plays in determining how certain mystics and mystical traditions address the mystical, Kripal aims to show that such erotic strategies are inherently exclusionary and potentially damaging to mystics who are unable or unwilling to identify with a homoerotic understanding of the mystical. This of course is exactly the problem that Kripal was

confronted with when he tried to make sense of his own mysticism from within a Catholic framework. Kripal's own heterosexual orientation prohibited him from fully identifying with the symbolism and rhetoric of Catholic mysticism. Hence he turned away from a monotheistic understanding of the mystical and pursued an alternative route in the form of the Tantric traditions.

However, whereas the heterosexually oriented structure of the Tantric traditions presented Kripal with a viable alternative to the homosexually oriented structure of Catholicism, he was still confronted with another problem that is endemic to almost all mystical traditions, namely, androcentricism. Kripal's "comparative erotics" reveals that regardless of whether or not a particular mystical tradition privileges a heterosexual or homosexual structuring of the mystical, both systems are fundamentally androcentric. Stated simply, if history is any indication, the world of the mystic is a man's world. There are relatively very few, if any, mystical traditions in both the East or the West that are not male biased. The question then arises: is there something inherently masculine about the mystical or it is possible that mystical traditions favor a male perspective because mysticism is a social construction that mirrors the social, cultural, and political power structures of the particular worldview which it manifests. From this perspective, the male bias that defines so many of the worlds mystical traditions is indicative of the fact that many of the cultures that produce the mystical traditions with which we are familiar are themselves grounded in a patriarchal worldview that privileges a definitively male conception of the mystical.

According to Grace Jantzen, “what counts as mysticism will reflect (and also help to constitute) the institutions of power in which it occurs. Put starkly, the church (and nowadays the university) will exert its power to determine who counts as a mystic, excluding from that category any who are threatening to its authority” (Jantzen 1995: 14). Although Jantzen is speaking about Christianity, her observations concerning the power dynamics at play in defining who constitutes a mystic and what constitutes mysticism is equally applicable to any mystical tradition, especially, as she points out, the academic study of mysticism. Again, although Jantzen is speaking from a Christian context, I believe the following point is also applicable to any of the world’s mystical traditions. Jantzen writes, “if there was one theme more than any other central to the definition of who should count as a mystic, sexuality was that theme”(Jantzen 1995: 225). Jantzen is referring to the fact that Western mystical traditions have a long history of valuing the experiences of a particular mystic based on his or her gender.

Generally speaking, female mystics such as Hadewijh, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila tend to favor a highly emotional and visually stimulating understanding of the mystical that was absent in the highly intellectualized descriptions of the mystical typical of such male mystics as Dionysius and Eckhart. Most significantly, Jantzen argues that the highly emotional and visually stimulating type of mysticism common to many female descriptions of the mystical “used the erotic as their model for union with God. The difference between women and men is that for women sexuality is explicit, and there is no warning that it should not be taken literally. The usual male anchoring in the mystical meaning of scripture is often absent, since the women did not have access to the

education or the ecclesiastical position for biblical study” (Jantzen 1995: 133). In other words, because female mystics were disbarred from directly participating in creating and maintaining the institutions of power that dictate the meaning of the mystical, they were forced to establish an alternative means of legitimizing their understanding of the mystical by appealing to their own experiences, which, as Jantzen notes, were often highly eroticized.

Jantzen suggests that it is precisely a female mystics appeal to experience, specifically, erotic experience, that proved to be such a serious problem for the male authorities of the church. Why are the erotic experiences of female mystics such a problem? According to Jantzen, the answer lies with the fact that by drawing on their own erotic experiences of the mystical as a source of meaning and authority, these female mystics posed a threat to the stability (and ultimately, the legitimacy) of the church because they moved the locus of power away from scripture, which was controlled by males, to a site that was arguably much more difficult to exploit, namely, their erotic bodies. Jantzen concludes her study with the following observation: “who counts as a mystic rests just as much on issues of power and gender as it does on an individual’s experiences or beliefs” (Jantzen 1995: 264). How well does Jantzen’s conclusions mesh with the findings of Kripal’s “comparative erotics”?

Kripal is adamant that whatever it is we mean by the term “mysticism” it is most certainly tied to issues relating to power and gender. Specifically, as I mentioned above, Kripal’s “comparative erotics” calls attention to how the symbolism surrounding male mystical traditions tends to be structured homoerotically. Consequently, according to

Kripal, there is little room within this homoerotic world for women. In fact, Kripal claims that such male “esoteric-erotic systems, while seeming to affirm a feminine aspect of the Godhead, actually ends up erasing woman almost entirely from the system” (Kripal 2001: 297). Kripal seems sincere in his call for mystics and mystical traditions to make changes in how they conceptualize the mystical in terms that are more inclusive and thus more welcoming of issues that directly pertain to the advancement of women. Kripal suggests that this will only be possible once males are both capable and willing to “transfigure” their understanding of masculinity in terms that are no longer hostile to the “other,” particularly women.

But in light of the history of so many other males who have sought to give voice to the “feminine,” we must ask if Kripal’s utilization of gender theory is anything more than a mere conciliatory gesture to include the “other”? Is it a genuine attempt to provide a substantial interrogation of how male theories about the mystical often alienate and oppress women? I certainly view Kripal’s work as a step in the right direction in terms of mitigating the gross gender inequalities that haunt the comparative study of mysticism. However, does his work go far enough? It is one thing to call attention to the plight of the disenfranchised and raising a case for change in how mystics and scholars of mysticism address the comparative meaning of the mystical. However, it is quite another thing to communicate a strategy of equality that is not ultimately designed and dictated by males. In other words, is Kripal merely paying lip service to gender theory or is he actually contributing to a robust critique of certain institutionalized forms of misogyny?

One of the central themes of *Roads of Excess* is hermeneutics. Kripal claims that there is a “mystical hermeneutics” at work in the comparative history of mystical discourse. The term “mystical hermeneutics” refers to a particular practice of mystics who secretly encode their experience of the mystical in a textual format, which, once read, can invoke a mystical experience in the reader. The weight of evidence that Kripal amasses in *Roads of Excess*, particularly his analysis of the writings of Underhill, Massignon, Zaehner, Bharati and Wolfson, suggests that mystics often do encode their texts with their own experiences and that reading mystical texts can potentially elicit a mystical experience in the reader. Stated simply, Kripal holds that the study of mysticism is essentially about studying texts. More specifically, it is about studying the various ways mystics use symbolism and rhetoric to encode their texts with their own personal experiences of the mystical. Kripal appears to recognize that in many mystical traditions writing is a male activity, that is, the question of *who* is permitted to write about the mystical and *what* exactly one is permitted to write is often determined by males.

However, what Kripal fails to recognize is that by framing mysticism as a textual category he is unwittingly propagating a viewpoint that can be interpreted as fostering the same androcentricism that he is seeking to overturn. In other words, by conflating mysticism with writing, Kripal links the mystical to an activity that is historically embedded in patriarchy. This problem is further compounded by the fact that with the exception of Underhill, all of the authors he examines in *Road of Excess* are male. Moreover, when we consider all the figures that Kripal tends to idealize as exemplars of the “gnostic intellectual” in *The Serpent’s Gift* (Feuerbach, James, and Rolland, etc.) in

conjunction with the Esalen theorists he most admires (Murphy, Heard, Maslow, Watts, etc.) a disturbing pattern begins to emerge indicating that the greatest influences on his understanding of the mystical are all male.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, it is significant to note that the mystical tradition that has most influenced Kripal's understanding of the mystical is Tantra, which, as Bharati points, is explicitly androcentric.¹⁷²

In addition to the male bias of Kripal's key influences, another problematic issue that undermines the supposed "gender neutrality" of Kripal's work is his appeal to the rational ideals of the Enlightenment as an invaluable source of theorizing about a "(post)modern" approach to the contemporary study of mysticism. In *The Serpent's Gift* Kripal's claims that his "(post-)modern" approach is grounded in a dialectical synthesis of "pre-modern" modes of consciousness and "modern" modes of consciousness. The result of this synthesis is a "(post-)modern" mode of consciousness that can negotiate the demands of both "faith" (pre-modern) and "reason"(modern) through an intermediary principle that Kripal refers to as "gnosis." Kripal characterizes his gnostic epistemology "as a triple-edged sword, implying at once a privileging of knowing over believing, an affirmation of altered states of consciousness and psychic functioning as valuable and

¹⁷¹ This trend continues into Kripal's latest published monograph, *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* (2010). For example, the four authors that Kripal frames as "Authors of the Impossible" – Frederic Myers, Charles Fort, Jacques Vallee, and Bertrand Meheust – are all males.

¹⁷² According to Bharati, "everybody is a male chauvinist in the official Hindu and Buddhist Indian tradition...It is the man who controls the seminal upward and downward flow. What about the woman? That's the most embarrassing question you can ask any tantric, who is an Indian male" (Bharati as quoted by Kripal 2001: 227). However, it must be noted that the type of "Tantra" that Kripal endorses is an Americanized form of Tantra that ostensibly contests the chauvinistic core of traditional Tantra. The question remains of whether or not it is possible for Kripal's "Americanized Tantra" to successfully appropriate the general structure of the traditional Tantric worldview without harboring an implicit male chauvinism.

legitimate modes of cognition, and a critical-but-engaged encounter with the faith traditions themselves” (Kripal 2001: 13).

The “critical” aspect of Kripal’s gnostic “encounter with the faith traditions” draws heavily on certain Enlightenment ideals, particularly the notion that human reason is the ultimate adjudicator of our ethical sensibilities and that science can help liberate us from the falsehoods of religious superstition. Moreover, in both *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Esalen*, Kripal readily admits that the egalitarian ethos that defines his understanding of mystical humanism is largely indebted to the Enlightenment. It is hard to dispute that the Enlightenment ideals of reason, liberty, and religious freedom are noble qualities that deserve a privileged place in both our theoretical and methodological understanding of the mystical. However, Kripal fails to address the possibility that the Enlightenment ideals that he so cherishes often serve to uphold dominant positions of male power in Western culture. Geraldine Finn speaks to this point when she writes the following:

Reason itself is constitutively and not accidentally violent and that it is neither good nor even neutral (i.e., that its value depends on its use), but like Science and the Family, it is a constitutive part of a political ideology (a theory and a practice) and apparatus of violence which is used to keep subordinates in their place in a given social and economic order. I believe, furthermore, that this Reason is most fundamentally an instrument of specifically *male* power and violence, constructed in the image of men and rooted in a peculiarly male experience of powerlessness and alienation and that it is perhaps first and foremost, an instrument of their particular alienation of women (Finn 1996: 10).

Consequently, Finn is claiming that any appeal to “Reason” as a source of legitimization or authority for one’s truth claims is tantamount to a consent of male privilege at the expense of women. I question the totalizing rhetoric of Finn’s remarks, that is, in contrast to Finn I do believe it is *possible* to utilize “Reason” in terms that are

not necessarily tied to violence. However, at the same time, I also believe that her overall argument that “Reason” is *primarily* tied to male privilege is correct. More to the point, it becomes impossible to accept the benign nature of Kripal’s appeal to the “reason” of the Enlightenment in light of Finn’s observations.

Yet, the general findings of Kripal’s “comparative erotics,” particularly his critique of male mystical systems, the correspondence he draws between a mystic’s sexual orientation and his or her conception of the mystical, and the erotic subtext he detects operating in both the hermeneutical and comparative study of mysticism, are extremely valuable contributions to the contemporary study of mysticism. Kripal “comparative erotics” do demonstrate that sexual issues play a fundamental role in how we construct the meaning of the mystical. At the same time, the contributions of Kripal’s “comparative erotics” must be qualified with the understanding that his general approach to the study of mysticism suffers from a “covert ‘masculinist’ bias” (Coakley 2005: 495). Kripal is certainly reflexive about *why* he studies mysticism. However, he fails to critically engage with the male biases that have shaped *how* he studies mysticism. He admits that the reason why he is attracted to the comparative study of mysticism stems from his personal desire to locate a heterosexual mysticism that speaks to the idiosyncratic nature of his own mystical experiences. Yet, unfortunately, this same reflexivity is not carried over to his general approach, as is evident in his unwillingness to engage critically with the implications of relying primarily on the work of male scholars and how this implicit endorsement of patriarchy directs his own hermeneutical and comparative study of the mystical.

I have no intention of minimizing Kripal's clear contempt for the misogynist attitudes and practices of the various mystics and mystical traditions that he has examined. Like his friend and colleague Elliot Wolfson, Kripal makes a clear, sustained, and admirable effort to criticize the institutionalized powers of male privilege in a manner that is much more sophisticated than the majority of male scholars who study mysticism. However, as unfortunate as it is, the fact that a scholar of Kripal's caliber can criticize the rampant misogyny of the world's mystical traditions while simultaneously failing to address fully the patriarchal assumptions of his own method, speaks to the insidious nature of the many problems that male bias has inflicted on both the historical and contemporary study of mysticism.

Turning to my third point, how can certain mystical states of consciousness help to expand our understanding of what it means to be human? Kripal's understanding of what it means to be human is complex. Perhaps the best way to explain his position is to go back to the theoretical foundation of his bimodal psychology. In *The Serpent's Gift*, Kripal claims that "the human is Two." Recall, that For Kripal this means that "*each person is simultaneously a conscious, constructed self or socialized ego and a much larger complexly conscious field that normally manifest itself only in nonordinary states of consciousness and energy, which the religious tradition have historically objectified, mythologized, and projected outward into the sky as divine, as 'god' and so on, or introjected inwards into the human being as nirvana, brhamna and so on*" (Kripal 2001:

164).¹⁷³ In other words, there are two dimensions of human consciousness – ego consciousness and mystical consciousness – that are functionally distinct but structurally co-extensive. Kripal claims that this bimodal psychology has a long history in the mystical traditions in both the East and the West (Kripal 2001: 168).

This same bimodal psychology also shares a rich history with the modern psychological approach to mysticism as represented by the work of Myers and James.

Both Myers and James posit a subliminal or subconscious dimension of consciousness that interacts and transforms normal “rational” consciousness. According to James:

Our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousnesses we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie in potential form of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leave these other form of consciousness quite disregarded. How to regard them is the question, – for they are so discontinuous with ordinary consciousness. Yet, they may determine attitudes though they cannot furnish formulas, and open a region they fail to give a map. At any rate they forbid a premature closing of our accounts with reality (James 1958: 325).

If we assume that Kripal’s bimodal psychology is an accurate representation of how consciousness is structured the question then arises, how do these two fields of consciousness interact? According to conventional neurological models, consciousness

¹⁷³ Kripal states: “I am not defining the precise ontological status or psychological structure of this second field of consciousness (whether it is personal, whether it survives physical death, whether is it structured by archetypes, whether *nirvana*, God, or *Brahman* is the better descriptor). I frankly do not know the answer to any of these questions and so I remain agnostic about such matters. Nor am I defining the precise relationship between the two fields of human consciousness, although I do think that many of the theoretical problems that the study of religion suffers from stem ultimately from a failure to recognize these two separate but related fields of human being. I am simply arguing that the data of the history of religions suggest strongly that something like these two broad fields of consciousness exist and, moreover, that any adequate theorization of that history must take this general phenomenology of consciousness into account” (Kripal 2001: 165).

or “mind” is conceived as a product of the brain. For instance, d’Aquili and Newberg claims that the brain “is the bodily organ that allows us to think, feel, and receive input from the external world. The mind is generally considered to be the thoughts and feelings themselves. Thus, mind is the product of the functioning of the brain”¹⁷⁴ (d’Aquili and Newberg 1999:21). The brain refers to the structure of the mind and the mind refers to the functioning of the brain. Or, in the parlance of cognitive theory, the brain is the hardware and the mind is the software. However, according to Kripal, the problem with these types of materialist models is that they fail to account for certain extraordinary experiences of human potential, such as those deemed “mystical” or “paranormal,” which appear to challenge the notion that consciousness is permanently localized and thus limited to the brain. Hence, Kripal maintains that mystical consciousness is not reducible to the brain.

How then does Kripal explain the relationships between ego consciousness and mystical consciousness without resorting to a materialist framework? Following in the footsteps of various theorists such as James, Myers, and Huxley, Kripal turns to the “filtration thesis” as an alternative explanation of how the relationship between ego consciousness and mystical consciousness operates. According to the filtration thesis, “consciousness is ordinarily kept narrow by biological and psychological selection processes that exclude a great deal of subconscious material. In mystical experience and other non-ordinary states, the filtering process allows greater access to the subconscious,

¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, Newberg also claims that, “an evolutionary perspective suggests that the neurobiology of the mystical experience arose, at least in part, from the mechanisms of the sexual response” (Newberg 2001: 126).

resulting in an expansion of consciousness” (Marshall 2008: 233). From this perspective, the brain does not produce mystical consciousness. Rather, the brain *transmits* mystical consciousness. But of course the question then arises, what is the source of the transmission?

Kripal is hesitant to provide a clear answer as to what he believes is transmitting mystical consciousness into the brain. However he is adamant that whatever it is, it most certainly indicates that human beings have access to an extraordinary dimension of consciousness that if properly contextualized, can help to expand our understanding of what it means to be human. Kripal states: “human consciousness cannot be restricted or reduced to the ego and its specific forms of knowledge and experience. There is always a More, to use the language of William James now, and so any adequate model of the human being, and hence of human knowledge, will have to take this More into account” (Kripal 2001: 168). Hence, Kripal concludes that the history of mystical discourse in both the East and the West suggests that “the human self is both Two and More” (Kripal 2001: 176). Most significantly, Kripal calls attention to the fact this “More” that defines the mystical heights of our human potential is often framed in erotic terms; the erotic is what ultimately mediates a mystic’s encounter with the “More.”

How can certain mystical states of consciousness provide a valuable source of social critique? Like Lacan, Kripal assumes that “the mystical is by no means that which is not political”¹⁷⁵ (Lacan 1982: 147). For Kripal, this means that “the personal is

¹⁷⁵ For instance, Kripal writes: “Kali’s Child, after all, attracted enormous attention in India and in the States from fundamentalist Hindu ideologues and activists. I spent about 7 years doing little else than trying to survive their barrages of ban movements and internet campaigns designed to shame me, scare me, and

political” and thus his work contests the modern distinction between the private and the public. For instance, in *Kali’s Child*, Kripal shows how a combination of both private (homoerotic desire) and public factors (Tantric discourse) contributed to the construction of Ramakrishna’s mysticism. In *Roads of Excess*, he outlines the various ways in which the private mystical experiences of certain scholars helped shape their public writings about the mystical. Moreover, in both *The Serpent’s Gift* and *Esalen* Kripal calls attention to how certain mystics and scholars of mysticism draw on their own private mystical experiences as a means of addressing the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of both the religious and academic understanding of the mystical.

Most significantly, Kripal admits that the knowledge he gained from his own private encounter with the mystical during “that Night” in Calcutta profoundly influenced his own public approach to studying the mystical.¹⁷⁶ The point to take away from all this is that Kripal believes that the question of *why* and *how* we study the mystical is always tied to a particular political agenda, which we may or may not be able to detect easily. Of course, there is a difference in identifying an overlap between the private and public sector of human experience and providing concrete evidence of how certain mystical states of consciousness impact the way public institutions manage power.

ruin my career. To the extent that these same campaigns reached tens of thousands of Hindus who never read the book (I seriously doubt that most of the activists read it either), they largely succeeded in their goal to ruin my name and reputation among their own communities (although it is also true that individuals from within those communities who did read the book often came to very, very different conclusions). I have been blacklisted, and I cannot safely, or at least comfortably, return to India. Hence I left Indology as a discipline and, since about 2005, made it a policy not to respond to criticisms of the book (I had already written ten essays, including one in India, and an entire website in response). So the thesis that the erotic is inherently political is not an abstract theory for me. It is a lived fact” (personal communication August 28, 2010).

¹⁷⁶ According to Parsons, Kripal used his “private visionary experience as raw data for the creation of a new hermeneutical model for religion. Private visionary experience became public theory” (Parsons 2008: 78).

Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of the way in which mystical states of consciousness can be utilized as a source of social critique is presented by the American counterculture, particularly in the work of certain theorists associated with Esalen's human potential movement. According to Kripal, the human potential movement can be interpreted as an Americanized form of Tantra. The human potential movement and the Tantric traditions share a similar approach to the mystical in the sense that both systems tend to address the mystical in terms that are both erotic and nondualistic. The erotic and nondualistic nature of each system runs counter to the established worldview of their respective cultures. From this perspective, their presence alone is a political statement because it demonstrates that the reigning worldview of the status quo is not absolute.

But the human potential movement's impact on the social lives of the American public goes much further than just providing an alternative viewpoint. The human potential movement has also helped generate substantial changes in the way we think and feel about certain issues, particularly the healing capacity of certain altered states of consciousness and meditative practices; the large role psychedelics and psychic phenomena have played in our understanding of the mystical; the various ways of developing more integral theories about human sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and the environment; and how comparative scholarship about the mystical can help create a sustainable dialogue between the East and the West based in terms of their mutual equality. For Kripal, all of the issues raised by the human potential movement have clear

political implications. All of these issues are also tied to the larger question of how we understand the political significance of “the enlightenment of the body.”

Recall that “the enlightenment of the body” refers to the mystical potential of the human body as a source of both spiritual and physical transformation. As with his conception of the erotic, Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” is nondualistic. It contests the conventional distinction between transcendence and immanence, soul and body, consciousness and energy, mind and matter, public and private, and all the other tired dualisms that have stifled our collective imagination. By seeking to displace the dominance of this either/or mentality with a more inclusive both/and perspective, Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” can not be characterized as a mere descriptive category referring to an embodied appreciation of the mystical. Rather, I claim that Kripal’s understanding of “the enlightenment of the body” is also a political mandate. It signifies a call to action for mystics, scholars and skeptics alike to consider the possibility that liberation is not only a state of mind but it is also a state of being. And, as Kripal skillfully demonstrates throughout his mystical corpus, being is always already embodied.

In a recent article Kripal ponders the question of whether or not his “different books appear to represent a developing oeuvre” (Kripal 2008: 227). My analysis of his four monographs – *Kali’s Child*, *Roads of Excess*, *The Serpent’s Gift*, and *Esalen* – suggest that Kripal’s books do appear to represent a developing oeuvre, centered on a personal and political commitment to communicating the theoretical and methodological value of mystical humanism. Kripal’s understanding of mystical humanism draws on

Eastern wisdom and Western science, the reason of the Enlightenment and the imagination of Romanticism, to construct what amount to a gnostic model of the mystical that privileges knowledge over faith. The central theoretical assumption guiding Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism is that regardless of the relativity of our creeds, our cultures, or our circumstances, all human bodies share a similar capacity to become enlightened.¹⁷⁷ According to Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism, it is this universal capacity to enlighten our bodies that offers the most lasting and hopeful source of comparative knowledge about the mystical.

From a methodological perspective, Kripal's understanding of mystical humanism demonstrates that any comprehensive study of the mystical must recognize that all mystical experiences are rooted in a dialectical interplay of consciousness and culture. Kripal maintains that this dialectical interplay of consciousness and culture that defines his study of the mystical is irreducible to either consciousness or culture, and that neither consciousness nor culture alone can fully explain what it means for a human being to be ecstatically transported from his or her conventional world to an ineffable dimension of reality that is unbound by space or time. However, Kripal's approach also suggests that as extraordinary as it is, mystical experience is first and foremost a human experience. Hence, perhaps the reason why certain mystics tend to eroticize their experiences is because human beings have a tendency to draw on the language of love to express what they value the most.

¹⁷⁷ Or, as Kripal puts it: "*if culture and history separate us, the sexual body unites us*" (Kripal 2003: 142).

Kripal has contributed significantly to the contemporary study of mysticism. His work has helped to expand both the breadth and scope of the psychoanalytical, hermeneutical, and comparative study of mysticism. I suggest that perhaps his greatest contribution to the contemporary study of mysticism is his concept of “the enlightenment of the *erotic* body,” which, I argue, is also the cornerstone of his mystical humanism. Overall, Kripal envisions a future in which the relationship between the body and soul can be harmonized. Kripal believes that as our understanding of mystical consciousness grows human beings may some day evolve the capacity to think of the body and the soul in complementary terms that are potentially liberating for both the individual and society. The moment that day arrives will also be the same moment in which human beings will finally realize that what ultimately matters in the long run is not what we think “God” wants, but rather what *we want “God” to think*.

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